



Fated to the Daddy Dragon (Alpha Dragons' Fated Mates #3)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Hired to care for his son. Tempted to touch her boss. Unprepared to fall for a dragon.

Running from a past she can't talk about, Jacy takes a desperate live-in nanny job. Her only rule? Don't get attached.

But Avery Armstrong—hot, gorgeous, and entirely off-limits—isn't just her new boss.

He's temptation in a tailored suit... and hiding something far more dangerous than heartbreak.

Jacy's presence is electric.

She soothes his son, stirs his instincts, and makes him feel alive for the first time in years.

But Avery never planned to let another woman into his life. Not after losing everything.

She doesn't know he's a dragon shifter.

He doesn't know she's already killed to protect the ones she loves.

When a deadly enemy returns with a gun and a grudge, everything explodes.

Blood is spilled. And Jacy confesses to a crime no one saw coming—except the dragon shifter cop watching their every move.

Now, with a rising threat in the skies and sparks flying between them, Avery must choose between keeping Jacy safe or keeping his distance. With danger behind them and a future full of fire ahead, Avery has one mission left: to claim the woman who changed everything.

She came to escape.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:47 am

Jacy

“You’re hired.”

Those two simple words sent wave after wave of sweeping relief through my blood. I couldn’t halt the silly grin from splitting my face, and I observed Mr. Armstrong’s kind smile in return. The kid didn’t know me, but he crawled into my lap after our rather intense hug. Declan’s bluer than blue eyes looked deep into mine as though searching for the Holy Grail within them.

Still, I wasn’t the least bit uncomfortable under that steady regard.

I finally glanced at my new employer. “Thank you, Mr. Armstrong,” I murmured. “I really need this job.”

“Waitressing doesn’t pay a whole lot,” he agreed. “And you’re welcome. As my ad stated, it’s a live in situation. You’re okay with that?”

Living under the same roof with this stranger? I looked as deeply into his eyes as Declan had mine and wondered if I’d recognize a serial killer if I saw one in him. Mr. Armstrong’s dark, Scandinavian blue eyes returned my gaze, his even white teeth gleamed as he smiled as though knowing my thoughts. He’s a damn good looking dude. I can see dragging him to bed with me. Reddish gold hair tumbled over his brow and shirt collar, his massive broad shoulders and biceps informed me he worked out regularly.

“I trust I’ll be safe?” I inquired.

I expected a flash of anger that I'd dared question his integrity. At the minimum, he'd snort with derision for the same reason. He laughed. In that laugh, I knew instantly I'd be safe living in his house with him. Mr. Armstrong not just owned a sense of humor, he didn't sweat the small stuff.

He inclined his head. "As safe as I can make you, Ms. Maxwell. I also appreciate that you asked."

"If we're working together, please call me Jacy."

"I'm Avery. I don't stand on formality."

"Great."

I glanced down at Declan. He followed the conversation with the intensity I wouldn't have expected from a five-year-old. His attention span seemed incredible to me, though I didn't know that many five-year-old kids. Wouldn't a kid his age prefer playing with his toys or the dog than listening to adults talk?

"Do you want Jacy to be your nanny, Declan?"

That, too, surprised me. That Avery included said child in the decision-making process. Declan's grin told me, and Avery, what he thought about me.

"Yeah, Dad," Declan replied, twisting in my lap to include me in his smile. "She's nice."

"I trust his instincts," Avery commented. "Declan has good ones. He can instantly tell someone's nature, good or bad, immediately."

"I wish I had the knack for that," I said. "I'm a lousy judge of character."

“I’m sure you’re better than you think. I’ll have you sign a salary agreement,” he went on, rising, and all but tripped over Max. “Max, you make a very obnoxious obstacle.”

Max rolled over on his back, his tail thumping the floor. I guessed he had German Shepherd in his genetic makeup, and perhaps a bit of retriever. Which might explain the goofy attitude. Big, easy going, he surely would protect his young charge if the need ever arose.

Avery returned to the table with a printed paper and a pen. Sitting, he passed the paper to me. “If you agree with what I’ll pay you, then sign it.”

After looking at the monthly number, I shut my jaw hard. I swallowed the gasp that threatened to escape my lips. Avery sent me a gentle smile as I looked up at him.

“I can afford it,” he said quietly. “I work as a stockbroker, and I have very strange hours sometimes. Given the local school district’s lack of a decent education system, I want Declan homeschooled. I don’t want him in daycare, which would cost me more than I’m offering you.”

“It’s – it’s too much.”

“Room, food, cable, a dog who’ll steal the covers if he sleeps with you, and a decent salary. How can you say no to that?”

I grinned. “I can’t.”

After scribbling my signature, I passed Avery the agreement. “I’ll have to get my things from my apartment; inform my roommate I’ll be moving out.”

“I can give you a few days to get settled in,” he said. “I’m off until Thursday. I’m

usually home on weekends, but sometimes I travel. Sundays are yours to do with what you want, unless I'm out of town. Okay?"

"More than." I squeezed Declan around his middle and nuzzled my nose into his neck. "I appreciate this chance so much."

"I'm glad to give it to you. Quite honestly, I've interviewed two other candidates, and neither Declan nor I liked either one."

I had to know, though it wasn't any of my business. "Why not?"

Avery shrugged. "Both gave off bad vibes. I got the feeling neither really cared about Declan or the job. They wanted a situation where they didn't pay rent, could watch TV all day, while making sure Declan didn't crawl into the oven."

Flattered, I felt my face heat in a blush. "That's not what I'll do."

"I know. So does Declan."

"I have to admit I've never been a teacher or a tutor," I admitted, "but I'll learn in my free time."

"There are so many homeschooling platforms on the internet I doubt you'll need to do that. Just follow the instructions." Avery grinned. "Declan has already started to learn to read, and he knows his numbers. Right, little man?"

"Yep," Declan replied proudly. "I can teach you, Dad."

"I'm sure you can. Look, take Max into the other room. I want to talk to Jacy in private."

“Aww, Daaad.”

Pouting, an expression I felt wasn't real, Declan slid down from my lap and grabbed the dog's collar. At first, Max refused to get up, forcing Declan to strain, his head down, pulling like a draft horse. With a long-suffering sigh, Max stood up and followed him from the kitchen.

My stomach clenched. What did he need to say that he couldn't say in front of his kid?

“Relax,” Avery said. “It doesn't concern you. Well, it does and it doesn't. Declan's mom abandoned us a few years ago. He doesn't really remember her, and he asks about her every now and then. I just want you to know in case he asks.”

“What do you tell him?”

“As much of the truth as I can. That she left us for the sort of life she wanted. One that didn't include us.”

“You're leaving?”

Beth hugged me tightly, near tears. “I'll miss you. Here and at the restaurant.”

My guilt nudged me in the ribs. “I'm sorry. I got the job. I'll be a live-in nanny for a little boy.”

Beth sniffled and held me at arms-length. We'd hit it off the moment we'd met when I got hired as a waitress at the same place she worked. Upon learning I'd just moved to town, Beth invited me to room with her. I never regretted the decision. Now I was

leaving her with the full rent.

“I’m happy for you, love.” Beth smiled. “You’ll be great.”

“I hate sticking you with the whole rent.”

She waved her hand negligently, her lips pursed. “Oh, stop. I was fine before you came, I’ll be fine once you move out. Just stay in touch, okay?”

“Promise.”

Ten years older than me, Beth had worked for the restaurant’s owner for five or more years before I arrived. Among us all – waitstaff and busboys – only she could deal with his crusty moods and ill temper. I certainly didn’t regret leaving that job – even without giving notice. Upon learning I wouldn’t arrive for my next shift, he’d no doubt take his rage out on Beth and the others.

“What’s this guy like?” she asked, turning away to sit on the worn sofa.

“Good looking, big muscles, hot to trot.” I sat beside her. “The kid is great. We hit it off right away.”

“That’s important.” Beth gazed at the distant wall. “Are you safe with him? You never know about some dudes. They behave all nice and kind, then hold a knife to your throat while they rape you.”

I recalled Avery’s laugh, his kind, dark-blue eyes. “I’m sure I am.”

“I’ll worry about you, though.” Beth took my hand. “At least until he proves he’s not a narcissistic rapist.”

“I think I’d know,” I replied slowly. “Declan, that’s the boy, he’d be different if he had a monster for a dad. Avery would abuse him, wouldn’t he? If Avery was that kind of man?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I never had kids. I much preferred to stay away from folks with testicles. Folks with boobs are more my type.”

That Beth liked girls never entered into our relationship. That she was lesbian and I straight never hindered our friendship. Unfortunately, in the small western town we both lived in, possible girlfriends were in short supply. Beth never complained about not finding a loving partner. Nor did she hit on me or try to turn me from liking men to liking girls.

“I think Declan wouldn’t be such an open and happy kid if Avery abused him, even emotionally,” I commented. “Narcissists emotionally abuse everyone in their lives.”

“Some physically,” Beth agreed. “Still, he could be a sociopath. Just be careful, love, okay? E-mail me every day to let me know how you are.”

I lifted her hand to kiss her knuckles. “You’re the sister I never had.”

“Ditto. I think I’ve heard of this guy. Avery Armstrong?”

“Yeah. What have you heard?”

“Mostly good stuff,” she answered. “That he works hard, has some bucks, came to town with a baby and no wife.” Beth suddenly frowned. “That started some rumors about why there’s no lady in the picture.”

“Yeah. What were they?”

“I don’t remember exactly. That he kidnapped the kid? Maybe? It was years ago, and time has moved on. I think at the time there was a big deal. Now, not so much.”

“If you remember what happened, will you tell me?”

“Nothing will keep me quiet.”

I leaned my head back against the sofa and breathed deeply. “I do love you.”

“I know. And ditto.”

My former employer never demanded a background check when I went to work for him. As I packed my clothes, my few possessions into suitcases in the tiny apartment, I sweated, fretting. What if Avery insisted upon a background check? What if he was doing it at this very moment? I quit my only job possibility to discover that Avery refuses to hire me after all when I show up to move in.

Lord, you can’t be that cruel, I plead to a God I’m not sure I believe in. Don’t let Avery discover I’m not truly Jacy Maxwell. I need this job desperately, you know that. Never let him find my secrets, I beg you.

Fully packed, my fear sweat hardly dry, I tucked my suitcases into the trunk of Beth’s little Ford, then joined her in the front seat. Always in tune with me, my emotions, Beth gripped my hand.

“Are you okay?”

I nodded, my mouth dry. “A little scared is all.”

She met my gaze firmly. “If things go south, come back. I don’t care if I have to support you for a time, you come back. Got it? I’ll take care of you.”

Her words, her sincere love, moved me to tears. My pent-up emotions, my terrors, gushed out in a torrent. I sobbed as Beth did her best to hold me with a console between us, my tears wetting her t-shirt. She kissed my brow, reminded me of how much she cared, caressed my hair back from my face.

“You don’t have to go,” she said. “Say the word.”

I sniffled, wiped my wet face with my palms. “No. I can do this.”

“You’re tough, girl,” Beth said in my ear. “You’re strong. Yeah, you can do this. The question is should you do this?”

I nodded. “Yeah. I should. It’s a chance I can’t pass up. I just have a case of the willies, Beth. Once I’m there, start working, I’ll be okay.”

Beth smiled faintly, her fingers sliding down my cheek. “Just know you can come home anytime, love.”

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Avery

I returned to work with the knowledge that my son and my dog were both safe with Jacy. She'd moved into the spare room next to mine and opposite Declan's, the shared bathroom down the hall, with the ease of a bolt sliding home. I'd never asked if she could cook, yet Jacy relegated herself to chief cook and bottle washer without complaint nor any this isn't in my job description whining.

Declan adored her. As did Max.

Come the Monday after Jacy moved in, I sat in my office in the downtown region , answering phones and e-mails, making deals and hefty commissions, studying the market via online platforms, content that I could work as long as I needed to, and that Declan had a sort of mother figure in his life he could turn to.

While I didn't exactly plan for Jacy to become his mother figure, I confess I hoped she would. When my wife, Elsa, left us, there remained a hole in our lives that couldn't be filled. I did my best to be both father and mother to Declan, but I also knew I'd utterly failed. He needed a woman in his life.

And Jacy, I hoped, would fulfill that need.

Her simple yet elegant beauty haunted me as I focused on market conditions and encouraging my clients to take my investment advice. Her startlingly green eyes stared at me from my computer screen. Her red-gold hair, falling past her shoulders and nearly to her waist captivated me. As did her slender, firm body and pert boobs. I blinked and tried to banish her image from my mind's eye.

No, I hadn't sought out any girlfriends since Elsa departed. I had no time and very few options in this town of less than ten thousand souls. Any available ladies were either old and widowed or young and far too young. Declan needed me more than I needed to get laid.

Abruptly, my cell buzzed, startling me out of my overactive imagination. The phone's screen revealed my oldest friend and confidante, Barry. With a grin, I clicked the answer button.

"Dude."

"Hey, man." Barry sounded cheerful and confident. "How's it hanging?"

"Long and low. You know that."

He laughed. "Cool. How's Declan?"

I leaned back in my office chair, smiling. "Happy. I found the perfect nanny for him. Gorgeous with lovely smile."

"Is she his nanny or yours?"

I laughed. "His, of course. Not that I don't daydream just a little. Even Max likes her."

"That damn mutt likes everyone," Barry complained. "Not a good guard dog at all."

"Don't underestimate my dog, man. How's by you? And your lil wife?"

"I get laid often enough to keep the mini me happy. She wants kids. Can you imagine me a dad?"

“Yeah. You’d be a good one.”

Barry made a sour noise. “I’m not like you, dude. I’m not dad material. I keep the condoms on and pray none break.”

“Once your first kid is born, you change,” I commented. “Take the leap, Barry. Get her preggers. You’ll never regret it.”

I heard his deep sigh cross the many hundreds of miles between us. “Look, Avery, this isn’t just a social call. I’ve heard that the big guy, Ian, has learned the name you now live under.”

My blood turned to ice. I gripped my cell hard as I leaned forward over my desk. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah, man. That’s why I’m calling. Get thee gone, my friend. Move. Change your name again. Get Declan and that useless mutt out of dodge. I mean it.”

Lowering my face, I contemplated what his advice meant. Changing towns. Finding a new nanny. A new house Declan would have to get used to. Fresh friends, neighbors, a place where no one knew us, and the big dude would have to start his search over if he wanted me.

I groaned. “I can’t. I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“That’s not the point,” Barry snapped. “He thinks you did. He’ll put you on trial, find you guilty, and banish you. What will happen to Declan if that happens?”

I ran my free hand through my hair, panic singing in my veins. “I’m not running,” I said, my mouth dust dry. “Let him try to convict me. I’m owed a fair trial.”

“Yeah, you are.” Barry tried to stifle a groan and failed. “But Ian is already certain you’re guilty. That’s all that matters. He’s the head honcho, the chief judge. What he says goes.”

I sat up straight, my courage returning. “The council will rein him in. They believe in fairness, listening to the evidence. Barry, I can’t run. I can’t do that to my son.”

“I sorta knew that.” Barry sighed. “Don’t say I didn’t try. Look, just know I’m on your side. I’ll testify on your behalf, if necessary. Count on that. You acted in defense of your home and family.”

“Thanks, Barry. I mean it.”

“I know. Stay safe, okay?”

“I’ll do my best.”

I clicked my cell off and dropped it on my desk. I stared into blank space, seeing nothing, ignoring my ringing phone, and wondered if I’d made the right decision. Only Declan mattered. His well-being, his psychological stability, his emotional health. Nothing else. What happens if I’m found guilty and banished? What then? Who’ll care for Declan then?

Unable to answer those questions, I focused my attention on my work, in making money. For not just Declan’s future, but also my own. Without funds in the bank, we’re both screwed.

My mind on Barry’s dire call, I walked into my house to the scents of something Italian wafting from the kitchen. Max, ever delighted to see me, ran across the front

room to lunge into my arms. Ignoring everything I'd tried to teach him, he licked my face with an exuberance I couldn't help but chuckle at.

"You're an idiot," I said, pushing him onto all fours. "Get down."

Grinning, panting hot doggy breath into my face, Max refused my command, thus forcing me to push his paws from my chest. Unrepentant, he danced around my legs, barking like a fool as I set my briefcase near the stairs and walked to the kitchen.

As exuberant as the mutt, Declan charged across the kitchen to leap into my arms. Again, the image of Ian landing on me with both feet flicked through my head as I held my son close. I must protect him. Nothing else matters. If I must run again....

"Hi, Dad."

Holding Declan in the crook of my arm, I smiled. "Hiya. What's new and exciting around here?"

"Jacy is teaching me to cook."

"Wow. She's trying to do herself out of a job."

I glanced at Jacy, who met my gaze briefly before blushing. I couldn't ignore how cute she looked when her skin turned that bright shade of pink. I grinned. "What's cooking, chef?"

"Lasagna," Jacy replied, finally returning my smile. "I hope you like it."

"How can I not? I'm already drooling from the smell."

Jacy bent over to peer into the oven, offering me a fine, long look at her delicate

backside. Heat grew and spread through me, and I lost all thoughts of Barry's dire phone call. That woman's ass could make a stick horny.

"Dad?"

I caught Declan watching me carefully, and my face turned red. I felt it smolder as though hot coals lay just under my skin. Hastily, I set him on his feet.

"Do I have time to change?" I asked.

"Sure," Jacy replied. "Dinner won't be ready for about twenty minutes."

"Be right back."

I climbed the stairs to the second floor, muttering under my breath. "Way to go, ace. Just put your lust out there for everyone to see."

As I changed from my business attire to simple jeans and a t-shirt, I pondered the risks of staying where I was. If Ian knows where I am, what will he do? True, he's the head honcho. But he can't forcibly arrest me and put me in some sort of jail. Our laws expressly forbid an arrest and banishment without a trial first.

So, I'm safe from being hauled away in chains. What then? He could order me to face the council and abide by their judgement. If I'm found guilty, I'd be banished to the extreme north of Iceland, to a remote island. Forced to survive as best I could, live in a cave if I could find one, unable to communicate with anyone or ever see Declan again.

I shuddered.

"I can't," I muttered thickly. "I can't risk it. If I face the council, I'll lose."

My stomach in knots, I slowly returned downstairs and to the kitchen. Pausing before I entered, out of sight, I listened to Declan's happy chatter and laughter, Jacy's warm responses. I clenched my fists, my jaw tight. I'd have to leave this house, and Jacy, behind. What did I owe her? Nothing. If I abandoned her, she'd be stuck without a job.

"I can't make that my problem," I grumbled, my voice low. "She's good for us, but I can find someone just as good as she is somewhere else."

Stepping into the kitchen, I brought the happy talk to an abrupt halt. Both Declan and Jacy obviously saw my grim expression and tight jaw before I arranged my expression into a more pleasant demeanor.

"Can I help?" I asked, forcing lightness into my voice, my face.

"Uh, no," Jacy replied. "We're about to make a salad, weren't we, kiddo?"

Declan, ever aware of the fine nuances of people's emotions, studied me for a long moment before finally returning his attention to meal preparation. "Yeah."

He stood on a stool to break lettuce into a bowl while Jacy brandished a paring knife to good effect. I sat at the table, half my mind on escape with the other half listening to Jacy explain the nutritional merits of tomatoes, carrots, onions, and cucumber.

"I don't like onions," Declan declared.

"Too bad," Jacy commented. "Around here, you eat what you're given. Got it?"

I chuckled inwardly at the stern mother-like tone Jacy offered and the face that Declan made in response.

“I’ll pick ‘em out,” he said.

“You can pick some out,” Jacy replied. “But you have to eat a few. Who knows, you might find you like onions after all.”

“Blech.” Declan stuck his tongue out as Jacy cut green onions into the salad.

“Cover the onions with salad dressing and you’ll never know they’re there.”

“Why do I hafta eat ‘em, anyway?”

“They’re good for you. You want to grow up to be as big as your dad, don’t you?”

Declan eyed me over his shoulder. “No. So I don’t need onions.”

“Too bad, so sad, sucks to be you.”

I couldn’t control the burst of laughter that Jacy’s statement brought. I tried to cover it with my hand, but Declan’s brows lowered in disapproval. I snickered and earned for myself a scowl. His young, cherubic face wasn’t meant for such expressions, and seeing it only made me laugh harder.

“Daaad.”

“You’ll eat your onions, child.”

“Don’t call me a child.”

“That’s what you are,” Jacy said, eyeing him sidelong. “Or are you a thirty-year-old dwarf?”

“Dad’s making fun of me.”

“Dads are entitled to do that. Eat your onions, grow up to be bigger than he is, and you can get your revenge by beating him in an arm-wrestling contest.”

Her meal wasn’t just excellent. Just seeing her beautiful face across the table had me thinking twice about running away again. Leave her behind? Take her with us? Neither was a good option. As we ate, making light conversation, I realized I couldn’t run. Not again.

I’m not leaving Jacy. Whatever happens, I’ll protect them both from the council’s wrath.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:47 am

Jacy

Hey, Beth, here's your daily e-mail. I'm fine. Better than fine. I don't work for a narcissistic rapist, nor do I think he's a sociopath. Avery's emotions are real, not faked. He did come home the other day with a weird look on his face, like he's worried about something. Since then, he's been sweet, kind, cheerful, even though I can sense something bothering him under the surface. No, it's not a plan to skin me alive and make lampshades.

Declan is the best kid ever. I wish he was mine. I'd love to have a kid like him. Maybe someday when I find Mr. Right. If, that is. I hope whatsisbucket isn't too hard on you guys at the restaurant. Tell him I don't miss him at all. Love, Jacy.

I sent my note via my cell phone as I didn't have a computer. Maybe I'll get one with my first paycheck. Sitting in the near darkness of my spacious and comfortable room, I thought about turning in. Though it was nearly midnight, I wasn't sleepy. Declan had gone to bed hours ago, sleeping the sleep of the innocent.

Avery, too, had yawned sleepily over a cable movie before finally leaving for his room two hours ago. Alone, I sat in the TV room for a while after he'd gone before deciding I should try to sleep. Instead, I sat, wide awake in the dark and played a game on my mobile.

The walls in the house weren't exactly thin, but I heard Avery's door open and snick softly shut. Listening, I heard his tread on the carpet as Avery passed my room, then fade as he went down the stairs. Unable to sleep and in need of warm milk? Getting a late-night snack? Too curious for my own good, I opened my door to listen to

whatever Avery was up to.

He left by the front door.

Okay, this is weird. Where's he going? He didn't go through the garage to get his car.

Pacing to my window, which faced the street below, I parted the curtains just enough to peer out and down. On foot, Avery walked quickly down the street and vanished around a corner. Weirder and weirder. I watched for a few more moments, then started to turn away.

Something big, a dark shadow I thought, passed over the house. I quickly stared out again, my gut twisting with nervous fear. What was that? It certainly wasn't a cloud passing over the moon and stars. Clouds don't move that fast. Whatever it was, and I'm certain I didn't imagine it, was huge. Flitted across the night sky and cast it all into brief and absolute darkness.

Too unsettled to go to bed, I paced my room for a time, nervous and upset. With Avery gone, wherever he was, I was now Declan's only protector. Not that – that thing – would somehow break into the house and abduct us, of course not.

Still, I left my room to quietly open his door a crack.

Declan slept under the faint light of a Scooby-Doo nightlight, his right hand fisted and tucked under his chin. Outside his room's window, the property's security light gleamed through his curtains. Finding him safely asleep didn't ease my worries, however.

Creeping downstairs like a burglar, dressed in nothing more than my shirt and panties, I patrolled the darkened house. Every room remained dark, silent, empty. Somehow, that made it all the spookier. If whatever that was out there managed to

come inside, I had no weapons, no means of protecting Declan.

Where is Avery? Why did he leave in the middle of the night? He didn't drive, he walked.

Okay, a midnight walk sort of made sense. He's unable to sleep, restless, he goes out for a walk to settle his mind. I could dig that. I peered out the front picture window and saw nothing alarming. No horrifyingly big shadows crossing the night sky. No Avery striding up the sidewalk toward his house. If the neighbors also saw the big shadow, I failed to see them peeking out of their doors or windows.

It's your imagination running into overtime.

Taking a deep breath, I walk into the kitchen, and open the fridge. Taking the milk jug from it, I seized a glass from the cabinet. After pouring a glass, I put the milk back. I took a long soothing drink, then turned –

Avery stood in the kitchen doorway.

“Shit,” I exclaimed, shocked, and nearly dropped my glass. “You scared me. Dammit, don't do that.”

He eyed me up and down with a slow grin. “Sorry. I didn't mean to. I just walked in.”

I watched his gaze travel down to my nearly naked body. Suddenly horrified, I realized I had nothing to cover myself up with. And he stood between me and escape. No, I wasn't a swooning virgin. I'd had lovers in the past. This was my boss , however, my employer . And I stood in his kitchen, half-naked, a glass of milk in my hand, blushing like crazy.

“Uh,” I began, frantic to get back to my room and away from his knowing gaze. “I

need to, er, get to bed.”

Avery graciously stepped aside, his eyes now on my face and not my bare legs. “Yeah, me, too. Big day tomorrow.”

“Goodnight.”

I edged past him, smiling nervously, ordering myself not to pause to ask where he’d gone off to. Not your business, girl, and it doesn’t matter. Just scoot up the stairs and lock the damn door.

“Goodnight,” he replied.

I knew Avery’s eyes followed me as I strode up the stairs, watching my ass the entire way. I knew because I felt him staring. Behind my closed and unlockable door, I leaned against it, almost forgetting the glass in my hand. Holy shit. He’s too damn hot for you to be prancing around him nearly naked. His bones are far too jumpable for words.

“Dad looks at you when you’re not looking.”

I couldn’t halt the hot blush that stole up my neck to invade my cheeks. Not daring to turn from the kitchen sink where I scrubbed the breakfast pots, I merely shrugged. “Looking is free, isn’t it?”

“I guess so.”

At the kitchen table behind me, Declan played a game on his tablet, but when I sneaked a glance over my shoulder, I caught him staring at me. What does a five-

year-old know? Far too much in my opinion. He's too intuitive for his age.

"I think my dad likes you."

"Good. He's my boss. Things are easier when boss and employee like each other."

"You like him?"

"Sure," I answered lightly. "He's a nice guy."

My face continued to burn as I recalled the hour when Avery busted me in my shirt and panties. How his gaze traveled up and down my nearly naked body, how the look in his eyes made me both embarrassed and exhilarated. I also remembered the shadowy thing, and my blush died away.

"Have you ever seen anything strange around here?" I asked, turning toward Declan.

"Like what?"

"I'm not sure, it's hard to describe. A big shadow in the sky."

"No."

Interesting. He just lied to me. Declan returned his attention to his tablet, obviously hoping I wouldn't ask anything else. I'd never been much of a body language reader, but Declan's face and stiffness informed me he knew something. Nor was he willing, or was perhaps not allowed, to talk about it.

"Okay," I said. "No biggie."

I carried on with my kitchen cleaning, yet sensed a strange tension emanating from

Declan. I found it not just odd, but suspected that if I demanded he tell me, I'd upset him. As I put the pots away and wiped the counter, I asked, "What do you want to do today? Go to the library? A park? If either are close by as I don't have a car to drive us."

Declan brightened instantly. "Can we go to the library? Please, please, Jacy? You can teach me to read."

I laughed. "Okay, it's a deal."

With the warm weather outside, Declan wore small cargo pants that came to his shins. My shorts were once jeans, and exposed more of my legs than perhaps was wise. We held hands as we walked toward the downtown area where the library stood. A few cars honked as they passed by which I happily ignored.

I smiled at the young librarian at the desk, then took Declan to the children's section. Mothers with their youngsters sat in the bean bag chairs, many eyeing me with what I thought was suspicion. After selecting a few books Declan showed an interest in, we took them to a table well away from everyone else.

"Okay, show me you know your letters," I said as we sat side by side, an open book between us.

Declan half sang each letter he recognized, indicating each one with his finger. "But what's this one?"

I looked. "It's a Q. It looks like an O, but has the squiggly thing."

He looked at me. "What's a word with a Q?"

Pondering a simple word he'd instantly recognize, I pursed my lips. "'Quick'," I

replied. “You know what that means? Fast.”

“But it sounds like a C word.”

“True, and good point. That’s what learning to read is all about. Learning that because a word sounds like a different letter doesn’t mean it’s always spelled that way.”

Declan frowned, then slowly recited a few words he knew. In this particular book, he found the word “quick”, and studied it for nearly a full five minutes. He moved on at last and asked me about several other words. I explained each and every one, and how to correctly pronounce them. Declan soaked up the education like a thirsty sponge, learning one word thoroughly before moving on.

I didn’t have much cash on me, but I took him to a local diner for lunch. He clutched the books we’d checked out to his small chest as though fearing a random stranger might yank them away. At the table, he placed them with near reverence on the seat beside him.

Over burgers and fries, I quizzed him on certain words he’d memorized. “How do you spell ‘puppy’?”

“P-U-P-P-Y.”

“Yay,” I cried, my fists lifted. “That’s great. High five.”

Grinning, Declan slapped my palm with his. “I remembered.”

“Your memory is phenomenal.”

In truth, it was. Declan had a knack for remembering small details that even I would

forget within minutes. Munching my burger, I absently wondered what his IQ was. He's certainly a smart kid, and more articulate than any other little boy I've ever met.

"Ready, kiddo?"

Declan burped, and belatedly covered his mouth. "Scuse me."

"I'll take that as a yes."

I paid our bill, left a decent tip, and took his free hand. "I can carry those for you."

He shook his head, his cherished books once again held to his chest. "I want to."

"Okay, let me know if you change your mind."

Outside again, we strode toward home amid the small-town traffic, the few other walkers on the sidewalk. My attention on Declan and his propensity for tripping as he couldn't see what was in front of him, I paid little heed to what went on around us.

Hence, when the slick, black sedan drove toward the curb and paced us, I didn't notice at first.

I'm not sure how long it tagged along before I finally glanced around to view it.

The driver smiled.

I glanced into the icy, bitterly cold gray eyes. My step faltered. The pleasant smile only made the soulless gaze that much deadlier. He offered me a quick salute with two fingers to his brow, then accelerated. The sleek car pulled into the traffic and vanished around a corner.

Shivering with dread, I frantically glanced around for other black sedans, more henchmen – for him .

He's found me.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:47 am

Avery

“Is anything wrong?”

At the kitchen stove, Jacy jumped a full foot, I swear, before whipping her face over her shoulder. Her smile quavered.

“No, everything’s fine.”

“Are you sure? You seem a bit – distracted.”

“Of course,” she said. “It’s all good.”

I wasn’t so certain about that. Ever since I’d returned from the office, I’d observed Jacy’s tension. She startled at any small noise, gave a small yip, of fear? Maybe? Max shoved his nose into her butt. Spinning on the poor dog, I thought at first she intended to scold him. Instead, she rubbed his ears and hugged him in something akin to relief.

“Daaad.”

Declan frowned heavily from his seat at the kitchen table. “You’re not listening.”

“Er, sorry.” I tore my attention from Jacy to Declan and his opened book. “I am now.”

“Jacy taught me to read,” he announced proudly. “I can spell ‘quick’. Q-U-I-C-K.”

I clapped my hands. “Bravo. That’s great, little man. I’m proud of you.”

“Want to see what else I can read?”

“I sure do.” I scraped my chair from the table. “Come sit on my lap and show me.”

Declan happily climbed into my lap with his book, busy showing me the words he’d learned. With half my attention on him, I still watched Jacy as she busily cooked our supper. A bean casserole from the delicious smells. I also noticed she didn’t smile upon hearing Declan enthusiastically praise her teaching skills, nor did she take any part in the discussion.

I grew concerned as I watched her pick at the incredibly good casserole she’d fixed. “Jacy, are you sure you’re all right?”

I received a distracted smile in reply. “Yep.”

“Why aren’t you eating? This is fantastic. You’re an awesome cook.”

“I’m just not hungry.”

At bedtime, Declan hugged her goodnight, then took my hand as I walked with him up the stairs to his bedroom. As I tucked him in, turned on his Scooby-Doo nightlight, I asked casually, “Did anything happen today, little man?”

Declan regarded me with wide eyes. “We went to the library.”

“I know. Besides that.”

“No.”

“Okay.” I bent to kiss his brow. “Night, night.”

Standing, I walked to his door and snapped off the light.

“A man looked at her funny.”

I turned. “What man?”

“I dunno. A man. In a car. He looked at Jacy and then she went all weird.”

“You’re sure?”

“Uh, huh.”

“Okay, go to sleep. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Night, Dad.”

“Night, baby.”

When I returned downstairs, I discovered Jacy had gone to her room and shut the door. Obviously, she wanted no interaction with me. After Declan’s comment, my worry over her increased. What man would look at her “funny”? Yeah, she’s a beauty with great legs she showed off in those tiny Daisy Dukes. But why would a dude ogling her bother her this much? Surely she’s long used to dickwads ogling her.

I sat heavily on the couch, unsure if I should pursue the incident or just let it go. An action movie played across my flatscreen TV, but I hardly noticed it. Wishing I knew her well enough to tap on her door and insist she confide in me, I knew damn well I couldn’t.

You're her boss. Her employer. You can't just butt into her business. Especially since she all but told you to butt out.

I felt the urge to fly.

My emotions swirling inside my head like a tornado, I needed the calm of the night sky, the feel of the wind beneath my wings. Once Elsa left us, I couldn't leave Declan home alone in order to indulge my needs. On the rare opportunity of getting a babysitter, I'd indulge to my heart's content. Yet, until Jacy arrived, those opportunities were rare indeed.

After a quick glance up the stairs, I listened for any sounds. I couldn't tell if Jacy was asleep, but if she wasn't, it wouldn't matter. I eased the front door open, then quietly shut it behind me. I stepped down from the porch and looked up at my house.

A faint light appeared in Jacy's window.

I won't be gone long.

The sweet night air invigorated me. I strode down the street amid the streetlights, only a few lights on in neighbors' windows. For the most part, the small town slept.

Two blocks down was a wide empty field. Weeds grew amid the broken glass and gravel, shredded plastic bags stuck to some of them and rustled in the light breeze. I looked around for any possible witnesses and saw none. The single most important of our laws, the very first on the list, was to never let humans see us in our other forms.

I broke that law three years ago.

Shifting, I spread my wings and leaped skyward.

Flying was nearly as important as breathing. And as necessary. I beat my way toward the stars, passing a few wisps of cloud. I climbed higher, rejoicing in the simple feel of the breeze under my wings. I soared. I folded my wings across my back and dropped like a stone, gravity sucking me toward the land faster than a peregrine falcon stooped upon its prey.

A hundred feet from the very hard earth, I snapped my wings out.

I locked the scream of joy in my throat as I coasted effortlessly over the landscape before climbing skyward again. I circled as I flew high, observing the lights of the town, the headlights of cars on the freeway stabbing the darkness. Up here, my troubles, my worries, all fell to the ground below.

Busy practicing a few backward loops, I failed to see another of my kind until she flew past me at roughly the speed of sound. Caught in her wake, I fumbled, dropped a hundred yards before catching myself and regaining my balance plus flying ability. She banked back toward me, her jaws wide in silent laughter.

Nor could I be angry at her joke.

“You’re hilarious,” I called to her. “Nice flying, by the way.”

“Thanks,” she replied. “You’re a handsome devil. I just had to say hi.”

I eyed her as she flew beside me. “I don’t suppose you’re single?”

She laughed. “Nope. Married with kids. Nor do I cheat.”

“Oh, well. It’s still nice to have a companion to fly with once in a while.”

“I totally get it,” she replied. “My mate is terrified of being discovered by humans so

he doesn't fly much, even at night as we are. The law, you know."

"I'm Avery. Nice to meet you."

"Sasha. And ditto."

It'd been far too long since I'd spent any real time with another of my species. Reveling in flying with Sasha, I danced the dance of wings and air and sky with her. And she was easy on the eyes, too. Her scales were a golden red shade, her eyes as green as Jacy's. I breathed deeply as I watched Sasha fly with the ease of long experience. Contented with simply having a friend to fly with, I spent two glorious hours laughing, comparing flying skills, and, of course, showing off.

"You know what you're doing," Sasha commented. "Your abilities are amazing."

"Until lately, I haven't been able to fly much. Kid at home, you know."

"I certainly dig that," she said. "You have a babysitter tonight?"

"Live in nanny. A good one, too. She totally adores my son."

"That's awesome. You know what they say, you can't find good help these days."

I chuckled. "Sometimes you get lucky. I'd better get home. Might we do this again?"

"I hope so. But I'm like you, I can't always get away. The hubby worries I'll break the law and get into trouble with the council."

Like I did. And now I'm on the run from the consequences. "I hear you, Sasha," I said slowly. "Take care, all right? I had fun."

Sasha laughed. “I did, too, Avery. Stay safe.”

We parted ways, flying in opposite directions. I flew toward home, craving what I may never ever find. A mate to fly with. A female with whom I can share the glory of being what we are, creatures born to dance through the sky like eagles.

Jacy’s light was out when I walked back from the field.

I let myself into my silent house, thinking I’d have only a few hours’ sleep before needing to rise for work. In the kitchen, I poured myself a glass of wine and sipped it, leaning against the counter.

On the table, my phone beeped. I had an e-mail. Who’d send me an e-mail at this ungodly hour? At first, I thought to ignore it as I dealt with business e-mails during business hours. This was my time off. I should ignore it until I get to the office. Still, I reached for it with a heavy sigh and opened my account.

I blinked.

At first, I didn’t recognize the address.

Then, cold consciousness flooded me and sent my stomach into tying itself into knots.

“Well, well,” I muttered, clicking on the message. “What do you know.”

Avery, Elsa had typed with no dear before my name. Why would I expect one? I’ve met someone. We’re still married, technically, so I need a divorce asap. I know you won’t deny it’s over, so don’t be a dick about it. I’ll send you the papers over the

internet. You have full custody of the kid, I'm not challenging that. You'll keep everything. Any questions, call me.

She wrote her number at the end of the note with no farewell.

I shut my phone down while absently sipping my wine. Not that I'd deny her the divorce she craved. As she'd pointed out, it was long over between us. I confessed I'd never given a divorce a second thought. Happy in my bachelorhood, I hadn't planned on needing a divorce from Elsa.

It seems she did.

"You go, girl," I whispered. "I hope he's what you want. Since I wasn't."

I stared into the dark kitchen, pondering what we once had meant to each other. Elsa's bitterness screamed at me from her note. She didn't know what she was marrying. I can't blame her. But she could have let the love she had for Declan work for her. Instead, she bolted.

"Like a frightened deer," I muttered into the near darkness. "She never said goodbye to him. Just – left."

Too young to understand, Declan cried for his absent mother. As I'd held him, rocked him, he, a bewildered two-year-old, cried for his mommy. The mommy who'd abandoned him, departed for parts unknown, left him as she wouldn't have left a puppy in a field. My anger rose.

"Damn you," I hissed in the dark. "Now you think you can come back and make demands. You whiney bitch."

I'd sign her divorce papers and be happy to. Elsa wouldn't contest me for custody of

our son. Nor should she. She had no right after walking out on us as she had. As I stood, late in the night, thinking of Elsa as I once thought of her – beautiful and sexy and utterly loved – I realized one important matter.

A small part of me still loved her.

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Jacy

Does that guy work for Carter? Was he just a random freak who had the urge to yank my chain?

I had no answers.

My stomach in nervous turmoil, I burned Declan's lunch, sprayed bug killer around the kitchen instead of a deodorizer to get the nasty smell out. Declan watched me with concern while munching the sandwich I'd made for him. I knew he wanted the reading lessons to continue, but I doubted my state of mind permitted it. If I can't read the label on a spray bottle, how can I teach him to?

"Can we go back to the library?"

Step outside the house? Ye gods! "Not today, sweetie."

His small face crumpled as though he'd cry, but he didn't. It broke my heart to say no, to see that expression of upset crumple his normally cheerful countenance. What was I doing to him? I'm scared to death to leave this house, yet how can I demand he do the same? Was I putting him in danger simply by my presence?

"I'm sorry, honey," I said, crossing the kitchen to crouch beside his chair. "Maybe tomorrow, okay? I'm just – not doing well right now."

Declan brightened instantly. "Okay."

While he happily finished his lunch, I scrubbed the blackened pan while castigating myself. If the dude from the black sedan worked for Carter, how long before he tracked me to this house? Would he kill both Declan and Avery along with killing me? Would he leave them alone? Not likely. Carter's philosophy was to leave no witnesses.

In the TV room, Declan played an educational game on his tablet. Trying not to be obvious, I looked out the window to the street. Sprinklers watered green lawns while a few kids rode bikes up and down the pavement. I saw no black sedans sitting at the curb. All the vehicles I did see were familiar as belonging to the neighbors.

Still, I didn't feel safe.

My cell beeped. Frowning, I pulled it from my back pocket. I seldom received calls, and only a few people had access to my number. Avery, for instance. And Beth. My call log was empty, but my e-mail icon informed me I had a new message. Getting an e-mail was rarer than a phone call or text.

I clicked on the icon.

Olly, olly oxen free! Come out, come out wherever you are. I just want to talk. Just you and me. Let me know where you are, and I'll send a car for you. We can work this out, Jacy. I promise.

I deleted the note, feeling sick. He doesn't know where I am. Not truly. He maybe has my general vicinity, hence the e-mail. He needs me to come to him. My stomach roiled, rolling in waves after waves until I knew everything I'd eaten would come back up with the force of a steam roller.

I ran to the bathroom.

I'd barely hit the tiled floor in front of the toilet before my meager breakfast splattered over the pristine white porcelain. Sweating, my belly hurling not just food but sour bile, I vomited again and again. I both heard and felt Declan enter the bathroom, watching me from the doorway.

"Are you okay?"

"No," I choked, gasping, before barfing yet another thin stream of nasty stomach acid into the bowl.

Declan stepped in and put his hand on my back. I spat, clearing crap from my mouth, my hair hanging to either side of the toilet. At last, my belly quieted, no longer in rebellion. I shakily stood, then flushed my puke away. Declan solemnly watched me as I rinsed my mouth at the sink.

"I was sick before," he commented helpfully. "You should lay down."

I nodded, splashing water on my hot face. "I think I will."

Trembling, my legs weak, I made my slow way back to the TV room and the sofa. Declan held my hand the entire journey, then sat beside me as I laid down on my back. I tried to offer him a smile, but I knew it wasn't sincere. Declan didn't smile back, which told me my effort was in vain.

"Thanks for looking out for me, kiddo," I murmured.

Declan merely nodded. "Can I watch TV?"

"Sure. I'm going to sleep if I can."

Considerate, he turned the volume down low, then sat cross-legged on the floor in

front of it. He'd chosen a light-hearted Disney movie, and I watched it for a time before closing my eyes.

"Don't go anywhere without telling me," I said. "Not even to the backyard."

"Kay."

I dozed off and on through the afternoon. Declan fixed his own snack of pre-sliced apples and a breakfast bar, munching as he watched a documentary on whales. My rest helped my stomach, but not my fears. Visions of being shot in the back of my head haunted my thin sleep.

I woke from my light sleep to discover Avery standing over me.

"Dad, she's sick. Don't wake her up."

"Too late." I slowly sat up, the sour flavor of vomit still coating my mouth. "I didn't hear you come in."

"No worries," he said. "Got the flu? I'd heard it's traveling around town."

I shook my head, throwing my tangled hair over my shoulders. "Just a minor bug. I'll fix dinner."

Starting to stand, I was forced back down with Avery's hand on my shoulder. "No, you won't. You rest while I fix dinner."

"But —"

“No buts about it. I can certainly cook for once.”

The warmth in his dark-blue eyes, the kind smile that creased his face brought me near to crying. Tears stung my eyes, and I lowered my face before he saw them. “Thanks.”

“No worries. Will you be able to eat?”

“I’ll try.”

My guilt at endangering both Avery and Declan wrapped itself around my heart so tightly I couldn’t breathe. I should move out. Quit. Ask him for a ride to the train station, then board it. For anywhere at all. Any place that is far from this town, keep them safe from Carter and his evil.

Leaving the TV on, Declan joined Avery in the kitchen. I listened to their father/son chatter marked by clattering pans. I endangered their lives by being here. It was only a matter of time before Carter located me. I now felt sure the guy in the car worked for him, was one of his enforcers. The thought of leaving Declan broke my heart, but knowing my absence would save his life eased that pain.

I slowly climbed the stairs to my room. Standing in the doorway, I glanced around the comfortable chamber, the spacious bed, the frilly curtains. It represented what I’d hoped was a fresh start, a new life, freedom from Carter. Instead, it had become a trap. A corner with my back to it. If I hoped to survive, I must leave now.

First, I brushed my teeth and rinsed my mouth with mouth wash as my mouth definitely smelled bad. I didn’t have much energy to climb the stairs and grab my toothbrush earlier as I felt so weak that time.

Taking my suitcase from the closet, I tossed it on the bed.

I threw my clothes into it without care, without folding them first. Adding my few personal possessions I still owned, I clicked the latches shut, then went to the window to stare out and down. No black sedan cruised past the house.

But I knew it soon would.

“It’s not just a bug, is it?”

I turned.

Avery stood in the doorway, his arms folded across his broad chest. I shook my head.

“No.”

Pacing slowly toward me, Avery stood beside me, then also looked out the window.

“What are you running from, Jacy?”

Death. I couldn’t say it, however. I couldn’t speak at all. Sure, I owed him an explanation as to why I packed my belongings with the obvious intent to leave him and Declan. Yet, no words connected from my mind to my mouth.

“You’re afraid of someone?”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

“Who?”

I stared out the window again at the quiet and orderly neighborhood street. “I – I can’t tell you.”

Silent, Avery also gazed out and down. What his thoughts were, I had no idea. Nor

could I ask him for them. Despite the keen knowledge that leaving him was the best decision possible, my reluctance to do so felt strange.

“So you’re going to run?” he asked finally.

“I have to. I’m putting you and Declan in danger.”

Avery leaned against the wall, gazing down at me. “You don’t think I can keep you safe? You as well as the two of us?”

Shocked, I looked up. “I can’t let you even try, Avery.”

“I don’t want you to leave.”

“I have to.” I failed to stop the whiney tone from my voice. “He’ll kill us all.”

“Whoever this guy is,” Avery stated flatly, “I’m not afraid of him. There’s more to me than you think.”

“Are you willing to kill to keep me safe?” I studied his dark eyes, the grim slash of his mouth. “I can’t ask that of you.”

“You don’t have to ask,” he snapped. “If any asshole comes in here with the intent to harm either you or my son, he’ll wish he hadn’t. Neither of you know what I’m capable of.”

I shook my head. “Perhaps not. That’s not a risk I want to take. If I leave now, he’ll leave you both alone and follow me. You’ll be safe.”

“But you won’t be.” Avery’s voice took on a hard note, almost a growl. “I’ll protect you, but only if you’re here, not out there.”

I looked away from his fierce protectiveness, his hard gaze. “Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why would you risk your life for me?”

“It’s mine to risk,” he replied in a tone so stubborn I chuckled.

“That’s not an answer.”

“It’s all you’re going to get. I like you, Jacy. You’re good for Declan. So good, in fact, that I’m scared losing you would be like losing his mother all over again.”

I stared up, my mouth open. “I’ve been here barely a week.”

“Long enough to sink deep hooks into Declan’s heart.” Avery half smiled. “And those hooks are sinking into me, too. I want to protect you. That’s all that matters.”

His timing either perfect or atrocious depending upon the perspective, Declan chose that moment to dash into my room. His keen perceptions instantly told him of the tension that all but vibrated the very air. He stopped. Glancing from Avery to me, then to the closed suitcase, Declan’s face crumpled, and he began to cry.

“No, no.” I slid off the bed to my knees beside him. I hugged him, holding his small body to mine, his arms clutched tightly around my neck. “Don’t cry, sweetie. Everything’s okay.”

“You’re gonna leave,” he wailed, his face buried in my neck. “Don’t go, don’t leave. Please, don’t leave.”

I caressed his silken hair. “I’m not leaving, sweetheart. Your daddy talked me into

staying. Okay? I'm staying."

My words had little effect, and he continued to cry. I glanced up at Avery, who smiled and winked.

"C'mon, little man," he said, gently pulling on Declan's shoulder. "Let's let her unpack. We still have to cook dinner."

I seized a tissue and wiped Declan's face, permitting him to blow his nose into it with a sharp honk. His cheeks red, he managed a small smile, then hugged me again.

"I love you, Jacy," he said simply.

"How 'bout that. I love you, too."

My light jest brought a smile, and he kissed my cheek noisily. Imitating a Tarzan yell, he dashed from the room and thundered down the stairs.

Avery bent and pulled me to my feet. Then into a tight hug of his own.

"It'll work out," he whispered against my hair. "Promise."

I tried to laugh into his shirt. "That's a promise I'll make you keep."

"I'll protect you. I swear I will. Just don't leave us. We need you."

My arms around his tight waist, I looked into his sweet, kind eyes, his extraordinary good looks. "I guess I need you, too."

"You do. Unpack your things, then come eat. I'm treating you to an Avery Armstrong special."

“And that is?”

“Something edible.”

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Avery

“Avery.”

Her voice didn't sound the same. Elsa's sweet intonations had vanished, replaced by a hard bitten, bitter woman with no forgiveness within her. I winced and took the phone away from my ear to glance at it in confusion. I'd taken a couple of days to ready myself for the inevitable phone call, and now wished I hadn't bothered to call her at all.

“How'd you know it was me?”

“I just did. Are you going to contest the divorce?”

“Hey, thanks for asking. I'm fine,” I said, sardonic. “Declan is good, too, growing fast. How are you doing these days?”

“Cut the crap,” Elsa growled. “I need you to sign the papers so I can move on.”

“I thought you already had,” I remarked. “Gone in sixty seconds. Remember?”

“You know why I left,” she snapped. “Because of what you are. And Declan is just like you. A monster .”

My instant fury sent my hands to a fit of trembling. I gripped my cell hard as I leaned forward over my desk as though getting into her face. “Watch what you say about him, dear . He's our son and a beautiful boy. I did what I did to save your life, Elsa.

Yours and his. Call him a monster again and you'll see the real me. Again."

"This is why I ran away," Elsa all but shrieked. "Because you're dangerous. You'll teach Declan to be a murderer. Just like you."

"You don't know anything of the kind," I replied. "You didn't give me a chance to explain, to show you how much I loved you. That's your loss, sweetheart. We're better off without you."

"Kiss my ass, you freak."

"Bare it."

I listened to her suck in a deep breath, calming her runaway emotions. I rubbed my eyes, thinking of the love and happiness we once shared. The day Declan was born, our joy soared to the clouds and beyond. I suppose she'd have someday discovered what I truly was, what I'd passed to our son in my genes. When that day finally came, it involved death and violence.

"Just sign the papers," she said, her tone bitter, but composed. "I want to marry again."

"Who's the lucky guy?"

"None of your business."

"Send them along," I told her wearily.

Elsa said nothing, but I heard the faint tapping of computer keys. "They're sent to your e-mail," she said at length.

I opened my e-mail. “Got them. I’ll read the documents over and get it back to you.”

“Asap,” she snapped, and clicked off.

I set my cell down with a sigh and opened the document. A simple, legal form that dissolved our once happy marriage. Within it, Elsa agreed to not contest my full custody of Declan, to not demand alimony or any support, that any goods or property we shared were now mine. I examined it for any loopholes and found none.

After signing and initialing, I hit the send button. “There you go, my now ex-wife,” I muttered, leaning back in my chair. “Loads of best wishes in your life with the new man.”

A strange emptiness surrounded my heart. As though a part of me had hoped Elsa would come back one day and now that hope was gone. Intellectually, I knew a long time ago she’d never return. Her terror of both Declan and me went far too deep for that. My heart hoped my mind was wrong.

I rubbed my eyes again. “Oh, well. Life’s a bitch, then you die.”

A free man, I confess I started looking at Jacy in a new light.

As though my promise to protect her brought a fresh freedom to her spirit, she smiled and laughed without hindrance, her love for Declan shining in her brilliant, green eyes. Days had passed since her fears had her packing her belongings, and in those days I witnessed a new Jacy.

“Dad.”

In unrepressed excitement, Declan slurped his milk from his plastic cup, his enchiladas only half eaten. He gazed at me, grinning widely, then shot a quick look toward Jacy. Jacy kept her eyes on her meal, yet I suspected a conspiracy at hand.

“Yeah?”

“Jacy saw an ad today,” Declan went on. “For kittens.”

I blinked. “Kittens?”

“Baby cats,” Declan explained as though to an idiot. “Can we get one? Dad? Please?”

I eyed Jacy sidelong. “Why kittens?”

“Easier than puppies,” she replied. “They poop in a box, don’t chew your shoes.”

“And claw my furniture to shreds.” I sighed. “Besides, we have Max.”

I glanced at Max, lying on the floor on his back with all four paws in the air. I sighed again.

“Daaad.” Declan’s long protest told me just how much he wanted this to happen. “I’ll take care of it, I promise.”

“Pets teach kids responsibility,” Jacy murmured into her enchilada. “Max is more your dog than Declan’s.”

“I’ll clean the box every day,” Declan promised. “And feed it. I’ll make it not claw the furniture, too.”

“Thanks for implanting this into my kid’s mind,” I muttered from the side of my

mouth.

“You’re welcome.”

“Daaad.”

“Somehow I feel I’m outnumbered,” I commented. “Are we talking about a single kitten?”

“These are brother and sister,” Jacy replied. “A bonded pair. The owners are asking they stay together.”

“Ai-yi-yi.” I shook my head. “I don’t know jack about cats.”

“You can learn. Along with Declan.”

I glowered into Declan’s happy and hopeful face. “You make sure they don’t scratch the crap outta my sofa.”

The kittens were nearly identical gray tabbies. Declan named them Peter and Wendy after he saw the Disney classic Peter Pan. How they bonded with him, and primarily him, remained a mystery to me. Jacy told me they followed him everywhere, sat on the tub’s side while he bathed, and I witnessed for myself how they slept with him every night.

Max, that big brave mutt, was terrified of them. When first introduced, the kittens puffed up like outraged porcupines, hissing and growling. Max yipped in horror, and jumped onto the sofa, trying to hide in the pillows. I rolled my eyes.

“They aren’t any bigger than his paw,” I grumbled. “Jeez.”

Jacy laughed. “Give them time. In days, they’ll be inseparable.”

Still, time passed, and Max avoided the pair as though they were mini tigers ready to yank his guts from his belly and eat them.

Being kittens, of course, they tore through the house like mini tornados, climbed the curtains, wrestled with each other, quarreled over toys, got onto the kitchen table and counters, cried for snacks from the dinner table.

“I don’t like them on the counter,” I objected.

“I’ll keep it clean, Dad,” Declan said, eager. “Jacy says it’s hard to keep them off things.”

“You can try,” Jacy added with a shrug. “But cats are cats. They do their own thing.”

“Just use a good cleaner on the table and counters before you fix a meal,” I growled. “I really don’t want kitty germs in my dinner.”

Jacy snorted laughter.

Wendy and Peter sat on the counter, staring at us hopefully as we ate our meal. Jacy cut up small pieces of leftover chicken for them, explaining to Declan what was good for cats and what wasn’t. I watched in disbelief as the kittens were spoiled rotten in front of my very eyes.

“Now they’ll never eat their own chow,” I complained.

“Sure they will,” Jacy replied calmly. “They’re growing babies.”

I closed the door to Declan's room after peeking in on him before I went to my own bed. The kittens never opened an eye and were curled into furry balls on either side of him. Unable to halt it, I smiled at the sight.

"They're good for him," Jacy said quietly from behind me.

"I guess so. I admit, I never thought a cat could be so loyal."

"Oh, they're very loyal," Jacy murmured. "I had a cat once. Named her Dancer. She loved me to the moon and back."

Something, a note of grief maybe, in her tone had me taking a second look at her face in the darkness. "What happened to her?"

"She died." Jacy turned away to cross the hall to her own room.

I caught her arm. "Of old age?"

"No. My brother. He killed her."

"You're lucky, bro."

Fletcher clapped me on the back before lifting his beer bottle to his lips. "You've got a great gal in your nanny. Don't let her go."

"I'll try not to." I drank from my own, half watching the ball game on the TV above the bar. I'd accepted Fletcher's invitation for a few beers in our local bar, and let Jacy know I'd be late home. "I almost lost her, though. She's got someone after her."

“‘After her’? Like whom?”

I shrugged. “She won’t say. I’m guessing an ex-hubby or boyfriend. She’s terrified of this dude.”

Fletch nodded sagely. “Us of the male persuasion tend to be possessive, stupid, violent, thinking with our peckers and stupid.”

“You said that twice.”

“Because we’re double stupid. Man, I hope you’re planning to run this dude through with the tip of your sword.”

“I was planning to burn him to death.”

Fletch shrugged. “That works.” He drank another long gulp of his beer. “Me, I’m staying single. Females scare me.”

“They scare me, too.” I glumly swallowed half my bottle. “But I could fall in love, I’m telling you.”

He flung his arm companionably over my shoulder, his beer breath wafting into my face. “Don’t. She’ll emasculate you faster than a dull blade. Love her, worship her, don’t ever let her near your family jewels.”

“You’re drunk,” I complained.

“Yep. And proud of it.” Fletch upended his bottle and drank his beer to the end.

“How will we ever procreate if we don’t have sex?” I demanded.

Fletch waved his arm in the air. “Aren’t there enough of us? Making babies merely adds to the population. It never guarantees love required.”

“Don’t I know it.” I signaled the bartender for another round. “I’m finally divorced, you know.”

“Are you?” Fletch grinned broadly. “Now you’re back on the market, bro. Find a nice lady and make Declan an older brother.”

“Didn’t you just tell me to not procreate?” I demanded, glaring.

“Sure did. That’s advice I’ll offer and never take for myself.” Fletch grinned. “I’ll never sire the next in line.”

“I think that’s a good thing,” I grumbled, accepting my fresh bottle and tossing bills across the bar. “You’d be a rotten dad.”

“Here’s to living life as a bachelor.” Fletch tossed his head back and downed half his bottle. “For me and not for thee.”

“Grow up, man.”

“Nope. Don’t wanna, don’t hafta. Growing old isn’t an option, growing up is.”

“I hate you.”

Fletch grabbed my shoulders to pull me toward him, then kissed my cheek. “But I love you.”

I pushed him away. “Don’t do that.” I wiped his kiss from my cheek. “People will think we’re gay.”

Fletch blinked. “We’re not?”

I rolled my eyes. “That’s your answer. Great sex with me, and no babies.”

“Come home with me.”

“No. You’re not my type.”

He rested his head on my shoulder. “You can be on top.”

I shoved him away. “Find a nice girl and make babies. If you’re lucky, they won’t look like you. If you’re lucky.”

Nursing a slight hangover the next morning, I dragged myself to the office. I booted up my computer, then left my desk to brew coffee. While I waited for it to percolate, I pondered Fletch’s dire premonition the previous night.

You’ll fall in love. And when you do, she’ll find out what you are. And pull an Elsa.

“I won’t fall in love,” I muttered thickly. “I can’t. I can’t risk my heart, or Declan’s, ever again. Jacy is our nanny and that’s all she is.”

Returning to my computer, I called up my e-mail while sipping my coffee. I scanned past the usual client list, deleted the spam, planned to read the daily stock reports within a few minutes. A strange address caught my attention. I set my coffee on its warmer, then clicked on the message.

Greetings, Avery. I’m in town and will pay a visit to your office at noon sharp today. Don’t even think of not answering your door. Avoid me at your peril. And remember,

I represent the governing council. Should you decline to chat with me, you'll never see your son ever again.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:47 am

Jacy

I gestured toward the playground and the kids on recess under the watchful eyes of their teachers. “Do you wish you could go to school?”

Declan ate his sandwich, munching while watching the kids play, swing on swing sets, play dodgeball and tetherball. “No. I like you teaching me.”

We sat in the park not far from the elementary school, having brought a picnic lunch in a cooler. With the summer nearing its end, and autumn on the way, Declan and I often walked through the town. Though I kept a watchful eye out for Carter or his goons, I saw nothing of either. He doesn’t know where I am. I’m sure of it now.

“Don’t you think you’d want to make friends with other kids your age?”

He shrugged. “Maybe. I have you, max and my cats. And my dad.”

“That’s true,” I mused. “The neighborhood kids seem nice. You might make friends with them.”

“Yeah.”

Eating our lunch, I pondered the years ahead. Declan turning ten, then fifteen. He’ll get his driver’s license. He’ll attend the local high school, play sports, maybe date a nice girl. By then, he’ll have outgrown his need for a nanny. Avery will say thanks for the memories, time for you to leave my house . Then I’ll go, perhaps find another nanny job.

Declan suddenly asked, “What are you thinking about?”

His intuition is at it again. “That one day you won’t need me.”

“I’ll always need you, Jacy,” he said, his tone fierce. “Don’t ever leave. Okay?”

“When you get older, kiddo, you’ll not need a nanny. You can stay home alone, go to school, hang out with your friends.” I smiled sadly. “You won’t need me.”

His mouth set in a stubborn line, he shook his head. “I don’t want to grow older.”

“I hear you,” I said quietly, watching the kids line up to return to their classrooms. “When I was a kid, I didn’t want to grow up, either. Adulting is hard.”

“You grew up, anyway.”

“I didn’t have much choice. Nor do you.”

He said nothing else. We finished our picnic, threw our trash in the dumpster, then ambled hand in hand toward the library. With the cooler weather, we both wore jeans, and the wolf whistles from passing cars diminished greatly. A few other townsfolk walked as we did, most passing us by with quick smiles.

We neared the library, talking about what I’d planned to teach him that afternoon, when yet another passerby strode briskly toward us. Rather than smile and walk on, she paused, forcing us to also stop. She gazed down at Declan, a beatific expression lighting her face.

“What a beautiful little boy,” she gushed. “You’re his mom?”

“No,” I answered. “I’m his nanny.”

Declan, gazing up at her, edged his way behind me, peering around my legs. An outgoing, never shy kid, Declan had never before hidden behind me when meeting strangers. Surprised at his behavior, I nonetheless trusted his instincts.

“Why aren’t you in school, honey?” she asked, bending over to be closer to him.

“He’s homeschooled,” I said, not liking the way she looked at him. “Excuse us.”

I started around her, Declan’s hand firmly in mine, when she asked, “Where do you live?”

“In Bakersville.” Bakersville was two towns north along the interstate highway.

I glanced at her again, memorizing her features as best I could. Middle aged, her brown hair held streaks of gray. She’d pulled it back into a tail and wore a pink sweater over her jeans. Thin, athletic, her face had crow’s feet around her brown eyes. Nor did I like the gleam I saw within them.

“Where’s his mother?” she inquired as Declan and I walked on.

I didn’t answer. Declan watched her warily, his chin on his shoulder, as we climbed the steps to the library’s doors. As I opened them, I, too, looked over my shoulder.

She stood on the sidewalk, watching us.

“Why was she asking those questions?” Declan asked as we strode toward the children’s section.

“I don’t know.”

Except, I feared I did indeed know.

The woman was nowhere in sight when Declan and I emerged from the library hours later. As though fearing she'd step out from behind a shrub and pounce, Declan clung to my hand while looking around warily. I, too, watched for not just her, but anyone paying us more attention than necessary.

Nor, as far as I could tell, did anyone follow us.

Declan immediately relaxed the minute we stepped through the front door of our house and locked it behind us.

Wendy and Peter woke from their naps, yawning and stretching their lithe bodies. They'd grown considerably in the last month and had begun to appear more like small cats than kittens. Giggling, Declan laid on the carpet to hold and pet them while they purred, bumping their heads into his chin.

Declan never played with them roughly, pulled their tails, seized their fur in his fist, or treated them with anything save love and kindness. Neither Avery nor I had to chide him for any of that. He behaved that way all on his own.

"Mac and cheese for dinner?" I asked, walking toward the kitchen. "With wieners?"

"Sure."

Though I suspected the health benefits of mac and cheese were minimal at best, both Avery and Declan loved it. I guess I should admit I do, too. Not healthy, but oh so tasty. Avery would be home soon, I knew, and mentally planned to get the meal together without cooking it until he got home.

My cell buzzed in my pocket.

Surprised, I pulled it out and glanced at the screen. Beth. Though I'd sent her nearly daily e-mails as to how things were going, we hadn't talked much on the phone. Pleased, I clicked the answer button.

"Beth," I exclaimed. "Hi, how are you?"

I listened to her choked off sob. "Beth? What's wrong? Are you okay?"

"No." Her tiny voice shuddered as she tried to withhold her weeping. "Jacy, I'm scared. I'm so scared."

I clutched my phone hard. My heart thudded in my chest. "What happened?"

"Just a sec."

Forced to wait, frantic with worry, my own fear grew, climbing, until my head swam while Beth collected herself. I licked my dry lips, forcing my questions to the back of my mind. Maybe it's not so bad. Let her tell you in her own time.

"A guy," Beth finally went on, her voice low. "A guy came to the restaurant. Looking for you."

I thought I'd faint then and there. "What did he look like?"

"I dunno. Tall, dark hair. Can't remember his eyes. Except they were so cold. Inhuman."

"Oh, God."

I slid to my ass on the kitchen floor, hiding behind my hair. "Oh, God."

“I told him you’d quit,” Beth continued after a sniff. “Jim ranted and raved right there about you. How you’d left him in the lurch, gone away. Every customer heard him.”

“Then what?” I whispered.

“The guy told me.” Beth swallowed hard. “He – he said he’d cut me up if I lied to him. He’d find me and cut me.”

“Beth.” I sobbed, crying hard. “Beth, I’m so sorry.”

We wept together, both of us sobbing as we each tried to comfort the other. Occupied with his cats, Declan must not have heard me, for he didn’t come into the kitchen to investigate. Glad of it, I wiped my face with my hands, trying to calm myself down.

“You have to leave, Beth.”

“I know.” She sniffled loudly and blew her nose. “I’ve already talked with my sister in Montana. I’m going there right now.”

“Good.”

I sucked in deep breaths, relieved that my best and only friend would be out of Carter’s reach. “You didn’t tell him where I was?”

“No. Jim started in with his yelling before the guy even asked me. He said you’d left town, gone with some cowboy yo-yo. I don’t know if the guy believed him.”

“He must not have if he threatened you.”

“Jacy.” Beth’s voice quavered. “Come with me. Whoever this guy is, he’ll hurt you. He’ll hurt you bad.”

“I can’t.” I ran my fingers through my hair. “I’ve an obligation.”

“Damn it,” she snapped. “Get out of there. Come with me. He’s your employer, he’ll find another kid watcher.”

“Avery said he’d protect me.”

Beth said nothing for a long time. I began to think she’d hung up, except I heard no disconnecting click. “Beth?”

“What does this guy want, Jacy? Why is he after you?”

“I can’t tell you.” I breathed deeply. “The less you know the better.”

“Christ,” she grumbled. “You sound like the damn mafia.”

“He’s not quite the mafia, but close. Look, get in your car and drive. Don’t look back. I’ll stop e-mailing you for your own safety.”

“Like witness protection.” Beth didn’t sound amused. “Maybe you should call the feds and give this guy up. Start a new life. New name, identity.”

“I wish I could.”

“Christ,” Beth said again. “I can’t believe this is happening.”

“It is, honey. Now please go.”

“I will. My sister lives in a big city. Maybe I’ll find a girlfriend up there.”

“I know you will. I love you.”

“Love you, too. Stay safe. And if you change your mind, let me know. We’ll take care of each other.”

“We will.”

After I hung up, I sat where I was, staring at the wall opposite. I’ve dragged someone else I love into this mess. How will it end? My death? His? While her description of the guy didn’t match Carter’s, I knew he worked for Carter. And guessed he didn’t know where I was. Not fully. He knew I’d worked at the restaurant, but would he believe Jim and think I’d left town with some hick?

“Not until he thoroughly scours this place for me,” I muttered. “I should have left here a long time ago.”

My conscience demanded I go upstairs and pack, leave right after Avery got home. Not let him talk me into staying, forget his offers of protection. I had no right to endanger Avery’s or Declan’s lives. No right at all. I stood up slowly and turned to lean my hands on the kitchen’s counter. I gazed through the window to the backyard, thinking of how the hunted fox leads the hunter away from its den.

“I have to leave here.”

I inwardly cringed when Avery came home. The fixings for mac and cheese stood ready, the words I’d planned to speak had been rehearsed several times within my mind. My legs stiff, I went to the kitchen door.

Avery kissed the top of Declan’s head, then went straight up the stairs.

He didn’t look in my direction at all.

Before he vanished, I recognized the turmoil within him by his tight expression, the tension in his broad shoulders. What happened? This is more than just a bad day at work. I met Declan's gaze.

"Dad's upset," he said.

"Yeah, I got that."

I waited, but Avery didn't return down the stairs.

Declan picked up the kittens and carried them into the kitchen. I followed more slowly, watching as they prowled around his legs, meowing, as he prepared their dinner. He set the bowls on the floor, then stood over them as Peter and Wendy growled at each other while devouring their chow.

I fed Max, who eyed the kittens warily before gulping his own meal. After that, he trotted up the stairs, presumably, to gain Avery's protection.

I started for the counter, then realized Declan was crying. Silently. No wailing, no loud sobs. His tears rolled down his cheeks to plop onto the floor.

"Oh, baby."

I crouched beside him and hugged him, letting him cry on my shoulder. "It'll be all right. I swear."

"No, it won't. Jacy, I'm scared."

What's to be afraid of? I'm glad I didn't say the words, for there was plenty to be afraid of.

“I know, kiddo,” I whispered. “I am, too.”

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Avery

Precisely at noon, Ian stalked uninvited into my office.

I rented a small office suite in a business building near downtown with space for a receptionist if I ever hired one. I never did. He opened the outer door and took two steps in before realizing I stood in the doorway to my inner office.

He silently shut the door behind him, then met my gaze while simply standing. “May I come in?”

“Looks like you’re already in.”

Ian didn’t look like what one might expect of my kind. Short, squat, going bald, he nonetheless gave off an aura of power. His dark gray eyes studied me, my non-defensive stance, my clear readiness to defy him. I didn’t try to hide my attitude behind a more suppliant demeanor and body language.

“What do you want?”

Ian ignored my challenging tone. “You know why I’m here. You broke the law.”

I curled my upper lip in a sneer. “You know why I did.”

“You mated with a human,” he snapped, pacing forward.

“It’s not illegal.”

“But highly ill-advised. A human mate will learn what we are. Dammit, you showed your wife exactly what you, we, are.”

“She’s my ex-wife now, and it’s not likely she’ll broadcast the information.”

Ian’s chin rose. “How do you know?”

“She hasn’t in three years.” I shrugged. “She’s terrified of what we are. What she gave birth to.”

Without coming closer, Ian paced. “She still could, Avery. You know that. She could go to the media, give an interview.”

“That was years ago, dammit,” I snarled. “Why are you fussing over it now?”

He spun toward me aggressively. “Because in revealing yourself you killed a human. And bolted like a damn coward from our justice. You’d have faced the council then had you bothered to stick around.”

“You also know the circumstances, Ian,” I grated, my voice low. “I wasn’t going to let you take my son from me.”

“He’s better off without a criminal for a sire.”

My fists clenched, I advanced on him. “Say that again, and I’ll gut you from crotch to throat.”

Ian stepped back from my fury. “Calm down, Avery. I misspoke. Look, let’s be reasonable here. We don’t want to take your kid from you or banish you. But you did wrong, and you have to face the music. It’s up to the council to decide.”

“But you’ll make damn sure the council finds me guilty and banishes me. Won’t you? I’ll never receive a fair hearing. You’ll make sure of that.”

“You give me far too much credit.”

I laughed, but not with humor. “You already know half the human population knows we exist. You’re enforcing a bygone law, from a bygone era. We’re not talked about, true. They like to pretend they’re wrong, we don’t shift from human form to something that flies and breathes fire. If they talked about us, we might decide to turn on them. Take this world for ourselves.”

“You’re ridiculous,” Ian snorted.

“You’d like to think that.” I grinned. “But you know for a fact I’m right.”

“I know no such thing.”

“I’ll save my breath. There’s no point in arguing with someone who refuses to see what’s in front of his face.”

“You think I’m a fool, then?” He set his hands on his hips in an arrogant posture.

I laughed. “Yeah. I do. How many cases have there been that are exactly like mine? Eh? Human mates who discover the truth? Our kind who must defend their loved ones from human predators?”

His lips pooched outward in a petulant child’s pout. “We have no records of them.”

“Only because folks like you refuse to keep them,” I snapped. “So you can persecute those like me.”

“We’re not persecuting you.”

“That’s exactly what you’re doing.” I stepped forward, now only mere steps from him. I leaned forward, towering over his short stature. “Others before me have done exactly what I’ve done.”

“And were banished to Iceland.”

“Try it, bonehead.” I growled low in my throat. “Try it, and unleash the raw power I possess. I’ll slay you, and every member of the council if you try to take my son from me.”

Ian dared not step back, for that would demonstrate I held the upper hand. Instead, he met my defiant gaze with his own, and he also leaned forward until our faces were inches apart. “You can’t slay us all.”

“Care to bet on that?”

I smiled.

Despite the enclosed room, I was an inch from shifting and burning his arrogant ass to ashes. Only the fact that my body would endanger the lives of office workers all around me when I my body burst the building’s walls and brought the roof down kept me from doing it.

He saw that smile and backed up a step until his body pressed against the shut door.

“Don’t threaten me,” I said softly. “You don’t want to piss me off. I’ll go on a rampage the likes of which none of our kind has ever seen before. You’re right to fear me.”

He tried to raise a feral smile. “You don’t scare me.”

My smile widened. “Oh, I believe you’re lying about that. I can smell your sweat, Ian. You’re sweating from fear. From terror. I should rip your throat out right now.”

“You wouldn’t dare.” His Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed. Hard.

“Except I would. To protect my child. What would you do to protect your offspring, Ian?”

“A – anything.”

“As would I. Even kill.”

Our eyes locked, I recognized the deep-seated fear in his cold brown gaze. I knew he saw the raw determination to keep Declan with me, my primal instincts to protect my son, deep within mine. He all but melted into the door. His fingers trembled even as he clenched his fists.

“I’m warning you,” he said, his voice quivering faintly, “you’ll face the council. You harm me, you’ll be executed.”

I laughed. “Do you think any council member can face me , Ian? Really? Drag me in chains to an execution site? I’ll bring down such a storm of fire upon them they’ll wish forever after they’d just let me be.”

“Back off,” he ordered, his voice shaking. “I mean it. I represent the council in this matter. If you defy me, it’ll go that much harder on you later.”

I lifted both of my hands in token surrender. “I’m backing off.” I paced two steps away from him. “Now get out of my office, you little pipsqueak. Now . Before you

piss me off and make me regret hurting innocent people.”

His haste making him fumble with the door handle, Ian frantically yanked it open, and he lunged from my office. And my threats. I stepped to the opened door to watch him rush down the hall to the elevator, then hit the “down” button several times before the car arrived. He didn’t meet my gaze as he stepped inside and hit the main floor’s button.

The doors hissed closed.

I sucked in a deep breath. I unclenched my fists and discovered my fingers, no, my hands, shook as though I’d throttled Ian, my fingers buried in his throat to my nails. Shutting my door, I leaned against it with my eyes closed.

“Fuck.”

I spoke the word with anger, with hate, and all the pent up emotion I kept bottled up inside me. I shook with rage, with fear, with the desperation of a father facing the unknown. The potential loss of his son.

“I won’t lose you,” I growled. “Declan, I’ll never let you go. They can’t take me from you. They’ll never take me from you.”

There was no way I could focus on my work after that encounter.

I shut down my computer, locked my office.

After I drove my car from the parking lot, I had no destination in mind. Heading west toward the mountains, I simply drove into them, following the twisting, winding curves that led higher and higher, the elevation rising with every mile.

I stopped at a pull in lookout point, then parked. Outside, leaning against the guardrail, I gazed at the mountains and the plains far below. So much world to get lost in. So many countries. The council can't track us everywhere.

Thinking of Jacy, I wondered how I'd explain this to her. Sorry, hon, the council is determined I'm guilty and plans to banish me to an island off the Iceland coast. I hate to fire you, but Declan and I are flying to hide in the islands off Mexico. I'll give you a great reference.

I bowed my head. How did my life get so fucked up? Why I am falling for Jacy more and more each day that I don't want to abandon my life with her which can lead to a separation between me and my son, even worse, I can lose my life?

However insane it sounded, I didn't want to leave Jacy behind.

Banishing most thoughts from my head, I stood at the rail and gazed at the scenery for hours. It wasn't exactly like meditating, but it came close. I calmed my inner torment and turmoil, found acceptance in what will be, will be. If the council chose to banish me, I'd run. I'd take Declan and Jacy with me.

There's a big world out there the council cannot reach. We'll lose ourselves, lose the council, leave all behind us. As a stockbroker, I can make money from anywhere. I'll keep us safe.

The sun made its slow way across the sky into the west. When it hit the high peaks, I returned to my car. As I drove down from the high country, my previous insecurity returned. What was I thinking? Bring Jacy along as I flee for my life? Am I insane?

My emotions torn, fluttering in the wind, I parked my car in the garage. I saw nothing of Jacy, but Declan looked up from playing with his kittens, his eyes dark and concerned. I tried to smile and failed. So I kissed him and retreated to my room.

After shutting the door, I lay on my bed, staring at the ceiling, as the shadows drifted in from the growing darkness. The odors of mac and cheese drifted to my nose, reminding me I hadn't eaten all day. Oddly, I craved Jacy, not food.

I felt like this pain inside me had persisted for centuries and I was running and running. I needed her. I needed her to hold me, to tell me it's all right. Just as she soothed Declan, I wanted her to soothe me. But how could I ask that of her? I hired her to care for Declan, not me. I dared not ask her for more than she wanted to give.

Especially to me.

Full darkness fell with a thump.

I sat on the edge of my bed, listening to Jacy put Declan in his room to sleep. I heard the soft meowing of his kittens as they complained about the early hour of bedtime. I smiled as I pictured Peter and Wendy purring while curled up on either side of Declan. Jacy was right to bring them into our lives. They're good for us all.

"I love you," I heard Jacy say as she closed Declan's door. "Sleep tight, bugs bite."

Standing, I paced to my door and opened it a crack. Enough to peer out and into the hallway.

As it happened, Jacy looked right at my room as I did so. Her green eyes, already wide, took me in.

"Avery," she murmured.

"Please," I whispered. "Come here."

She accepted my outstretched hand, permitted me to bring her into my darkened

room. I shut the door behind her, held her hands within mine. In the darkness, her face appeared as a small moon, uptilted toward mine. Bending, I kissed her.

Not just a kiss.

Oh, no.

I slipped my tongue between her lips, explored her mouth as she opened for me. Her arms around my neck clasped me to her, preventing a change of mind if I had one. I didn't.

"I need you," I whispered against her mouth.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:47 am

Jacy

I wanted him.

Oh, how I wanted him.

As I'd never craved a lover before, I needed Avery at that moment. I sweated for his touch, the press of his body against mine. I thrust my hips against his, feeling the hard knot within his trousers. Spreading my thighs, I encouraged him, demanded he spend his emotions within me.

Avery, his arm around my lower back, bent me over it. His hot lips, his devilish tongue, stroked between my breasts. I moaned in heat as he licked and sucked my flesh, nipping, biting, leaving marks that are hard to explain without blushing.

"Jacy," he muttered, his voice thick. "I need you."

"I'm here," I said around my swollen tongue. "I'm here."

I needed him as badly as he needed me. I might not know the cause, but I felt his turmoil. It roiled through me, him, like a thunderstorm. I craved the touch, the connection, of another person, as much as he did. I might die tomorrow, but at least I'd feel a human touch before that happened.

"Jacy. Jacy."

Avery's teeth nipped my throat even as his hand slid between the waistband of my

jeans and my belly. I gasped as his fingers found my clit, toyed with it, brought a gush of my arousal into my panties. I lunged upward, his chest against mine, as he delved deeper, his middle finger searching my pussy. I clamped my lips onto his mouth, tasting him, loving him, needing him, even as his tongue tangled with mine.

His massive body rising, looming over me, Avery undressed me. His swift fingers nipped my jeans apart, shoved my shirt over my head. My panties shredded under his insistent hands. If I hadn't slipped my jeans down, kicked them off, I'm sure he'd have shredded them as easily as my laced undies.

Naked before him, his hand swept from my boobs to my thighs. He slid down my body, his hands shoving my thighs even further from one another. I nearly yelled out as his tongue invaded my pussy, teasing my clit, my body responding to his remarkable tongue talents as they never had any previous lover.

"Stop," I groaned, thrashing under him, my fingers tangled in his hair. "I'll come. I'll come."

He ignored my request. His tongue delved deeper. I clamped my thighs to either side of his head, trapping him, forcing him to bring me to my climax.

"Stop," I gasped, unable to handle the sheer forces that pulled me into their embrace. Never before had I orgasmed that hard. Not without a cock inside me. "Stop."

He lifted his mouth, "Why?"

"Oh, God."

"Can't handle me?" He chuckled with an evil tone. "Just you wait, baby. You ain't seen nothing yet."

Nor had I.

He raised his body onto his arms, posed over mine. I gazed up at his leer, my body vulnerable to his invasion. I glanced down and I gulped, panicking, not sure that I could handle such a long and thick member.

Looked like he could read my mind. “I’ll be gentle,” he murmured, lowering his heavy body onto mine.

He was. Sort of.

When his thick, hard shaft thrust into me, I cried out. Both pleasure and pain accompanied his invasion, a burning sensation that quickly morphed into sheer erotic pleasure. He thrust in and out, gliding on my arousal, pinning me to the mattress as his mouth took mine, his tongue piercing my throat.

I moaned in sheer pleasure, my arousal growing, my needs rising. Tidal waves of sensations crashed over me. I gasped for breath, unable to collect a full breath as my orgasm quaked. My body shuddered under its force, claiming me, my nails dug deep into Avery’s shoulders as his cock spasmed deep with my body.

I felt his shaft burst.

His hot seed splashed deep into my womb.

A distant part of me realized the danger – he wore no condom. I wasn’t on birth control.

The other part of me exclaimed – woo, hoo! Live a little!

I wasn’t sure what part made the most sense.

He kissed my forehead and collapsed atop me, his shaft buried between my legs. His heavy breathing sounded loud in my ear. Sweat collected between us where our flesh came together, slicking and oiling us. I let my fingers dance along his spine, content to have his weight on me.

Avery lifted himself enough to smile into my eyes. "I could fall in love."

I turned my face away. "Don't."

With a sigh, he rolled off me, but pulled me against his hard muscled belly and chest. His arm trapped me against him, yet I didn't fight to escape his grasp. His legs covered mine, completely catching me against him.

"You're running," he whispered. "So am I. We can do this. If we stay together."

Twisting my neck, I gazed into his eyes. "You're sure?"

Avery bent to kiss me. "Yeah."

I wiggled enough to set my back against his chest and stared into the darkness. "I'm not so sure."

"Apart we're weak," he muttered, his lips against my neck. "Together? Shit. They don't have a chance."

"How can you be so sure?"

His breathy chuckle against my flesh made me shiver. "I'm sure, honey. Trust me."

“Dad isn’t upset anymore.”

Declan made the comment from the table where he practiced his reading. Wendy and Peter tussled on the floor, while Max watched from the kitchen doorway. He’d overcome the worst of his anxiety over the cats, and I suspected he’d soon try to make friends. The kittens had long lost their fear of him, and they often stalked him in an attempt to play.

“No,” I said, making Declan’s lunch. “He’s much better.

So am I. There’s nothing like great sex to release the inner tensions and fears.

Of course, I still worried about what my presence in their lives might bring to them. I recalled the strange woman, her scrutiny, her pointed questions. Did she believe we lived in Bakersville and sent Carter or his goons searching for me there? Was she even certain I was the woman Carter sought?

I set Declan’s sandwich and chips in front of him, then poured his milk into his cup. The kittens instantly went on alert, and jumped into his lap, their inquisitive noses inspecting his lunch. Declan slyly tried to filch some turkey from between his bread slices.

“Uh, no,” I said firmly. “Put them down.”

Reluctant, Declan pushed the kittens off his legs. After two more tries, and failures, to gain a snack, Wendy and Peter sat on the floor, side by side, watching every morsel he ate. I chuckled under my breath.

“You can give them some turkey in their bowls,” I commented. “After you’re done. And Max gets some, too.”

“Okay.”

My confidence had returned. I felt that with Avery at my side, Carter and his goons couldn't do a thing to harm me. Perhaps I should have pushed that confidence away, stayed on my guard. I didn't. Instead, I cleaned the house while daydreaming of Avery.

He said he could fall in love. Maybe I can, too. He's strong, yet kind, warm, humorous. A tried and true good guy. Humming while vacuuming, I recalled his love making, how well our bodies meshed together. How quickly and easily he'd brought me two orgasms. How well I'd slept in his arms the night before.

As though we were meant to be together.

Fated.

I ceased all thoughts of leaving Avery and Declan to run for Montana. Instead, I pondered fresh notions of staying, of making nightly love to Avery, perhaps have a kid of my own with him. Maybe two. I know Declan would love being an older brother. Even to half siblings.

But would Avery want more kids?

I suspected the answer to that was yes.

I heard the sound of Avery parking the car, and suddenly, sensations surged through my body. My face was definitely flushed. Was it because of last night? Was I still burning with the desire to be in his arms again?

When Avery walked in, he came straight to me and leaned in to kiss me—a long, slow, tender kiss filled with love. A warm glow bloomed from my core to my chest as

we smiled into each other's eyes. His hands settled on my hips, his body just an inch from mine. His trousers weren't tented, but his desire was unmistakable.

Yeah. I could fall in love

"Dad."

His kittens, meowing for their supper, trotted in his wake as Declan charged into the kitchen and jumped into Avery's arms. Laughing, Avery noisily kissed his cheek, making Declan giggle.

"How's your day, little man?" Avery asked, holding Declan easily in the crook of his massive arm.

"Okay."

"Just okay?"

"I learned a new word today."

"Cool. What word?"

"Um." Declan rolled his eyes as he tried to remember. "Gorgeous."

"Ah." Avery shot me a sly glance. "As in, 'Jacy is gorgeous'?"

"Yeah."

My skin heated in an obnoxious blush. "That's enough, you two. Declan, go feed your cats and dog. Avery, wash up."

I prepared spaghetti for dinner and then sat on the couch, scrolling through social media as I waited for Avery to join me.

He walked in wearing pajama pants and a white sleeveless shirt, giving a perfect view of his strong torso. His damp hair looked incredible against his model-like face. I hoped he didn't notice me scanning every inch of his body with my eyes.

As the three of us sat at the dinner table, I couldn't stop glancing at Avery—and it didn't seem like he was growing tired of looking at me either. While Declan and Avery chatted away, I kept stealing glances, my mind constantly drifting back to last night.

That funky, warm glow never left me.

After dinner, I curled up on the couch, trying to shake off the memory of what had happened between us. Then suddenly, Avery sat beside me and slipped his arm around my shoulders.

“Share my bed tonight?” he whispered, while Declan played a game of keep-away with the kittens on the floor.

I looked away, not wanting him to see my blushing face. But he pulled me closer, tucking me under his arm, and pressed a kiss to my forehead. I rested my head on his shoulder.

Together, we watched Declan giggle as the kittens leaped for the feather toy in his small hand. Somehow, I knew that if Declan understood the affection growing between Avery and me, he'd wholeheartedly approve.

Deeply asleep, hours before the dawn, we both woke to Max's savage barking. Instantly alert, my heart racing, I heard/saw Avery climb swiftly out of bed and don a pair of jeans. The barking drove me out from under the covers, seizing a shirt even as Avery lunged from the bedroom.

"Dad?"

Declan's frightened voice rose over Max's noise. Rather than answer him, Avery snapped on the hall light before charging headlong down the stairs. "Stay with Declan," he ordered.

Suddenly, Max's barking ceased after a sharp yelp of pain. Declan joined me at the door, near tears, as he hugged me around my waist.

"What's happening?" he whispered.

"What'd you do to my dog?" Avery screamed.

I heard Avery say, "fucker," then a strange eerie silence.

"I don't know," I said, "but I'm gonna find out. Go to your room and stay there."

Avery

“Fucker,” I yelled, observing Max’s twitching body on the TV room carpet.

The man garbed in black, a black balaclava concealing his face, aimed the Taser at me. Charging at full speed, I backhanded the Taser from his hand before he pulled the trigger. It bounced off the carpet somewhere behind me, then I punched him across his jaw.

He stumbled back but recovered far faster than I’d anticipated. He yanked a long knife from the small of his back, and now I was on the defensive. The dude was maybe ex-military, or an MMA fighter, for he was fast and light on his feet. He swung the blade in short arcs, never leaving himself open for attack.

Forced to leap back, I ducked and dodged the knife, the intruder advancing on me with icy, cold gray eyes above the balaclava. He gave me no opportunity to find a weapon of my own –

Until I stumbled over the fireplace tools.

I sucked my gut inward, feeling the blade slice a thin groove across my belly. Spinning, I bent and seized the first object that came to my hand. The broom I’d used to clean the ashes from the hearth. I didn’t care that it was a damn broom. The long handle was made of solid steel, and I blocked his next swing with it. I heard a muffled curse from behind the black cloth, then attacked. Swinging in short arcs as he had, I both blocked his weapon and aimed to either hit him on the head or his wrist, whichever came first.

If I got him to drop the knife, I might just win this fight.

Unfortunately, he was a better fighter than I was.

I swung hard at his head. In a lightning-fast move, he grabbed the handle and tugged. I didn't let go, of course, but the brief tug threw me off balance. His returning slice went for my throat. I both dodged it and threw my arm up in a defensive move – and his blade slashed deeply into my forearm.

I cried out at the sudden, burning pain, stumbling into the sofa's back. Bleeding profusely, I tried to ignore the wound as the intruder came at me again, knife lifted for the killing blow.

With my back to the couch, I was trapped.

His body suddenly jerked.

A grunt emerged from behind the balaclava.

He fell to his knees, the knife skittering from his hand.

Jacy advanced on him, her mouth a grim slash across her face, the Taser aimed at the dude. He half-lifted his right arm in a gesture of surrender, pleading, perhaps, for her not to hit him again. She paused, a short distance away, and glanced at me, the blood gushing from my arm.

“Are you –” she began.

The intruder lunged at her from his knees, dashing the Taser from her hand. Jacy cried out, the Taser flying across the room. Without either weapon, the dude staggered to his feet, then ran, limping, for the front door. Unable to pursue him in

my current state of going into shock, I merely watched as he yanked it open and vanished into the night.

“Shit,” Jacy yelled.

She seized the Taser and ran after him.

My vision blurry, my head spinning, feeling that I should sit and put my head between my knees, I couldn't call her back. I made my way to the kitchen, flipped on the light, trailing blood across the carpet and flooring. Grabbing a towel, I wrapped my arm in it and pressed tightly. I managed to sit at the table just as Jacy ran back in.

“He's gone,” she snapped. “Why didn't the Taser knock him out?”

Unable to speak, I couldn't tell her that in some instances, a Taser does little good. For another, he could have had training in which he'd been Tased over and over. Instead of telling her this, I hung my head and hoped I wouldn't pass out.

“You need an ambulance.”

Garbed in her shirt and undies, she dodged around the kitchen, searching for a cell. Ours were upstairs, charging and unavailable. Jacy seized another towel, then unwrapped the soaked one I had. She rewrapped it and put pressure on the wound herself.

“This isn't good,” she stated. “I'll take you to the hospital.”

I slowly shook my head. “No. Hospital.”

“You're bleeding out,” she cried.

“No. It. Will. Stop.”

Already, I felt the blood flow slow to a trickle. The towel soaked it up thirstily but kept much of its original color. The urge to faint passed gradually, and my mind cleared once it was gone. I breathed deeply, but the burning agony didn't cease with my blood flow.

“Dad!”

Declan charged into the kitchen, followed, on four shaky legs, by Max. Max whined, his ears slack, his tail thumping on his hocks as he slowly walked toward us before flopping to the tiles. Crying, Declan hugged me as best he could, shutting his eyes against the sight of my blood all over the place.

“I'm okay, little man,” I murmured. “Do me a favor, kay?”

His tears running down his cheeks, he lifted his face to mine. “What?”

“Look after Max. He's not feeling good right now. He needs a bit of pets and love. Kay?”

Declan eyed Max, then nodded. He trudged toward our dog, then sat beside him. He stroked Max's ears and down his neck, whispering words I couldn't catch. Max heard, however. His tail thumped the floor tiles.

“Fuck, this hurts,” I muttered through my clenched teeth. “Can you sew?”

“Sew?” Jacy's green eyes widened in sudden horror. “Oh, no, Avery, you can't ask me —”

“I am asking you.” I stood shakily. “No hospital. This is a clear knife wound. It'll be

reported to the cops. I don't want them involved."

"But –"

Ignoring her protests, I made my slow, careful way across the kitchen, then up the stairs. Jacy followed, silent, but her tension vibrated against my back. In the bathroom, I sat on the toilet seat, then unwrapped the towel. Jacy stood in the doorway, her eyes huge in her white face. The knife had cut a deep gash nearly from my elbow to my wrist, the wound gaping wide. Still, it had stopped bleeding.

"Helluva scar, eh?"

My attempt at levity wasn't well received. She stared at the gaping wound, her hands shaking. If I could stitch my own wound, I would. But I couldn't. I needed Jacy. I needed Jacy calm and collected. Right now, she'd jump and hit her head on the ceiling if I shouted boo.

"Look," I said, breathing heavily against the pain. "In the drawer there. Yeah, that one. There are needles, suturing silk, scissors. Alcohol to sterilize."

"Avery."

"You can do this, babe. I trust you. It's not that hard. It's like sewing two pieces of cloth together."

Jacy nodded slowly and found the items I mentioned. My arm would heal faster and cleaner if it was sutured. I needed Jacy to do that. My kind healed fast, true, but trying to heal an open wound would take ten times longer than if I had it sewn closed first.

"Run the silk through the eye," I said, "then splash alcohol on the needle."

Jacy obeyed me, her hands still shaking. Slightly alarmed by this, I watched her kneel beside me, then reach for my arm. Her choked sob cut itself off as she pinched the end of my wound shut with her left fingers and lifted the needle.

I dared not flinch. I dared not tense up. When the needle pierced the edge of the wound, the flaring pain all but had me curled up on the floor in a fetal position. My inner discipline forced me to remain relaxed, breathing deeply, despite the sweat trickling down my cheeks.

Thankfully, Jacy didn't look up. With all her attention focused on sewing my skin together, her trembles ended and little by little, she was able to complete her job. Though I hoped the pain would ease after a time, it didn't. Even after she finished bandaging my freshly sutured wound, the burning agony continued.

I bent my head and shut my eyes, sweat dotting my entire face.

I heard Jacy wet a cloth, then her gentle touch on my head. She wiped the sweat away, cooling my cheeks and brow, dabbing dried blood from my belly. Her kind care sent my heart oozing down my chest to puddle on the toilet seat. Not the best place for it, but there you are.

Jacy cupped my damp chin in her hand and lifted it until I stared into her eyes. "Never make me do that again. Ever."

I managed to smile. "No, ma'am."

"Pain killers? Narcotics?"

"Cabinet. Top shelf."

She gave me two pills from the bottle. "Antibiotics?"

“No need. I don’t get infections.”

With a skeptical grimace, she helped me to stand. “Bed then. And you won’t move from it.”

As she assisted me toward the door, we found it blocked by Declan. And Max. Both stared into my face as though reading my pain there and sorrowed by it. With my healthy arm, I pulled my son’s face into my stomach.

“I’ll be all right, little man.”

“Can I sleep with you, Dad?”

“You sure can. Max, too. Come on.”

Jacy got Declan and I settled into my bed she’d shared with me until a short while ago. Max, perhaps feeling insecure, hopped up to curl his big body at my feet. I didn’t bother to expel him. He needed comfort, too. Declan cuddled against my healthy right side, and almost instantly fell asleep. Shock, I thought.

“Rest,” Jacy murmured, her fingers stroking my hair from my brow. “I’ll watch over you.”

“Thanks,” I muttered thickly. “Check the doors. Windows. He got in somehow.”

“He won’t get in again. Not this night.”

“Max will help you.”

I saw her quick glance at my dog, his body resting against my ankles, then her soft smile.

“Rest now. He left his Taser.”

“And the knife. But don’t touch it, we’ll need it for prints.”

Jacy’s brow rose, but she said nothing. Instead, she bent to kiss me full on the lips, then briefly rub her nose against mine. “Sleep. You won’t be going to work for a while.”

“I reckon not.”

The medicine began to hit me by the time she ambled to the door, her delicious butt cheeks swaying gently under her tiny shirt. She flicked the light off, and paused to look back, her body silhouetted against the light in the hall.

“This is my fault,” she said. “I need to leave. Or others will come. And you may not make it out alive next time.”

She then shut off the hall light, leaving me in darkness. I despaired even as the pain killers made my head swim, my vision blurry. No, I can’t lose her. Not now. I need her just as she needs me. I can protect her – I can. I must.

I sank into a mixture of sleep and unconsciousness, my pain swirling down into the darkness with me. I dimly heard Declan mutter in his sleep before we both were mired into deep, dreamless slumber. Or at least, I hoped his sleep was devoid of dreams.

As for me, demons chased me through my darkness, nipping at my heels even as I ran in terror.

God, please help us. Please.

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Jacy

I should clean up all this blood before it dries.

I didn't. Instead, I sat in the armchair, facing the door, the Taser in my fist. Listening to the house creak, the whoosh of the refrigerator kicking on, the distant snores from upstairs as Avery slept. Scared to death, I nonetheless prepared myself for Carter, or one of his goons, to break the door down.

I nearly screamed when Wendy and Peter jumped into my lap.

Breathing hard, I caressed their small heads, realizing they were frightened, too. Loud noises, the scents of blood and fear, Declan's absence, all forced them to turn to a human they trusted. Tiny paws with sharp claws kneaded my thighs as their lilting purrs soothed my soul.

"It'll be okay, kids," I whispered, at last setting the Taser on the table. "It'll be okay. Somehow."

Pink dawn soon etched the sky outside the windows. The kittens, fast asleep, missed their instinctive need to prowl and feign hunt at dawn, dining on their kibble in the kitchen as their reward. I sat, watching the day brighten outside, and wondered how to leave Avery.

"I must," I muttered, gazing down at the snoozing cats in my lap. "If I don't, the next time might get us all killed. Even you two."

The sun rose higher.

I didn't move, the kittens didn't wake. Max ambled down the stairs and wandered over to me, his black nose inspecting the kittens. Wendy woke and busily washed Max's nose and whiskers while her brother slept on. I caressed his ears, wishing I could take the night's pain from him. I'd never been zapped by a Taser and imagined what it felt like. For a dog, it was possibly quite traumatizing.

"I'm so sorry, Max," I whispered. "This is my fault."

His tail wagged at the sound of my voice, then he turned to walk to the kitchen. I listened as his body opened the doggy door, and he slid through it to the backyard. Wendy turned her attentions to my fingers and washed them with the dedication to cleanliness only a cat can have.

I smiled at her. She reminds me so much of Dancer.

"Look, kid," I muttered, picking her up to set her beside her brother. "I have to get up." I stood, stiff, and stretched. Declan stood at the top of the stairs, gazing down at me. I lifted my hand toward him.

"Come on, honey. Let's get you some breakfast."

Obeying me, Declan sat at the table in his jammies, watching as I made breakfast. I sensed the questions hovering behind his lips. What should I say in reply? The truth. Even a child of five deserves to hear the truth. Especially when his home was invaded and his father injured.

Declan didn't ask until after he'd downed his morning cereal. Not hungry, I drank my coffee, watching Wendy and Peter sit patiently on the floor watching Declan eat. Max declined his morning repast, lying near the door with his muzzle on his paws.

“Who was that man?” Declan finally inquired.

“A bad man,” I said slowly. “He was looking for me.”

“Why?”

While I knew the question was coming, I found it difficult to answer. At last, I replied, “I saw something I shouldn’t have. A crime. The criminal knows I witnessed it, and now wants to hurt me.”

“Why?”

“Because I can put him in jail.”

Declan frowned. “But if he’s in jail, he can’t hurt you.”

“True. But he has friends who won’t be in jail and can hurt me. That man last night was one of his friends.”

“Oh.”

Leaving my chair, I crouched beside his to look up into his troubled face. “That’s why I need to leave you, kiddo. Your dad got hurt because of me. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“No,” he cried. “No. You can’t leave.”

“Honey, if I stay here, you might get hurt. If I leave, you’ll be safe.”

His frown morphed into a scowl, an expression that should be comical on his small face, but oddly wasn’t. “I’ll protect you.” His fierce tone startled me. “I can, you

know. I have claws and fire. If that bad man comes here, I'll get him."

"Thank you, sweetie, but I can't risk it. I have to go."

"You hafta stay here and take care of Dad," he said, stubborn. "It's your job. Right? You take care of Dad and me."

I sat back on my heels, defeated. How can a five-year-old be clever enough to utilize emotional blackmail? Well, he just did. He was right. I couldn't abandon them now. Avery was in no shape to care for Declan, and he needed me to nurse him back to health.

"You're right," I murmured. "I'll stay until your dad is well again. Then I'll leave."

Declan smirked. "I'll find a way to keep you."

Avery lay on his back, staring at the ceiling when I quietly entered his room. His gray flesh hadn't regained much color, and lines of pain encircled his nose and mouth. He rolled his head on the pillow and tried a smile.

"Mawning," he drawled.

Sitting on his bed's edge, I cupped his cheek and pressed my palm against his brow. "No fever."

"Told you, I don't get infections."

My guilt at not leaving when I had the chance made it hard for me to breathe let alone meet his eyes. "I'm so sorry."

“Not your fault.”

“It is. That guy was after me.”

“So?”

At this, I met his steady gaze briefly, then looked away. “I’m endangering you both. I’d leave now, but.” I shrugged. “Declan pointed out I can’t leave until you’re better.”

“He’s a smart kid. Takes after me.”

“This isn’t funny, Avery. Next time, you could be killed. Or Declan – hurt. Killed.”

His healthy right-hand clasped mine. “Look, keep your secrets. I don’t care why this dude is after you. Only that he is. I promised to protect you, and it’s a promise I intend to keep.”

What could I say to that? I found nothing at all to say. I stared down at our linked hands, wondering whether luck was with me or against me. I’d been trapped into staying here because Avery and Declan needed me. Maybe I need them, too.

Leaning forward, I kissed his mouth. “I’ll get you pain pills, then change your bandage.”

“Okay.”

Declan and Max came into the room as I cut the old, stained wrap from Avery’s left arm. Declan leaned on the bed, watching avidly while Max jumped onto it and lay next to Avery. The wound, while red and angry, showed no appearance of any infection. Avery stroked the dog’s head and smiled wanly.

“See? I don’t get infections.”

Irritated, I snapped, “What are you? An alien?”

“No,” Declan answered, “we’re –”

“Just as human as you,” Avery said, overriding Declan. “I’m just lucky that way.”

I sighed heavily. “Somehow I don’t believe luck has anything to do with it.”

I carefully rewrapped his arm, then helped Avery to the bathroom. While he used the toilet, I returned to the kitchen to make him something to eat. Both Declan and Max followed me, Declan to help and Max to lay on the floor again. He still didn’t eat his food, though the kittens inspected his dish. The chunks of kibble were too big for them to crunch, so they made do by scooting the food across the tiles, then chasing them.

By the time Avery finished the eggs and toast I’d fixed him, the pain killers had kicked in. I tucked the covers around him as he drifted to sleep, then stood looking at his handsome features. Are we fated to be together? Is this why I’m deterred from leaving? That something or someone wants me here?

I’m not one to believe in a higher power. There’s still something to be said for forces in the universe making plans for all of us.

Or maybe I’m not right in the head and am seeing things that aren’t there.

“I have to leave town in a few days.”

As he healed, remarkably fast as he'd told me, Avery worked at the kitchen table on his laptop. He no longer required a bandage, as his wound had closed. The angry red shade had long since vanished. Shutting the computer down with a sigh, he said, "I hate to leave you alone, but this is a great account, if I can get it."

"Don't worry about us," I said from the stove where I prepared another batch of mac and cheese with wieners. "We'll be fine."

At his silence, I glanced at him over my shoulder to find him staring at me. "What?"

"This guy could be watching the house," he said at last. "He'll know when I leave and you two are by yourselves."

"Got a gun?" I asked lightly.

"No. But maybe I should go buy one."

"I was joking. I've never fired a gun in my life."

"I'm deadly serious."

"We have his Taser," I said, inwardly ordering myself to not be nervous about his leaving. "Non-lethal. And we have Max."

He eyed Max lying on the kitchen floor. The dog had begun to eat again, thankfully, but much of his usual exuberance hadn't returned with his appetite. I hoped it soon would.

"He's not a guard dog."

"He'll give us warning. Look, you're being overprotective. We'll be fine."

“I hope so. If you drive me to the airport, you can keep the car. I want you to have it available.”

“That’s cool.”

“I can trust you, right?”

His question struck me like a fist to my solar plexus. Slowly, I turned from the stove and caught his stricken expression. “What did you just ask me?”

“Sorry, that didn’t come out the way I meant it,” Avery began.

“Are you kidding me?” I demanded, my fury ignoring both his face and his half-assed apology. “Trust me? If you don’t think I’m trustworthy enough to care for Declan, then why’d you hire me?”

Avery looked down. “What I meant was, will you stay with Declan even if something does happen?”

“Like I’d abandon him and head for the hills?” I shook with rage. “You can actually look me in the eye and think that’s what I’d do? You’re a real piece of work.”

“I’m sorry, Jacy. It just came out.”

“I’m sure it did. Your subconscious just informed me as to what you really think of me.”

“No, that’s not –”

“When you get back, you piece of shit,” I growled, “I will leave. Start looking for another nanny now. Consider this my notice.”

“Jacy, wait –”

“It’s your turn to fix dinner. I’m done.”

Stalking from the kitchen, I ignored Declan’s questioning expression as I passed by. He sat with the kittens on his lap, watching an educational show on the history of America. I climbed the stairs, two at a time, and barely halted the impulse to slam my door after entering my room.

Too pissed off to lie down, half-thinking I should have gone out, gone for a walk instead of coming here, I paced. My anger squirreled my thoughts into near incoherency. Only a single thought rampaged – how dare he think that of me. Just how does he fucking dare?

My fury failed to relent until hours had passed. It also took all my energy. Tired, gazing out the window at the dark street illuminated by a few streetlights, I wondered if I had enough money to make it to Montana.

Fuck this place and everyone in it. I’m gone like yesterday.

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Avery

“Dude, you really fucked up.”

Gloomy, I stared at the TV on the wall behind the bar. “Yep. I surely did. Opened my mouth too wide and fell right in.”

Fletcher clapped me on my shoulder. “Bring her flowers. Make it up to her.”

“It’s too late, man,” I said, then drank from my beer bottle. “I leave tomorrow for Atlanta. Jacy and I haven’t spoken a civil word since, and she won’t accept my apologies. And it’s hurting Declan bad.”

“You can’t lose her, Avery. Look what she’s done for you.”

“I know.”

Fletch had listened to my tale of the balaclava masked intruder, showed him my still healing arm, and told him of Jacy hitting the dude with the Taser. “She’s got guts, Fletch, I’m telling you. I wish she was one of us.”

“How do you know she isn’t?”

I gaped. “Uh.”

“Right. We can’t go around asking one another if we’re fully human or not.” Fletch chuckled into his beer. “Hey, man, we should create a secret sign. Like the Masons.

You know, flash a sign only we know and if the other responds, we're cool."

"Suggest that to the council."

"No way. I'll have nothing to do with those assholes. You do it."

"Why would they listen to me?"

"I dunno. I don't even listen to you."

"Yeah, yeah, eat me."

"You said you weren't gay."

"You said you were."

"I ain't," he protested. "I just want sex without the risk of making babies. That's not gay."

"Give yourself a hand job."

"What do you think I do every morning in the shower?"

I rolled my eyes. "I really don't need the details."

"So, I'll give 'em to you." Fletch leaned towards me, his expression conspiratorial.

"First, I –"

I slapped my palm over his mouth. "Don't. Just don't."

"I thought I'd give you instructions."

“Don’t think, Fletch. You might hurt yourself.”

“Yeah, that’s a possibility.” He drank his beer, watching the game on the TV. “You can do my thinking for me.”

“I’ll just fuck up your life along with mine.”

“I say bring her flowers, offer them from your bended knee.” Fletch smirked. “Guaranteed to melt her heart.”

“I checked her browser history on the laptop,” I replied. “She’s looking for jobs in Montana.”

“Hoo, boy, you are really and truly fucked.”

“Don’t I know it.”

The one most hurt by all of this drama was Declan. I ached for him, knowing full well he loved Jacy as he would his mother. Not just was she good for him, the knowledge of her departure upon my arrival home had him moping and crying frequently. Nothing I did or said made any difference at all.

I have to convince her to stay. Somehow.

“I could fall in love with her,” I murmured over my bottle.

“I know, man.” For once, I heard no laughter in his voice. “Don’t give up, Avery. You found a good one in her. Don’t let her go.”

“Right.” I drank from my bottle, feeling the beer go to my head. “Flowers and groveling.”

“I mean it. Make her listen to you.”

I eyed him sidelong. “Maybe I should let her leave, man. Like she says, she’s bringing her evils into our lives. It might be Declan who gets hurt next.”

Fletch scowled, an expression so rare on his countenance I looked twice to see if it was really real. “You also promised to protect her. You have the means to do so. Letting her be killed by this asswipe will stain your honor. If you have any, that is.”

“What do you care? You haven’t even met her.”

“Now I see why she wants to leave,” he growled. “You’ve become a real asshole these days.”

“That’s true enough.” I drank a gulp, my head beginning to swim. “Just shoot me. Put others out of their misery.”

“Can’t. If I did, I’d be responsible for raising Declan, and I don’t want a kid.” He brightened. “But then, I’d have a shot at Jacy, wouldn’t I? Might be worth having Declan and her both.”

“Now who’s the asshole?” I groaned. “You have to drive me home.”

“Why should I? You might hurl all over my leather seat.”

“What a pal.”

“I am, huh.” Fletcher grinned and drank his beer.

“Bitch.”

“You’re mine.”

In companionable silence, we drank another round. I tried, through the growing fog in my head, to ponder life without Jacy. Declan would grieve for a time, then get past her. And me? I supposed I’d do the same, and often wonder about the one that got away.

I watched her beautiful face.

Jacy knew I stared at her from the passenger seat of my car. Her skin flushed a deep pink, and her mouth thinned. She drove steadily, driving the exact speed limit, flicking her gaze at me self-consciously. Declan, in his safety seat behind me, slept.

“Stop staring at me,” she snapped under her breath.

“Why? I should enjoy the last sight of you. Or, one of the last.”

“You’re making me angry.”

“It’s not my intention.”

“Then quit it.”

I didn’t. Instead, I murmured, “I’m sorry. I was an ass.”

“The only truthful thing you’ve said.”

“Please. Give me, and Declan, another chance. I’ll beg on my knees if I must.”

“Why? You don’t trust me. And this job depends on trust. Right?”

“I put both feet in my mouth the other day. I’ve earned your anger. Is ‘forgiveness’ anywhere in your vocabulary?”

She snapped a glare in my direction, then returned her gaze to the road. “Don’t lay this on me.”

“I’m not. Have you never made a complete ass of yourself, never needed a second chance?”

Jacy’s hands on the wheel tightened. “That’s not fair.”

“It is indeed,” I replied quietly. “We all do stupid shit, say stupid shit. I am heartfully and deeply sorry I implied through my stupid mouth that I didn’t trust you with my son. I do. More than you know.”

Jacy said nothing, nor looked at me, for the next ten miles. I know, because I counted the mile markers. Patient, I studied the scenery rather than her face, removed some of the pressure I’d put on her. Though I didn’t precisely hope she’d change her mind, a small part of me rooted for her to say yes. She’d stay, and we’d work things out.

“I have done stupid shit,” she said at last. “The mistake that brought me here is just an example. While I don’t exactly crave forgiveness for it, since it’ll never happen, I suppose I see your point.”

“That’s a start.”

“Is it?” She shot me a fast glance. “You hurt me, Avery. You wounded me. Right to my core. I’ve done nothing over the last few days except wonder why you’d do that.”

“Because I’m a male with testosterone and that makes me as stupid as hell.”

Jacy snorted laughter before she could halt it, then frowned imperiously. “If I’d done or said something that dumb, how would you have reacted?”

I sighed but answered truthfully. “Gotten pissed. Yelled. Made threats. Got over it.”

“Gotten over it that easily?”

“It may have taken me a day or two. That’s not that easily.”

Jacy again went into silent mode, driving, watching the mirrors, passing slower vehicles, occasionally eyeing Declan, still asleep, behind us. The tension left her mouth, however, and her grip on the wheel wasn’t nearly as tight as it was. The white departed her knuckles, anyway.

We’d reached the city limits and the teeming traffic when she said, “I’ll think about it.”

“Think about what?”

“Forgiving you. Not moving away. Keep working for you.”

“I’ll call you.”

She flashed me an almost humorous glance. “You’d better. Declan needs to talk to you.”

“What about you? Will you need to talk to me, too?”

“Maybe.”

“It’s a start.”

Unintimidated by the ever-thickening traffic, Jacy expertly drove, following the signs, to the International Airport. Declan woke as she slowed to a stop at the departure gates of the airline I was taking to Atlanta. I stepped from the car and opened his door, then unbuckled him from his seat.

Yawning, Declan hugged me around my neck. “I miss you, Dad.”

“I’ll miss you, too, little man.” I kissed his cheek. “You take care of Wendy and Pete, okay?”

“Uh, huh.”

“Feed Max for me while I’m gone.”

“Kay.”

Lowering my voice, I whispered in his ear, “Take care of Jacy, too. She doesn’t know it yet, but she needs us.”

Declan shot a look over his shoulder at Jacy, who stood watching from near the car’s right front tire. So much for subtly. “Okay.”

Setting him down, I opened the trunk and took my suitcase from it. After shutting it, I stepped closer to Jacy, half expecting her to make a dash for the driver’s seat. She stood firmly as I set my case down and slowly enfolded her into my arms. Her stiff body gradually relaxed, then her arms crept around my neck.

I kissed her tenderly. “I’ll call.”

“Okay.”

After another hug for Declan and a kiss to his cheek, I picked up my suitcase and strode toward the airport’s doors. Turning, I grinned and waved, grateful to see both wave back. Then I went inside, whistling, to fly to Atlanta.

In between meetings with potential investors, I called home. I also called just before Declan’s bedtime. Though I craved to also call in the morning before the meetings began, I shoved the urge aside. On all the calls, Jacy sounded cheerful, Declan more so. As he seemed to be a gauge measuring Jacy’s demeanor, I took his happiness as a good sign.

“Have your damn cats scratched up my sofa yet?”

“Daaad.” Declan’s exasperation made me laugh. “Jacy bought them a scratching post. We’re teaching them to scratch that.”

“Oh, good. I don’t want to have to turn them into mittens this winter.”

“Dad!”

I laughed. “I’m kidding, little man.”

“That’s not funny.”

“Just think. They’d be with you always as tiny little kitten mittens.”

Declan took the cell from his ear to yell, “Jacy! Dad’s gonna make mittens out of Wendy and Peter.”

Jacy must have grabbed the phone from him. “Not funny, dude. You apologize right now.”

Declan sounded more peeved than upset when he returned to the phone. “Dad, you be nice to my cats.”

“I’m sorry, little man. I really was just joking.”

“When will you be home?”

“Tomorrow night, baby. Miss me?”

“No. You’re mean to my cats.”

I chuckled. “When I get home, I’ll kiss them, and tell them I’m sorry. They’re good kitties. They look after you, don’t they?”

“Wendy smacked Max today. But she didn’t hurt him.”

“I’m sure Max deserved it. Will you put Jacy back on the phone?”

“Yeah. Bye, Dad.”

“Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

Jacy came back on the line. “Avery?”

“Can you pick me up tomorrow night? My plane gets in around eight.”

“Sure. Did you make the deal?”

“Still working on it. But it’s looking good. I’ll call you when my plane departs, okay?”

“Sure thing. Bring Declan a present. Maybe something for his cats. He adores them so much.”

I laughed. “I can do that. Get them stoned on catnip.”

“Good luck bringing that through security.” Jacy chuckled, then hung up.

I made the deal.

The commissions brought by these investors would fatten my bank account by nearly double. High on the triumph, I called Jacy from the cab taking me to the airport. She didn’t answer. Her voice mail kicked in, inviting me to leave a message.

“Hey, it’s me. Call me back.”

I reached the airport and my gate. With an hour to kill, and darkness settling in, I called Jacy again. Again, I reached only her voicemail. “Hey, I thought you were working on forgiving me. I got catnip for those damn cats. Is everything okay? Call me.”

During the two-hour flight home, I fretted. Why didn’t she answer? Did that balaclava dude come back? Were Jacy and Declan dead on my floor? Were they forced to run, but left the cell behind? What was going on?

Upon landing, I tried her cell again.

And reached her voicemail.

Nor was she, and Declan, waiting for me outside the airport in my car.

Oh, fuck.

Jacy

Over and done with the mac and cheese scene, I made a mildly spicy chili for Declan's and my supper. The fall weather had turned decidedly cold, though the news stations had yet to call for snow. As we ate, Wendy and Peter watched every bite enter our mouths.

"Can I give them some chili?" Declan asked.

"That's not a good idea," I answered, picking up our dishes to take to the sink.

"Why?"

"Cats have trouble with some foods we eat. They can get sick."

"Oh." The kittens jumped into his lap to investigate any possible leavings on the table. "I don't want them sick. Can they come with us to pick up Dad?"

"Not this time, kiddo," I said, rinsing plates and bowls before putting them in the dishwasher. "Cats don't tolerate car rides well, and they need to get used to them. It's a long drive. We'll take them on shorter rides someday."

"So you're not leaving?"

I stopped. I stared out the kitchen window into the darkness and rising wind. Though I felt happier, contented, since Avery's sincere apology, and Declan's demeanor changed because of it, I hadn't talked to him about whether I'd stay on or not. I'd

received excellent feedback from a company in Bozeman to work for them, and seriously considered taking the job.

“I don’t know.”

“Please stay. I want you to.”

“I know you do, sweetie.”

Not finding any edibles save bread crumbs, Peter and Wendy took up yoga positions to wash their nether regions, a hind leg sticking straight up from each fuzzy body. Declan watched them avidly as I continued to clean the kitchen.

“We have to leave soon,” I said. “Where’s your warm jacket?”

“In the closet.”

I realized with a jolt that I had no winter coat, having arrived in summer while penniless. “Does your dad have an extra coat I can use?”

“Yeah.”

Declan dashed for the hallway, Max tagging along while the kittens paused their grooming in order to stare at the drama. I heard Declan talking to Max, telling him to babysit the kittens while he was gone. If Max answered him, I didn’t hear it.

In the icy garage, I buckled Declan into his safety seat. “I’ll warm the car up,” I commented.

“I’m not cold.”

“No?”

“Nuh, uh.”

“Well, I am. Brr.”

After rolling the garage door up, I backed the car from it, then hit the remote to run the door down again. Lights from neighboring houses illuminated the street, and despite the weather reports to the contrary, I fully expected snow to fall. The sky overhead was thick with gray clouds.

“Take a nap if you want,” I said, glancing at Declan in the rear. “It’s a long drive.”

“I’m not sleepy.”

“Okay.”

In order to reach the Interstate Highway, a driver must cross the town proper, then drive along a two-lane blacktop for several miles. Cars passed us going the other way while a few sets of headlights glowed in my mirrors. I paid them the scantest heed while pondering my immediate future. Do I stay or do I go?

I loved Declan as my own kid. Did I love Avery as much? I certainly enjoyed sharing his bed, the great sex, his warm kindness and good heart. More than easy on the eyes, Avery also had enough charisma to float an aircraft carrier. What’s not to love about Avery? His sincere apology resonated in my head. Okay, he screwed up. I’ve done worse, I guessed.

A set of bright headlights blasted into my mirrors, nearly blinding me. I swore under my breath, squinting, annoyed at some of these redneck drivers and their big ass pickup trucks. This one grew closer until it sat right on our bumper.

“Oh, shit.”

I knew what the truck’s driver would do a moment before it hit us.

It slammed into the car’s rear bumper hard enough to make it swerve into oncoming traffic.

I righted it mere seconds before a semi tractor trailer crushed us into itty bitty bits.

“Jacy!”

Scared, grim, Declan’s safety in my hands, I stamped on the car’s accelerator. I put some distance between us only to have the truck’s larger engine catch up to us within seconds. It hit us again. I fought to keep the car on the road, terrified we’d be forced onto the road’s edge. At this speed, hitting the trees and small boulders in the fields would certainly prove fatal for Declan and me.

Which was the truck driver’s obvious intent.

Declan began to scream, crying, his fear and panic melded with mine. I couldn’t think, had no plan, felt as helpless in the face of death as a prisoner facing a firing squad. The car’s speedometer topped ninety, and I wove around slower cars in a desperate play at keeping us both alive.

The truck hit us again.

I lost complete control of the car.

It hit the shallow ditch just beyond the shoulder, went airborne, struck a grove of pine saplings, then rolled onto its roof. All in the span of a second or two.

Hanging upside down, I panicked. “Declan!”

He didn’t reply.

Unable to see him, I twisted in my seat belt, frantic, desperate to get to him, to administer first aid and save his life.

The truck’s brilliant headlights glared into my eyes.

It stopped. He’ll kill us both.

I hit the seat belt’s release and fell onto the car’s ceiling. Lashing out with my feet, I kicked the door again and again, forcing it open. I had to get between that driver and Declan.

Whatever the cost to me.

I had no weapon. No gun. Not even a Taser, useless at this distance.

I saw him take a long rifle from his truck’s cab, his big body silhouetted just behind the bright headlights. I heard him rack a bullet into the chamber, saw him lift the stock to his shoulder. He aimed the business end of the rifle at me, standing like a victim in the full glare of the lights.

He didn’t have a hope of missing his target.

I’m going to die.

In the split second before he fired, I changed.

The bullet ricocheted off my chest and whined into the night.

I blinked. What the hell?

I saw clearly in the darkness, as though I'd suddenly gained a terrific night vision. The truck's driver stared upward, his mouth open, and I suddenly realized I stared down . My face had to be not just several feet above his, but several yards .

The killer lifted his gun upward, swiftly aimed, and fired again.

I barely felt the bullet's ping.

My instinctive defenses kicked in. I didn't know what I'd do until it happened.

I opened my jaws and blew a long gust of fire down at him and his truck.

He screamed for a full second.

Him, his truck, his rifle, all caught fire in an inferno so hot I paced backward.

And stumbled.

I whipped my head around on my very long neck to view an extremely long tail tipped in a spade. My wings filled the sky above and behind me. What the ever-loving fuck was I?

"Jacy!"

Declan's scream brought me back to my senses. I spun toward the upside down car and lowered my face to peer inside.

His skin pale, still strapped in his seat, he stared at me with his blue eyes huge, bulging.

Great. I just scared him into a seizure. “Declan?”

I didn’t know I could speak until I did. “Are you okay, kiddo?”

“Jacy, help me.”

He struggled to unfasten the belts not meant for a child to unfasten. In my current state of being something else, I had no idea how to help him. Flexing my right hand, which ended in long savage claws, I gripped the car itself. Taking it from the broken saplings, I set it on its wheels by the side of the road.

His window had shattered in the crash.

Delicately, scared to death of just not what I now was, but of hurting him, I sliced through the belts trapping him. Declan scrambled from his seat just as I used a claw to yank the door open. Fully expecting him to run from me, I felt doubly shocked when he ran to me and wrapped his small arms around my left front leg.

Yeah, I had four. Four legs, a long neck, a huge tail and massive wings. Oh, and I just killed a man by breathing fire.

“You’re a dragon,” Declan exclaimed. “I knew it. You’re one of us.”

“I’m a what?”

I happened to glance at the road and the still burning truck. People had stopped their vehicles, asking questions, calling the police, the fire department. I didn’t know if any of them saw me, but my gut told me I couldn’t let them witness what I’d become. I seized Declan in my talons, and silently backed into the forest behind me.

“Stay quiet,” I hissed.

Without thinking, I set him on my wide and broad shoulders, then turned to duck under the woods. Hoping I wouldn't brush him off, I worked my way further from the road and growing collection of cars and bystanders. When I could no longer see or hear them, I stopped in a wide clearing. The wail of sirens drifted over the heavy wind blowing through the trees.

I gently set Declan on the ground. "We're what now?"

He beamed up at me happily, as though we hadn't been in danger for our lives a few minutes ago. "We're dragons, Jacy."

"Dragons don't exist."

"Yeah, we do." He set his small hands on his hips. "Dad is a dragon. My mom wasn't, though."

"How can this be?"

"I'll show you."

In a blink, Declan was no longer Declan. Where he'd stood, now stood a creature from legend – albeit a small legend.

"See?"

He stretched his wings wide and flapped them, rising only an inch or two off the ground. His hide, or what could only be called hide, was a light sandy brown, his eyes as blue as ever. A trickle of flame burst from his jaws and set a patch of dry grass on fire. I stamped it out, growing more frightened by the minute.

"How can this be?"

I looked around at myself again. My hide was the same color as my hair. Thus, I guessed my eyes were green. I slowly fluttered my wings up and down experimentally, swept my tail across the grass. "I'm a dragon."

Declan pranced, his wings wide, laughing. "Isn't it great?"

"You can fly?"

His grin faded. "No." I swear I saw a young dragon pout on his expressive muzzle. "I can't, I'm too young. When I get older, Dad will teach me."

"How is it people don't know about dragons?"

"We're not s'pose to tell. We get into trouble if people see us."

"And in the dark, they can't see as well as we can." I couldn't stop looking at my tremendous body, my wings that when spread blocked the sky, and most of all, my tail. I have a damn tail. A tail!

"How many of us dragons are there?" I asked.

"Dunno. Lots."

Sitting back on my hind legs, I used my talons to inspect my long muzzle, the rows and rows of sharp, backward curving teeth. "We could rule the planet," I mused.

"We're not s'pose to. That's what Dad says."

"With the power we have, it's probably best that we don't, eh?"

A shadow floated over our heads.

Panic struck me as I looked up, trying to find the source. I stepped over Declan to shield him with my body, ready yet again to fight and die to protect him. I saw nothing. The wind lashed at the trees, yet I felt none of the cold it brought. Could it be –

A dragon, its wings creating a hurricane, dropped from the sky.

Avery

“Dad!”

Declan charged out from under the strange dragon’s – it had to be Jacy – legs, galloping toward me. He cannoned into me, laughing, smoke trickling from his nostrils, then reared up against my leg.

“Jacy saved me, Dad,” he exclaimed, still excited. “A man tried to kill us, ran us off the road. Jacy got him when she turned into a dragon. Isn’t she great, Dad? She’s one of us –”

I looked up from Declan’s happy laughter to Jacy. “Thank you for protecting my son.”

The relief I’d felt upon finding them both alive and unharmed still steeped within me. In a near panic, I’d flown from the city, certain they’d both been killed. Instead, I discovered police cruisers, fire trucks, ambulances, and a crowd of onlookers as the flames of some burned vehicle died in the dark. When I saw my own car, wrecked beyond belief, I knew they were dead.

“How’d you find us, Dad?”

Jacy ambled toward me, her green eyes wide with horror, fear. “Avery.”

I craved to smile, to laugh with joy, to entwine my neck with hers, to fly with her, wing to wing. The expression in her eyes, the tension in her neck and shoulders

warned me to be careful. She hadn't yet accepted what she was – a dragon shifter. If I fumbled, I might scare her into never shifting again.

“Jacy,” I said, keeping my tone soft. “Can you tell me what happened?”

She sat, clearly nervous, her tail coiled around her feet. “I’m not sure what to say. The dude ran us off the road, he had a gun. I – I had to protect Declan. The next thing, I’m big and I – you know. I’m sure you saw the truck.”

“I did. Let me see if I can explain a few things.” I sat down, also curling my tail around my feet. Declan happily rolled in the tall dry grass, his wings flapping against the ground. “You’re in danger. Your dragon instincts took over. The dragon within you, the dragon you’ve been since your conception, rose to protect you. She shifted from your human form to this one.”

She dipped her muzzle in agreement. “That makes sense.”

“I won’t make light of your predicament,” I went on. “I know, I can obviously see, that your dragon side scares you.”

“That’s one way of seeing it.”

“Don’t.” I smiled. “Your dragon half is still you. You haven’t left your humanity behind.”

“Haven’t I?” Jacy’s voice shook. “I don’t know how to get back. I can’t get back, the way it was, I was –” She gulped, her body shaking.

“Calm down, Jacy,” I said softly. “You just haven’t learned how to shift yet. Declan, why don’t you show her.”

“Okay.”

Declan rolled onto his feet, then shifted back into his little boy. “See, Jacy? It’s easy.”

Jacy blinked, but her trembling hadn’t ceased. “I still don’t – I don’t see how.”

“Just think of your human half,” I said, my tone soothing. “Imagine your human body as it was before you changed. Then, simply will it to happen.”

“Will? Will it how?”

“Yeah. Think of your human body, your beautiful, lovely body, and make it happen.”

“You can do it, Jacy,” Declan cried.

She closed her eyes. Her breathing slowed. An instant later, she stood on her human two legs, her hair flowing around her shoulders. I noticed she wore one of my jackets.

“Yay,” Declan shouted and ran to her. “See? You can do it.”

Laughing shakily, Jacy bent to hug him. “I did, huh. I did it.”

“Now think of your dragon self,” I said. “Think of her, then will yourself into that form.”

With a bit more confidence, Jacy shut her eyes again, concentrating. Instantly, her huge dragon body dwarfed Declan, who, in his excitement, hugged her leg.

“I did it,” she yelled, all but crowing in triumph. “I did it.”

I laughed, too. “With practice, you can shift with simply a thought. I’ve been teaching

Declan since he was old enough to understand. Dragon parents are supposed to teach their children when they're young. Teach them that what we are must be kept from humans."

"Declan said something like that," Jacy replied, bending her neck to touch Declan's head with her muzzle. "But if I had at least one dragon parent, why wasn't I taught this? Why didn't my parents tell me?"

"We may never know, honey," I replied. "I'm sorry you had to learn in such a desperate fashion."

I paced close to her and settled my neck over hers. "But I'm also so very glad. If you weren't a dragon, you and Declan would be dead right now."

Jacy lifted her muzzle to rub against mine. "I'm glad I'm not alone."

"You'll never be alone," Declan declared.

"Are you afraid to fly?"

"Afraid to fly? Why –" Jacy suddenly gulped and glanced at her folded wings. "Oh. Um. I don't know."

"We should get home," I said quietly. "Now, I can carry both you and Declan. Or you can have a crash course on draconic aviation right now."

Jacy pondered her options for a time, then said, "I'll fly. Just tell me how."

"Spread your wings."

Jacy obeyed me.

I set Declan on my shoulders. “Hang tight, little man.”

I felt his small hands clutch my neck ridge in a death grip. He’d flown with me before, yet hadn’t quite gotten over his nervousness. “Ready?”

“Yeah, Dad.”

To Jacy, I said, “Crouch low. Gather your haunches under you. Leap into the air and let your dragon instincts take over.”

I crouched to show her how, then jumped for the cloudy sky above. The wind had little effect on my flight as I circled low over the clearing. A swift glance toward the county highway showed all the emergency vehicles and those of the looky loos gone. “Now, Jacy.”

She leaped as I had, her wings spread – then she abruptly fell face first into the grass. “Dammit.”

“Try again. Once you feel the wind under your wings, beat them up and down. They’ll know what to do.”

Crouching, Jacy jumped again, her wings spread, and this time caught the wind beneath them. And headed straight into the copse of trees. I held my breath, fearing she’d crash and lose all potential confidence in flying. Jacy yelled out, then dipped her right wing and swung right. Beating hard, she flew up and over the forest below.

Both Declan and I screamed our joy.

As graceful as a hawk, Jacy banked toward us, her wings floating up and down, her jaws wide in the sheer joy of flying. She’d caught the bug. The dragon bug. The addiction to flying that ran through all dragons’ veins. Never again would she be

content with being grounded.

I circled higher and higher, laughing, as Jacy soared upward, her instincts to let the warm thermals assist her guiding her flight. Banking around, she flew past us, dancing the dragon dance of wind and sky and flight. I couldn't join her in that dance, yet vowed I would at the first opportunity.

"Come on, love," I called to her. "Let's go home."

"Thanks for letting me know what happened to my car."

The uniformed cop nodded. We had beaten him to the house by mere minutes, as he'd been sent to inquire why my car was involved in a wreck on the state highway. Naturally, I expressed my shock that my car had been stolen and I never knew it. And involved in a car chase resulting in a fire.

"Call your insurance company," he said. "It's a total loss, I'm sure."

"Sounds like it. But you didn't find who'd taken it?"

"No, sir. The culprits were gone before anyone arrived."

"Hope you catch them."

He offered a small salute, then stepped off my porch. I shut the door, locked it, and shared a small smile with Jacy. "Hook, line, and sinker."

"It's a good thing we were here and apparently had been here all night," she replied, her cheeks flushed with excitement. "You'd make an awful good crook."

Hours passed before Declan climbed down from his high in order to sleep. Midnight had come and gone by the time I tucked him into his bed, his kittens, purring, curled up next to him. I kissed his brow before he rolled onto his side and tucked the nearest kitten to the curve of his stomach. After shutting off his light, I left his door open and returned downstairs.

Sipping wine, Jacy, too, came down from her own high since we'd returned to the house. Her cheeks no longer flushed, she'd tucked her legs under her as she sat on the couch, sipping thoughtfully as she stared into the hearth fire I'd built. Coming up behind her, I kissed her throat, and listened as she all but purred like the damn kittens.

"I feel I understand you better," she murmured as I sat beside her and picked up my own glass.

I, too, gazed into the flickering flames, the room lit by the fire and a single small lamp. Romantic indeed, yet I had other thoughts than romance on my mind just then.

"We have a huge responsibility, Jacy," I said softly. "We can't let humans know what we are. Some do, yes. It can't be helped. We've shared this earth with humans for millennia. We protect them, when we can. We don't want to rule them, either. We could. But it's against our laws."

She turned toward me. "You once said you were running, too. What are you running from?"

"My past."

Jacy waited patiently for me to continue. I did, but only after a large gulp from my glass.

"Elsa, Declan's mom, wasn't a dragon," I said slowly. "She found out the hard way."

“How?”

I gulped again, draining my wine. “An intruder busted in. He was armed, high on some drug or other. Maybe PCP. Anyway, he attacked us. He’d have killed us all if I hadn’t gone dragon.”

“You killed him?”

“To save my wife and son, yes. In my human form, I tackled him, shoved him out the door.” I chuckled dryly. “If I hadn’t, I’d have brought the roof down. Yeah. I shifted and burned him alive. Now the dragon council wants to put me on trial. Maybe banish me.”

“For defending your family?”

I adored Jacy in her outrage. “Yeah. And for letting Elsa see me as I am. We aren’t encouraged to seek human mates. It complicates things. Elsa left us, too scared to have dragons in the family. I took Declan and ran. Came here. I’m not really Avery Armstrong, you know.”

“So what’s your name?”

I grimaced. “Avery Smith.”

Jacy tilted her head back and laughed. “Keep Armstrong. It suits you so much better.”

“Now the council knows where I am.” I sighed heavily and took the wine bottle from the table. “I vowed to never run again. You came into my life in time to care for Declan.”

Jacy scowled. “What do you mean?”

“If I’m found guilty, I’m banished for life. I can’t take him, or you, with me into exile. It’s an inhospitable island off the coast of Iceland.”

Growling low in her throat, Jacy snapped. “No way. That’s self-defense. They can’t condemn you for that.”

“In defending my family,” I went on with a shrug, “I showed a human who I really am. Elsa.”

“That’s so bullshit,” Jacy snapped. “If they’re that worried, then why don’t they outlaw marrying a human?”

“They can’t.” I smiled faintly. “We live among humans. It’s only natural we mate with them.”

“I won’t let them take you,” she said fiercely. “They won’t banish you. I’ll make damn sure of that.”

Lifting her hand, I kissed her knuckles. “My savage warrior,” I murmured. “This is why I can fall headlong in love with you.”

Her fury calmed within moments. “Maybe my being a dragon is why I’m falling in love with you.”

Setting her glass on the table, Jacy spread her legs and sat on my lap facing me. Her hands lightly clasping my neck, she gazed solemnly into my eyes. “Make love to me.”

“Here? On the couch?”

“I don’t care.”

I glanced at Max, sound asleep in front of the fire. With Declan zonked out upstairs, I saw no reason to not indulge Jacy in a bit of hanky panky on the couch. Reaching behind me, I shut the light off. Only the dancing flames illuminated us as we kissed, our tongues tangled, our dragon's heat growing between us.

I pushed her back onto the sofa and stripped her jeans from her. Jacy's pussy already dripped her arousal as I plunged two fingers into her. She moaned, arching her back, as I finger fucked her while my cock yearned for her. Too eager, too hepped up on my discovery, their close brush with death, I opened my fly and pounced on her delectable body.

Jacy

Avery plunged his thick, hard cock into me. Spearing me, he spread me wide, his thrusts coming hard and fast. My face buried in his chest, my thighs clamped around his, I dug my fingers into his shoulders and fought my growing climax. Not yet, not yet, not yet.

In my mind's eye, I saw us flying together, making love in mid-air, Avery plunging his dragon cock into me even as our wings and legs tangled together. Toward earth we plunged, falling from the sky, our bodies so firmly wrapped together one couldn't discern whose leg or wing or neck belonged to whom.

The fantasy brought me gasping, orgasming hard, to reality. Avery drove in and out as I climaxed, my teeth biting into his flesh above his left nipple. My pussy spasmed and convulsed, carrying me to new heights of pleasure. He groaned as he came, his seed spurting deep into my womb, his thrusts hard, fast.

A quickie it may be, but oh, so pleasurable.

Collapsing on me, Avery breathed raggedly, his dick softening within my pussy. I held him to me, kissing and licking the sweat from his throat, my nails running up and down his spine.

Then Max's nose split us apart as he licked both our faces, whining his happiness. Grumbling under his breath, Avery shoved him away. Sitting up, he closed his pants then lay against the sofa's back with his eyes closed. I sat up, and tugged my panties on, dismissing my jeans.

I curled up against his ribs, his arms around me, as Max joined us on the couch. With a grunt and a sigh, he lay against me, then put his nose on his paws. And slept.

“He’s not getting much better,” I murmured, caressing his ears. “He’s got PTSD.”

“I know,” Avery rumbled. “But I doubt this town has doggy counseling.”

“There has to be something we can do,” I murmured. “War dogs come home with PTSD.”

He kissed my brow. “I’m sure you can find a way to bring him back.”

“I hope so.”

I killed a human being. Max isn’t the only one with PTSD.

Days passed since the night I killed a would-be killer and discovered my true self. Avery worked to bring in the money to keep us afloat, Declan happily learned to read, and I studied up on the mystery of dragons.

Throughout human lore, dragons played a part. They created legends around us, myths, stories. Later, we became either heroes or villains in stories and movies. For example, Smaug, the gold hoarding dragon in Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*, was a bad dude . While I never craved to sleep for sixty years on a mound of gold, I wondered if that story might have a basis in fact.

“A gold loving, hoarding dragon who took what he could, killed interlopers, and defended his hoard. Sounds like a dragon to me.”

Declan poo-pooed the notion. “Dragons don’t want gold, Jacy. They want love.”

I chuckled as I hugged him. “I sure love you, kiddo.”

“Love you, too, Jacy.”

His brush with death didn’t seem to have affected him at all. Perhaps because he’d been semi-conscious after the crash and simply didn’t remember much. Or, being a dragon, he could brush off emotional trauma as he might have a slight cold. I had a great deal to learn about dragons.

Which of my parents, or both, was a dragon?

My father died just a few months ago. I never knew my mother. She died of an unknown cause not long after I’d been born. If my father was dragon kind, why didn’t he tell me? Obviously, if my mother was, she couldn’t have passed on her knowledge as well as her birthright to her daughter, me. She died before she could.

I lay in the darkness beside Avery and wondered about my sibling.

Was he a dragon, too? Does he share my blood? Does he know he’s a dragon?

I had no answers to these questions. But they kept me awake at night.

Though I’d learned much about being a dragon that fateful night, Avery taught me far more. With Declan at home, watched over by a neighbor girl, Avery took me flying. He taught me how to dive with my wings folded, like a hawk on a mouse, how to soar on the wind with my wings wide, how to control my flames.

“There’s nothing on this earth hotter than dragon fire,” he said as we flew, wingtip to wingtip. “That dope head I burned – well, there’s nothing left of him. The human authorities couldn’t accuse me of murder as they have no body, and no evidence any crime may have been committed.”

“So the dude I burned, there’s nothing left of him, either?”

“Nope. The truck became a mound of slag, nothing tying the fire to a dragon.”

I banked a hard left, followed closely by Avery. “But won’t the authorities question why that truck fire was so hot?”

“Sure,” he replied. “They question. And have no answers.”

“How many humans know about us?” I asked.

“That’s hard to say. Some do. Obviously, they keep quiet about it. We don’t make waves, don’t make the news cycles. That way, it’s easier to ignore us.”

We flew back to the empty field to land, then shifted into our human forms. Hand in hand, we ambled through the icy darkness, talking of this and that. We reached home at nearly two in the morning to discover Declan asleep in his bed and the babysitter dozing on the couch. She woke and accepted Avery’s cash sleepily. He saw her out while I poured wine for us both.

Returning to the TV room, Avery plucked his cell from the table, then sat beside me.

“Isn’t it rather late for making a phone call?” I asked, then yawned.

“I’m expecting an e-mail from the Atlanta guys.” Avery bent to kiss me. “I’ll be with you in a second.”

Luxuriating in the memories of flying, I sipped my wine while daydreaming of more flights to come. His cell in his hand, gazing at it, Avery suddenly sucked in his breath. Sharply. In alarm.

“What?” I asked.

His brows furrowed, Avery met my eyes. “I’ve been summoned by the council. They’re going to try me for what I’ve done.”

Avery seized my hand. “Let’s run away.”

I glanced toward the TV room where Declan played with his toy dinosaurs while Peter and Wendy batted them with their paws. He’d obviously sensed the fresh tension since Avery’s e-mail two days earlier and had been subdued. Yet, at that moment his voice sounded happy, without care.

“Maybe we should just face them,” I said, my voice low. “Get it done and over with.”

“If they banish me,” he said, both his tone and expression strained, “I won’t have a chance to escape. They’ll have dragons ready to land on me, force me to Iceland.”

Since he’d received the e-mail, Avery had spoken very little, and only when spoken to. I, too, stressed over what might happen if or when Avery obeyed the summons. Neither of us had slept much since, and I’d grown tired and cranky.

I sat in his lap and slid my arms around his neck. “And we keep running? For the rest of our lives? What might that do to Declan?”

He grimaced. “We’ll fly to a remote place, an island maybe. They’ll never find us.”

I smiled sadly. “And how can we survive? On fish and coconuts? What about earning money to pay for supplies? You, or I, need the internet to work, make a living. Sure, we can find a place in another country, change our names. Then what if they find us again?”

Avery nodded slowly, rested his brow against mine. “I’m scared, Jacy.”

“I know, I’m scared, too.”

“One of the members of the council has it in for me,” he went on. “Ian. I defied him not long ago. He’ll make damn sure I’m exiled. I can’t let him take you and Declan from me.”

“I’ll stand at your side, my love,” I whispered. “If they take you, they take me. And Declan.”

He uttered a soft moan of grief and muttered thickly, “No.”

“There’s always the chance the council will see your side,” I went on. “I’ll certainly plead for mercy on your behalf.”

“And if they don’t listen?”

“I’ll bitch slap them into next week.”

Choking on a laugh, Avery hugged me tightly. “I love you.”

“Why, what a coincidence. Happens I love you, too.”

He held me for a while longer, then pushed me upright, sniffing as though fighting tears. “We don’t deserve you.”

“Sure you do. Look, I need to get some things from the store. You’ll watch Declan?”

“Um, yeah. It is sorta my job as his dad.”

“It’s my job now.” I kissed him briefly. “Car keys?”

The insurance company paid for a rental while they evaluated the damage to Avery’s car and its worth. Avery leaned back to pull the smart key from his jeans pocket, then his credit card from his wallet. “Will you stop at the liquor store for wine?”

“Lush.” I kissed him. “Be back soon.”

The trip to both stores took only minutes in the small town. I rolled the buggy up and down the grocery aisles, selecting items we needed. Milk, eggs, bacon, beans, coffee. I pondered the merits of two different brands of coffee when his voice spoke from behind me.

“Hello, Jacy.”

I straightened and turned slowly to face him. “Carter.”

He smiled down at me from his six three height, his red-gold hair tumbling over his brow. “It’s good to see you again.”

“Not from where I stand.”

I didn’t flinch as he plucked a tendril of my hair and rubbed it between his finger and thumb. “Look, we should talk.”

“No, thanks.”

“Come on,” he said, half pleading. “We can work this out.”

“Not when you send your goons to kill me.”

“They’re just supposed to scare you.”

I smiled, but not with amusement. Carter blinked. I’m sure he expected me to cower and beg for his mercy, tell him everything he wanted to hear. I’ll never say anything, I swear. You’re safe from the cops, the feds, I don’t know anything, I never saw anything. My fresh dragon confidence gave me the courage to face him down as equals.

“James never reported back,” he said slowly. “He’s vanished, it seems. Did you take him out somehow?”

I glanced around, then stepped toward him. “I did. And I’ll take you out the same way. Leave, Carter. Just walk out of this store, this town. Run your gang, do your thing. Forget me. Or just maybe you’ll vanish, too.”

“Is that a threat I hear?”

“You bet your boots it’s a threat. It’s also a promise.”

He licked his lips, a sure sign my words struck a chord. “You don’t have what it takes.”

“Go ahead.” I shrugged. “Underestimate me. It’ll make killing you so much easier.”

Uncertainty filled his eyes, thinned his lips. “What did you do to James?”

“You don’t want to know. If you do crave the intel, then just continue to hassle me. I

swear you'll wish you'd just walked away."

I made a small gesture toward the gun concealed under his jean jacket. "You can shoot me now and have everyone in this store memorizing your face. You'll be caught before you can leave the state."

Carter nodded thoughtfully. "That's possible."

"So you won't shoot me now. Instead, you'll try to find where I'm living, and stalk me, kill me under the cover of darkness." I smiled. "Good luck with that."

After studying my face for several moments, Carter turned and walked away.

As I believed Carter was no longer a problem, I decided not to inform Avery of the encounter. He had enough stress on his mind at the moment. I don't need to add to them when Carter is a done deal. As I put groceries away, Avery slid his arms around me from behind and kissed my throat.

"We leave in the morning."

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Avery

We drove for sixteen hours across the country, Jacy and I swapping turns behind the wheel. Declan napped or played with his tablet, enduring the long drive without crying or complaining too much. As we'd departed on such short notice, we had no time to locate a pet sitter. Thus, Max, Wendy and Pete came with us.

"Let's hope they don't poop or pee," I grumbled upon learning both kittens had hidden themselves under my seat.

"They have a litter box, Dad," Declan pointed out.

"They'd better use it."

Max curled up on his seat behind me and slept. Jacy eyed him over the back and smiled.

"He's a good boy."

"I'm not worried about him."

We'd driven for perhaps six of those hours when the cats finally emerged from hiding. They cried for a while, but Declan's hands and voice eventually quieted them. Not long after, Wendy climbed over the back and crouched on my shoulder, occasionally commenting on my driving skills.

"Backseat driver," I snapped, and Jacy laughed.

We reached our destination just before midnight and rented a motel room that accepted pets. Max sniffed everywhere while the cats prowled the room, tail stuck stiffly upright to inform the world they'd become veteran travelers. I tucked Declan, sound asleep, into one bed while Jacy fed the critters.

With a grunt and a sigh, Max laid beside Declan. The kittens, not to be outdone, snuggled in the curve of his stomach. I turned the lights down, then held Jacy close.

"I'm scared this is a terrible mistake," I murmured. "If I'm convicted, will you care for Declan?"

"You know I will," she replied, kissing me. "You won't be convicted. Tomorrow, this will all end. Happily."

"I hope you're right. If not, I need to know Declan will be with you. All his life."

"I'll be his mom."

Jacy laid in the bed with me, her head pillowed on my shoulder. I couldn't sleep. I stared up at the ceiling, unable to stop thinking if running wasn't the better option. It's not too late. We still can. I knew Jacy didn't sleep either, though she pulled a good fake. I knew the pattern of her breathing when she slept, and she couldn't feign it.

The sun rose at six, and Declan with it.

I listened to him yawn his way from his bed and go to the bathroom, then his pee striking the toilet. I sat up, rubbing my gritty eyes, then glanced at Jacy. She watched me, fully awake, her hair hardly tangled at all.

"You can do this."

“We can.” I bent to kiss her as Declan, yawning, returned from the bathroom.

“Can we go out for breakfast?” he asked.

“Yeah, little man. That’s the plan.”

Jacy walked Max while Declan fed the kittens and cleaned their litter box. The council ordered me to appear in a private dining room in a restaurant at ten in the morning. I put the address in my GPS map, then took a quick shower to clear my head. The knot in my stomach failed to untie itself even after I ate a little and drank a cup of coffee.

“They’ll be okay in the car,” Jacy assured Declan at ten to ten as we parked in the lot. “It’s not hot. And we won’t be gone long.”

At least they’ll return to the car and drive home. I may be Iceland bound.

Declan carefully shut the cats in the car, then held both mine and Jacy’s hands as we crossed the parking lot to the restaurant. Oddly quiet and without his usual toddler jumping, Declan must have sensed the gravity between Jacy and me. He walked with his head up, his eyes bright, and with far more confidence than I felt.

Ian stood at the entrance to the private room, the familiar sneer curling his upper lip. “I figured you’d run.”

Jacy marched into his personal space, forcing him to back up or be stepped on. “Can it, jackass,” she snarled. “Unless you prefer to wear your nuts for earrings.”

His eyes wide, his sneer gone, Ian glanced at me. “Is she –”

“Talk to me, asshat,” she snapped. “I can answer, and the answer is yes. I am. Now

get out of my way.”

Ian stepped courteously aside, looked askance at Declan, then followed us into the big room.

I paused, gazing around at the faces. I knew none of the councilors personally, yet lived the last three years of my life in dire dread of them. Most were elderly, gray haired, faces lined with experience. A few were younger. Yet none beheld me with anything more than a mild curiosity.

“Avery Smith?”

“I’m Avery Armstrong now,” I replied quietly, “but yes.”

“Please have a seat opposite me.” The dragon shifter at the table’s head gestured toward the empty seat at the table’s bottom. “Your mate and child may sit over there.”

Jacy took Declan’s hand, then both sat in chairs that lined the walls. Ian took a spot, standing, near the middle and put his hands behind his back. Like a soldier at attention.

Younger, brawny dragons also sat in chairs along the walls. My jailors. None looked at me, nor seemed at all interested in the proceedings.

“Thank you for coming, Avery,” the dragon said. “I am Dean Andersen, the chief of this council. We need to clarify the events of three years ago. When you killed a human.”

I wished I hadn’t brought Declan. I shot a glance at him. He held Jacy’s hand, his eyes wide as he stared at me. Sorry, little man, this isn’t how I wanted you to know

about that day.

I cleared my throat, clasped my hands together on the table in front of me. “Very well, sir. The evening was late. My wife, Elsa, had just put the baby to bed. The baby, Declan, now sits over there.”

“Your wife was human,” Ian suddenly burst out. “Then who’s that there?”

“Ian,” Dean said, his tone imperious, “please park your tongue and wait.”

Ian’s face turned beet red, but he shut up.

“Elsa came back,” I continued, “and we sat to watch some TV. A loud banging came at the front door.”

I gazed around again, observing the interested faces, the few nods of encouragement for me to continue. “I went to the door. I’d barely opened it when it was shoved violently into my face. I fell back, and this big human hit me twice in the head. I fell to the floor.”

“And you have proof of this?” Ian demanded.

“I don’t lie.” I stared at Ian directly, controlling my anger. “Unlike some I know.”

“Ian,” Dean barked while other council members grumbled at the interruption. “Stand down and be silent.”

“Yes, sir.”

I looked back at Dean. “I heard Elsa scream. I had a busted nose and bled everywhere. The guy had a knife, and he was walking straight toward her.”

“You believed her life was in danger?” asked a younger dragon.

“I did then, and I still do. I ran at him, tackled him from behind.” I tightened my mouth at the memory. The big guy in a filthy sweatshirt, hood up, stinking like he’d slept in a sewer. He elbowed me in the face to get me off of him, but Elsa had a chance and took it. She ran for the kitchen.

“He hit me again,” I went on after swallowing hard. “I rolled off of him, and he went for Elsa again, chasing her.”

“Then what?”

“She bolted for the backyard with him right behind her,” I said. “It’s as though he had something against her, needed his vengeance. But that’s impossible. Elsa stayed at home, wasn’t involved with drugs or gangs.”

“You think this dude was hepped up on PCP?” Ian sneered.

“I think it’s highly likely, yes,” I replied evenly.

“Tell us what happened then,” Dean said quietly.

“He reached her.” I stared into blank space, remembering the horror of the moment, the knowledge that I’d be too late, I couldn’t stop him before he brought that knife down and into her chest. “She screamed, falling onto her back with him poised over her.”

“And you shifted.”

“I shifted.”

I clutched my hands together until my knuckles glowed white. “I grabbed him with my talons, sent my fire into his body. The PCP didn’t even allow him the realization that a dragon just killed him. He died, and his ashes blew away.” I smiled grimly. “The neighbors never heard or saw a thing.”

“But your wife did.” Ian gazed around the council in triumph. “You let a human see you in your dragon form.”

“As Elsa lay on the lawn staring at me in horror,” I replied dryly, “that’s an affirmative.”

“I’ll ask the questions, Ian,” Dean said tersely. “Other than your wife, no human saw you that night?”

“No, sir. That neighborhood had houses spaced widely apart, large lots. I returned to my human form immediately and tried to comfort Elsa. No lights came on, no faces appeared over fences to ask what happened, no cops were called. It’s as though nothing at all was wrong.”

“And your wife?” the younger dragon asked.

“She was terrified,” I said simply. “She left us two days later. I never heard from or saw her again until she demanded a divorce a few months ago. She wants nothing to do with – us.”

I forced myself to not look at Declan. I’m sorry, little man. Life sucks sometimes.

“I see,” Dean commented. “It appears to be a clear case of self-defense. We can’t always control our surroundings, or the humans we live among. I personally have kept an eye on your Elsa, son, and she has never spoken of dragons. At least not publicly. Her social media is silent on the subject.” He smiled. “She rants on occasion

regarding deceiving husbands, however.”

“Oh.” I coughed nervously. “I’ve never followed her.”

“That’s it?” Ian demanded, his voice raised. “You’re not going to banish him?”

“What is it you have against Avery?” Dean snapped. “You knew this was merely a formality. Had Avery come before us three years ago, we’d never have had to send you to find him.”

“He killed a human ,” Ian gasped. “That’s against our laws.”

“There are exceptions,” the younger dragon growled. “Self-defense is one such, you idiot. Had you told him back then to simply come and chat with us, this would long be over.”

Now I gasped. “This – this was just a formality ?”

“Of course,” Dean replied. “We never thought we needed to charge you with a crime. We had some of the information from that night, the rest had to come from you.”

I glared at Ian. “He told me I’d be banished for certain. He had me believing I needed to run for my life. So I did. I couldn’t have you taking Declan from me.”

“As he should be taken from you,” Ian hissed.

“Robert,” Dean snapped. “Please remove Ian from this room. His voice is giving me a headache.”

Robert and two burly dragons stood. Ian paled, then hustled from the hall with the three big dudes behind him. I glared at Dean.

“Why didn’t you come forward and say so years ago?”

“My boy, we couldn’t find you. We tried. You hid yourself far too well. I do apologize for Ian’s behavior. I can’t imagine what his problem with you is. Had he not been so – misguided – we’d have invited you to tell us what happened back then.”

“Where does this – misguidedness – come from?”

“I’ve no idea, but from now on, Ian won’t be our council liaison any longer.” Dean sighed. “Maybe Iceland would be a better choice for him.”

I laughed just as Jacy and Declan hugged me, each tucking their bodies under my arms. “I’d love to see that, sir.”

“Your young lady is also a dragon?” Dean asked.

“I am, sir,” Jacy answered with a smile. “Though I don’t know my parentage. I found out I’m a dragon just recently.”

“That’s a shame.” Dean smiled. “I’m sure your parents would be proud of you, my dear.”

“I hope so, sir.”

“Well.” Dean rapped his knuckles on the table. “That’s it. Avery, have a safe drive home with your family.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“My cats are in the car,” Declan announced with a note of defiance. “They need me.”

Dean's smile widened as chuckles abounded around the table. "I adore cats, young man. If I ever hear of you not caring for them properly, I'll summon you to this council."

Declan grinned. "Will you come see them?"

"My boy, I'd love to."

Jacy

“We’re fated to be together. Can’t you feel it?”

Avery and I sat together on the sofa, the TV off and the dancing firelight the only illumination. Outside, a fierce storm struck the region, blowing snow and ice past the windows. I listened to the wind howl over the snapping and crackling of the flames and felt safe. Happy, warm, and very much in love.

“Yeah, I do,” I murmured. “Hard to believe I came here just a few months ago. Now look at us. In love. With a wonderful future ahead.”

He squeezed me more tightly, his hand resting against my stomach. “Is it time to think about planting a baby dragon in there?”

“I don’t know,” I answered, unsure if I was ready for a pregnancy. Motherhood, absolutely. I already thought of Declan as my son.

“You want more kids, don’t you?”

“Sure. In time.”

Avery kissed my cheek. “I can wait until you’re ready.”

Breathing deeply, I smiled into his Nordic blue eyes. “Thanks.”

“We should consider getting married first,” Avery mused. “In the spring?”

Lightly smacking his arm, I said, “Shouldn’t you ask me first? There’s a form to follow, you know.”

“There is?”

“Yeah. Buying an engagement ring, kneel, beg me to marry you, slide it on my finger.”

“Oh. I recall hearing something about that once.”

“Then plan the wedding, send invitations, order a cake and flowers.”

“I thought we might get one of those drive-thru weddings in Las Vegas.”

I snorted. “That’s about as romantic as doing your taxes.”

“That’s me. Mr. Romantic.”

“I’d like a honeymoon cruise through the Caribbean,” I commented with a sigh. “The three of us. Leave the cats and dog at home.”

“Declan will insist his cats come along.”

“I love his devotion to his cats, but they stay home. End of discussion.”

His chuckle vibrated against my ear. “Now you sound like a mother.”

“I hope I’ll be a good mother.”

“You’ll be the best.”

His finger under my chin lifted my face toward his. His mouth enclosed mine in a sweet, passionate, and loving kiss. Parting my lips, his tongue slipped inside and danced the tango, licking my teeth and turning my pussy into a wet, throbbing mess.

I wore a lightweight set of linen pajamas. His hand had little trouble in sliding between the thin elastic and my skin to toy and tease my clit. I moaned, my excitement growing, my lust rising. I opened my legs, leaning my back against his chest. Kissing had to stop, but the foreplay did not. Avery caressed my flesh under my top, cupping my breasts and teasing my nipples into hard pebbles.

Unable to return the favor, I laid against him and simply enjoyed the erotic pleasure his talented hands brought me. My pussy hummed and quivered, craving more, needing his thick, long cock buried deep within it. I tried to push that need aside, but his fingers, his oh so long and gifted fingers brought me to my first orgasm.

I shut my jaw in order to not cry out at the exquisite pleasure romping through me. Still, I moaned, unable to prevent that sound from escaping my lips. My pussy spasmed, quaking, and I rode the high as I might a bucking horse.

Gasping for breath, I turned in Avery's arms. "My turn to pleasure you."

I slid down his body until I knelt on the carpet. He pulled his thick shaft from his sweatpants and guided the head into my waiting mouth. Now he groaned, his fingers tangled in my hair, while I sucked his cock, licking, taking him in as deeply as I could. It didn't take him long before he, too, orgasmed, shooting his come into my throat.

I swallowed his salty seed, half thinking I may need to wait before he'd fill my pussy. I need not have worried. Avery's shaft stayed hard. He lifted me from my knees and pulled me onto his lap. I knelt on the couch over his thighs and pointed his cockhead at my pussy.

Then dropped my full weight on it.

The mix of pleasure and pain as his shaft filled me, spread me wide, made me gasp. Avery bucked his hips upward, and within moments we had a nice rhythm going. His cockhead nudged against my G-spot, and the intense pleasure flooded my loins. Deep inside me, my second climax swelled, rocking through me like a tornado.

Avery followed close behind, his cock spasming his seed into my pussy. Though I wasn't quite ready for pregnancy, at that moment, I didn't care if his sperm was successful. I clasped my hands behind his head and kissed him with all the love I felt within my heart.

"I love you," I muttered thickly. "Forever. You're mine."

Avery kissed me. "I am yours, my blood, my heart. Our lives have been linked from beyond time."

I leaned my brow against his. "Fated to be together?"

"Yeah. Maybe we were star crossed lovers in another life."

"I wouldn't be at all surprised."

Avery clapped his hands together and rubbed them, grinning, like a 60's game show host. "Today, my beloved and my child, we're going car shopping."

"Yay," Declan crowed, then sobered. "What does that mean?"

Avery picked him up and swung him around. "That means, o child of my loins, our

insurance check came in, and we need a new ride.” Avery eyed me sidelong. “An SUV. A family vehicle. If you get my drift.”

I rolled my eyes. “I got your drift, o grand holder of the family jewels. The insurance won’t cover the entire cost, I hope you realize.”

“What it doesn’t cover, we’ll finance.” He smirked. “Right now, I’ve got more work, aka commissions, than I can handle. And since you’re no longer on the payroll –” His smirk widened.

“Oh, this is how it is.” I groaned. “How typical in a male society that a woman falls in love, and she gets canned.”

Declan wriggled from Avery’s arms and ran to me. “You’re not canned. Dad, you can’t do that.”

“Since Jacy got a promotion,” Avery replied, pouring himself a cup of coffee, “she’s not your nanny anymore, little man.”

Declan’s eyes widened. “She’s not?”

“She’s gonna be your mom.”

His happy scream might have alarmed the neighbors if the windows had been open. Declan wrapped his arms around my hips as I laughed, then picked him up to hold him.

“We’re a family, baby,” I said, kissing his cheek. “From now on.”

“I love you, Jacy.”

“I love you, too, sweetie.”

“Why don’t you try calling her ‘Mom’?” Avery asked.

Declan grinned. “Mom. I love you.”

“Ditto.”

We drove the rental to the nearest large city an hour’s drive away. Hand in hand, with Avery carrying Declan, we walked among the SUVs at a Ford dealership. After dismissing an eager salesman, we talked the merits of this vehicle or that one, discussed the prices, third row seats and built in TVs.

“We don’t need a TV,” I argued. “We have one at home.”

“Sure we do,” Avery protested. “When we take over the road vacations, the kids will need entertainment. Besides, it doesn’t add that much to the overall cost.”

“And leather?” I lifted my brow. “We need that, too?”

“It’s easier to clean than cloth. Cloth stains.”

“And leather cracks.”

“Not if we care for it.”

Avery slipped his hands around my waist, his grin making me hot inside my warm jacket and hood. “Come on. Let’s indulge ourselves. The insurance will cover half the cost as a down, the payments for the rest won’t break the bank. We can do this.”

I studied the dark gray SUV with all its bells, whistles, and TV, then nodded. “All

right. I've never bought anything so expensive before."

"It's a family car, babe. Room for the rugrats, taking long vacations, maybe take it to a remote location, drop the seats and – use your imagination."

"Imagination for what, Dad?" Declan piped up.

I covered Avery's seductive grin with my finger. "Declan, never mind. Do you like it?"

"Yeah!"

"Then I guess we've bought ourselves a new car."

We called back the ecstatic salesman, haggled a bit, signed the papers, Avery wrote a check, and we both received a set of smart keys. Avery transferred Declan's safety seat to the new SUV and kissed me with a grin.

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"For everything. Coming into our lives. Agreeing to a family. And for just being you."

I slid my arms around his hard waist and smiled into his eyes. "You're sucking up because I agreed to that monstrosity."

"True. I love you, anyway."

With Declan humming to himself behind me, I drove the new SUV behind Avery in

the rental to the agency. After he turned the car over, he joined us, and directed me to drive to a nice restaurant to celebrate. I eyed him.

“Celebrate what?”

“Our new life together.” Avery grinned impudently. “Our future family. Our new car. And the freedom from the dragon council under whose fearful doom I no longer fear to tread.”

I laughed. “They were quite nice, weren’t they?”

“And Ian, that putz, got what he deserved.”

“What happened to him?”

Avery smirked and kissed his fingers like a French chef. “He’s been shit canned as the council liaison and ordered to report for duty as the council’s new toilet scrubber.”

“No,” I gasped.

“Yes. Couldn’t have happened to a nicer dragon.”

“Avery,” I said, glancing at him. “He could easily blame you for his new assignment.”

He waved his hand, negligent. “He can blame himself. Turn right here, the restaurant is a few blocks down.”

I followed his directions, troubled. Ian didn’t seem like the type who’d take responsibility for his own actions and attitude. He’d spent three years tormenting

Avery. He'd once held a position of high esteem among dragons. Now? He was a janitor of sorts. A low life.

The implications bothered me.

Declan received a booster seat from the smiling waitress. He scribbled pictures of his cats on a paper with a crayon as Avery and I smiled at one another over glasses of wine. While not exactly a family type restaurant, the staff bent over backwards for Declan. He repaid them by showing them his drawings of his cats.

We dined on steaks and baked potatoes, drank wine, and celebrated our freedom from those who'd wished us ill. Ian had his new job to keep him busy while I'd scared Carter into leaving the state. No more would either of them darken our horizons. We talked of our future, our unborn kids, and our wedded life together.

Slightly tipsy, I clutched my jacket close around my neck as we left the restaurant. Darkness had fallen, and Declan drowsed while Avery carried him across the parking lot. Snow blew in swirling circles to land on our lashes and the pavement. I vaguely hoped our drive home wouldn't be slick and slippery as the storm around us intensified.

Avery flipped the SUV's door handle upward to unlock it. "Here you go, little man," he murmured. "Let's get you buckled in."

As he settled Declan into his safety seat, I stood behind him, shivering in the cold, and glanced around the parking lot. A few cars pulled in to park just as an even number drove out. I happened to glance at a darkly tinted pickup – and the gleam of the streetlights on polished metal.

My eyes widened in disbelief.

“Get down,” I screamed, shoving Avery into the rear seat and on top of Declan.

The rifle’s muzzle flashed red and orange.

I barely registered the flash, the bark of the rifle. The bullet struck me high in my chest long before they hit my eyes and ears.

I staggered, fell back against our new car, the shock of being shot instantly numbed all my senses. I knew I fell, dropped onto my knees, then onto my face as Avery’s screams, his panic, echoed in my now limited hearing.

I felt the icy snow and ice on my face –

Avery

My dragon instincts all but took over.

As Jacy fell onto the snow-covered asphalt, I nearly shifted. I saw the rifle retract into the truck's window, witnessed the vehicle skid across the pavement as it screamed, tires spinning, into the street. I saw myself flying low over it, grasping the roof in my talons, lifting it, tossing it aside to crash – then setting it, and its murdering occupants – ablaze.

Jacy needed me more. Declan, screaming, crying, in the SUV, needed me more.

I knelt beside my beloved in the icy cold and set my fingers to the pulse in her neck. She's alive! Her blood pooled on the asphalt under her, melting the snow, and forcing me to turn her over. I had to stop the bleeding.

"Is she alive?" someone demanded from behind me.

"Yeah," I answered, terse. "Call an ambulance."

"Is this your son in the car?"

"Yeah."

I pressed the heel of my hand against the bubbling wound in Jacy's chest. Half listening, I heard a matronly voice comfort Declan, then more voices surround us. In the dim distance, a siren wailed in response to the catastrophe.

And if Jacy died, a catastrophe would indeed this situation become.

“You’re not gonna die,” I muttered, stopping the terrible flow of blood from her body. I stared into her closed eyes, her parted lips, her pale flesh. “You’re not gonna die. I won’t let you. Breathe, dammit. Breathe. You’re tough. You’re a fighter. We need you, Jacy. You know we need you.”

Paramedics arrived, pushing me aside. They applied oxygen, took her blood pressure, applied blood congealing bandages, inserted tubes that kept her saline levels up. I sat back, dripping her blood, watching, as Declan crawled into my arms. We both stared in grief and horror as the medics worked to perform a miracle.

She’s lost too much blood. What if the bullet hit an artery? Her lungs? Will she die on the table?

I held my weeping son to my chest, and my soul within me died.

“She’s resilient, I’ll give her that.”

The exhausted surgeon doffed his cap as he looked at me with Declan sleeping across my lap in the hospital’s surgical wing’s waiting room. “We repaired her artery, removed the bullet. It nicked her heart, and whoever kept the blood inside her saved her life.”

I refrained from saying it was me who did that. “And?”

“With good luck, she’ll recover fully.” He shrugged slightly. “Without such luck, she’ll always have a weakened heart, compromised immune system. The bullet ended up in her shoulder blade – she might have a life filled with pain because of it.”

He nodded politely and walked away.

She's a dragon, you ass. Jacy has the toughness of a dragon and will heal like one. She'll be flying within days, bullet or no bullet cracking her shoulder blade. If she survived the initial attack, she'll recover easily.

I endured the questioning of the police. No, I don't know the shooter. No, I don't know why he targeted us. Mistaken identity? That's possible. We'd just bought an SUV, had dinner, and were headed home. Yeah, this is my son, I hope he's not traumatized by all this shit.

The officers left cards. Call us if you think of anything.

Yeah, right.

With draconic rage smoldering in my heart, I pondered the reason Jacy came to me. She'd seldom spoken of it, but I knew she'd fled from someone. An ex-husband, boyfriend. One who'd abused her. One she'd feared. I smoothed Declan's hair from his brow and plotted vengeance.

Come out, come out, wherever you are, I crooned within my mind. You messed with the wrong woman, dude. She's mine, not yours. And if you want a fight, I'll sure give you a good one. I'll burn you to a fucking crisp.

Unless Jacy told me about him, who he was, my rage had no outlet.

Hours passed. A nurse informed me Jacy was in intensive care. There she'd stay until she healed enough to be transferred to a regular room. Yes, I was permitted to see her for a short time, but Declan could not. As much as I needed to see Jacy, assure myself that she'd live, I couldn't leave him. Even for ten minutes.

Near dawn, when the hospital's heart beat slowly, I carried Declan to the nurses' station. A pleasant looking lady in purple scrubs glanced up with a smile.

"Yes?"

"Jacy Maxwell? Is there any change in her condition?"

"Let me check."

The young nurse tapped a few keys on her keyboard, studied the monitor. "Her stats are good, no fever, her urine output is normal, kidneys seem to be functioning. This doesn't say if she's woken up yet."

"May I see her? Just for a minute."

She eyed Declan in my arms. "Kids aren't allowed in the ICU rooms, but as she's asleep." She grinned. "I won't tell if you don't."

I blew her a kiss. "Which room?"

"C. It's right down there."

"Thank you."

I found Jacy's tiny room with the glass front, but lacking a door. On her back, her flesh ghostly pale, she rested on the gurney. Tubes sprouted from her chest, others dripped liquid substances into needles in her arms. Her heart beeped slowly and steadily on the monitor. An oxygen mask covered her nose and mouth.

"Oh, Jacy," I muttered thickly, tears stinging my eyes. "I love you so much. You can't leave us, baby."

Her eyes fluttered. Her head rolled on the thin pillow even as she smiled behind her mask. “Hi.” Her voice was weak, faint, but I thought it was the most beautiful sound in the world.

Careful not to wake Declan, I bent to kiss her brow. “Hi.”

Jacy lifted her right hand and lightly touched Declan’s arm. “Sleeping.”

“Yeah. As you should be. We only have a minute. Long enough to say how much we love you.”

“Love you.”

Jacy’s eyes closed. She slept.

As much as I wanted to, we couldn’t camp out at the hospital. After seeing Jacy, I drove Declan home just as the dark sky above morphed into a sullen lighter shade of gray. The highway had become slick from last’s night’s storm. The snowplows pushed the snow aside but left behind the ice.

Declan didn’t wake as I carried him upstairs to his room. His cats bitterly complained about his absence, trotting ahead of me with their tails high. Both jumped on his bed, sniffing him over, as I tucked him under his covers. Leaving him to their care, I showered, then laid down on my bed to sleep. Though I was exhausted, emotionally drained, sleep came only slowly.

I’d dozed for perhaps an hour, then woke when Declan emerged from his room to use the toilet. I glanced at the clock – eight-thirty. I scrubbed my face with both hands, then stiffly stood up. I donned my jeans but no shirt and went downstairs to make

Declan his breakfast. I set his favorite cereal, a bowl, and spoon on the table, then started my coffee.

“Is Mom going to be all right?”

Declan, his hair flattened in some places, sticking up wildly in others, stood in the kitchen doorway. The kittens prowled at his feet, meowing for their breakfast. The anguish that creased his small face nearly broke my heart. I crossed the kitchen to pick him up.

“Yeah,” I said hoarsely. “She’ll be okay. She’s a dragon, remember?”

“Why did someone do that?”

“I wish I knew. But they’ll pay for it. That I promise you.”

While expressing my need for vengeance to my toddler son might not be the best parenting, I refused to regret my words. Dragons would not nor could not let such an attack slide. Whoever shot Jacy would indeed pay for hurting her.

Declan hugged me around my neck. “When can we go see her?”

“How about this afternoon?”

“Can we bring her lunch?”

“Let’s see how she’s doing first.”

While he played with his toys and the cats, I slept on and off on the sofa. My sleep deepened, dropping me into a nightmare in which I couldn’t save Jacy. I wept as her blood and her life gushed out from under my hands. No! Jacy, no! Stay with me,

don't leave us –

“Dad!”

I woke abruptly, covered in sweat, blinking as Declan shook my shoulder. “What?”

His lower lip quivered. “You were crying in your sleep.”

Upon wiping my face, I discovered it was wet with my tears. “Sorry.”

He crawled onto the sofa with me, his small face crumpled. “I want Mom.”

Lying on my chest, he burst into a fit of crying. I held him, trying to find words of comfort when my own terrors of losing Jacy still wracked my soul. I smoothed his tangled hair, unable to say much beyond it'll be all right.

I sat up with Declan in my arms. Grabbing a tissue from the table, I wiped his face, held it so he could blow his nose. “How about we get ice cream?” I suggested. “On our way to see Mom.”

“I don't wanna.”

“Well, I do. Come on, time to get out of your jammies. Go upstairs and get dressed.”

While he stomped his way to his room, I stared out the kitchen window at the sunlight melting the snow from the previous night's storm. The nightmare clung to me like a heavy spider web, nor could I shake free of its grip. Was it a premonition that Jacy had died while I slept? No, the hospital would have called.

I still couldn't shake the feeling of impending doom as I drove the miles to the city hospital.

Holding Declan's hand, I strode through the sliding doors and crossed the lobby to the elevators. Declan gazed around at the hospital staff in wonder with a few nurses smiling at him. What an adorable little boy I heard murmured around us. If Declan heard the compliments, he gave no hint of it.

I glanced toward unit C as we walked to the ICU nurses' station. A different nurse glanced up in askance.

"Jacy Maxwell?"

"Oh. You're too late."

My heart thudded in my chest. No, no, no, no. "Um."

"She's been transferred to a regular room on the second floor."

My head spun sickeningly. "Do you know what room?"

"No, but you can ask there."

"Um, thanks." I managed a crooked smile while my knees wobbled. She's not dead, not dead, not dead.

"Where's Mom?" Declan asked, his voice rising as we headed back down the corridor. "Is she okay?"

I punched the elevator button. "She must be getting better if they moved her, little man."

We not just found Jacy on the second floor, we found her awake. The oxygen mask was gone, as were the tubes going into her chest. She wore a hospital johnny under

the light blanket, and only a single needle buried under her skin led a slim tube to a bag hanging nearby.

“Mom!”

Jacy’s green eyes lit up in instant love. “Baby.”

I grabbed his arm before he could leap onto her bed. “Easy, easy. She’s fragile. Just give her a careful hug.”

Declan gingerly hugged her as Jacy sat partway up. She immediately laid back down as though the movement exhausted her. By her pale skin and the slight tremble in her hands, I suspected the effort did indeed wear her out.

I bent to kiss her. “Hi.”

She smiled. “Hi.”

“Don’t scare us like that again.” I rubbed her nose with mine. “My heart can’t take it.”

“Are you getting better, Mom?”

I lifted Declan so he could sit on the edge of her bed and hold her hand.

“Yeah, I’m much better. I’ll be out of here in no time.”

“I miss you.”

“I miss you, too. How’s Peter and Wendy?”

I studied her face as Declan regaled Jacy with stories of what the kittens had done lately, showed her the faint scratch on his hand from Pete's enthusiastic playing. Jacy kissed it, chuckling weakly, as I sat in the room's only visitor's chair. I rolled the question I desperately wanted to ask within my mind, wondering how I'd ask it with Declan right there.

A knock on the door interrupted both my thoughts and cat stories. A dude in a business suit and tie poked his head around the door's edge. A cop. He's gotta be.

"Hey, I hope I'm not interrupting," he said, stepping in as though invited. "I'm Detective Truman Jenkins. You're Ms. Maxwell?"

"I don't think she's up for any questions," I said, standing.

He eyed me with amusement. "And you are?"

"Her boyfriend."

"Ah. Then you were at the scene of the shooting last night. I have questions for you as well."

He sat comfortably in the chair I'd just vacated and smiled at Declan. "Hi, there."

"Hi."

As Declan didn't shy from him, I guessed Jenkins was an okay guy, even if he was rude and pushy. "I won't take up much time. You're Avery Armstrong?"

"Yeah. My son, Declan."

He gravely shook Declan's hand. "Did either of you happen to see the vehicle the

shooter was in?"

"I didn't see it at all," I replied. "Jacy yelled 'get down' and pushed me further into the car. I was buckling Declan into his car seat at that moment."

"Ms. Maxell?"

"No," she said softly. "All I saw was the gun. The rifle."

"You're sure it was a rifle?"

"Long barrel. The light reflected off of it."

Jenkins nodded thoughtfully. "A waitress at the restaurant said she saw a dark gray or blue Chevy truck parked there, the silhouette of a man inside, when she went on her smoke break. She thought it odd that he was still there when she went on another smoke break."

"How much time between breaks?" I asked, frowning.

"More than an hour." He glanced between Jacy and me. "How long were you in there?"

"Close to two hours."

"So this dude waited for you to come out."

"Are we sure that dude was the shooter?" I demanded.

"According to eyewitnesses, yes." He nodded shortly. "Folks heard the shot, saw Ms. Maxwell fall. A moment later, the truck drove from the lot at a high rate of speed. It

skidded on the snow, nearly hit a fire hydrant, then drove east.”

An odd silence fell as Jenkins looked at Jacy. “Who wants you dead, Jacy?”

“Hey, maybe the guy wanted to shoot me, not Jacy,” I protested.

“What do you do for a living, Avery?”

“I’m a stockbroker.”

He smiled. “I doubt the dude wanted you dead.” He heaved a deep breath. “I’ve looked into Jacy’s background a little. You know, snooped. You weren’t born Jacy Maxwell, were you?”

My jaw tightened as Jacy slowly shook her head.

“I’m Jacy Andoni.”

Jenkins eyed Declan. “You lost your father recently, isn’t that right? A certain individual who, shall we say, skated on the far side of the law?”

“That’s right.”

“Wait a second,” I snapped. “Are you accusing her of something, Jenkins?”

“I’m accusing her of being related to a gangster,” he answered calmly. “I saw nothing that indicated Jacy has done anything illegal.”

“So where are you going with this?”

Jenkins lifted a brow. “Jacy? Who wants to see you harmed?”

She didn't look at him, but at me. She smiled sadly.

“My brother.”

Jacy

I hurt. Never in my life have I hurt this bad. I craved to thumb the morphine drip and drift along the tide of the narcotic until I no longer cared about the pain. I needed a clear head, however. At long last, I needed to share what had transpired all those long months ago when I fled Carter's wrath.

Avery put Declan into the willing care of a nurse, then held my hand as I started to talk.

"Carter is my older brother," I said, taking small sips from the ginger ale, the nurse brought me. "He and my father hated one another. Always. Carter was involved in my father's gang – running drugs and guns from Mexico – but he wanted the whole enchilada for himself."

"Is that why he killed your dad?" Jenkins asked.

I nodded. "You knew this?"

"I guessed by the course of your story," he replied. "I read the reports, naturally, but there wasn't enough evidence left at the scene to point any fingers."

"I saw it happen."

Avery gripped my hand. "This can wait, baby. Until you're stronger."

"No. It's gone too far. I have to get it out." I met Jenkins's eyes. "I lived with my dad.

I knew what he did, it wasn't a secret. But I didn't want any part of it. I'd planned to move out, find a job, leave both of them behind."

"What was your relationship with your father like?"

"Cordial. Not loving. He'd always been distant with me. Made sure I had food, clothes, went to school, didn't cause him problems the way Carter did."

"And when Carter killed him?" Jenkins prodded.

"They were arguing." I sipped my ginger ale to soothe my throat. "As usual. I was more irritated than upset about it. They always fought. Anyway, I went downstairs to get something, I don't remember what now. They were in Dad's den when I stopped at the doorway to ask them to shut up. That's when Carter pulled his gun and shot Dad."

I swallowed hard. "It stunned me. Seeing my father with his face blown to hell. I couldn't believe it."

Jenkins gave me a few minutes to gather my thoughts, not pressuring me. "Take your time."

Squeezing Avery's hand, I continued. "I don't think Carter knew I was home. He suddenly saw me. He went white. He said my name." I drank more ale from my cup. "I knew in an instant he'd shoot me, too. Cover his tracks. He couldn't risk me talking to the cops."

"So what did you do?"

"I ran like a rabbit," I replied softly. "Didn't look back."

“What did your brother do?”

“Called for me to wait, to stop. But he didn’t chase after me. I don’t know why he didn’t. He probably could have caught me if he had.”

“Have you seen him since that day?” Jenkins asked, his voice bland.

“I guess you know I did.”

“What?” Avery barked. “When?”

“At the grocery store,” I said. “He said he wanted to talk. I stood up to him, told him I’d kill him if he bothered me. He walked away, and I thought he’d leave me alone. That I’d won.”

“I’d say he wanted you to lower your guard,” Jenkins commented dryly. “Does he drive a pickup?”

“No. A Mercedes.”

“We still can’t rule him out.” Jenkins finally stood. “I’ll work with the PD and the feds from your home city on this. I’ll also get an arrest warrant issued. I’m sure he knows he didn’t kill you and may stick around for another go.”

“Let him.” Avery’s eyes burned with rage. “I’ll rip his heart from his chest and make him eat it.”

“Whoa there, cowboy,” Jenkins said. “No vigilante shit, okay? I don’t want to arrest you for foolishness.”

Avery smiled. “You won’t have to.”

Obviously, Jenkins didn't much like Avery's smile nor his attitude. Still, there wasn't anything he could do about either one. He stared at Avery, their gazes locked for a long time, then he breathed deeply. Jenkins turned to me and patted my arm.

"You get better, eh? If you suspect your brother is around, or if you see him, you call me. Day or night. Got it?"

"Yeah."

He fished his card from his wallet and left it on my bedside table. After a nod toward Avery, he left my room. I shut my eyes, exhausted from the ordeal, and craving the sweet oblivion of sleep. I thumbed my morphine drip – finally.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Avery asked, his tone soft.

"I was going to. Eventually. But I thought Carter would leave me alone."

"He's been looking for you all this time."

I remembered the lady outside the library, the goon I'd killed. "He's known exactly where I was the entire time I've been here."

"So why did he wait so long to act?"

"To torture me. Psychologically. He told me he wanted to talk, his goon was supposed to only scare me. He found out I'm not scared at all."

"So why did he wait this long to kill you?"

"Reluctance to kill his own sister? I don't know."

The morphine hit. I started to drift, swirling down into the depths of slumber. I started awake when Avery kissed me.

“Get some rest,” he murmured, his breath warm on my cheek. “We’ll be back to see you tomorrow.”

“Kay.”

I both heard and felt him leave the bed, and my room, the soft squeak of his shoes on the tiles. My pain slid away as if oiled as I drifted once again on the tide of sleep. If a nurse came in to check on me or draw blood I didn’t know it.

“Mom!” Declan held up a kitten. “Wendy wants to give you a kiss.”

I obliged him by giving the squirming cat a swift kiss between her ears. “Can I have a kiss from you, too?”

He immediately dropped the cat and puckered his lips. Smiling, I kissed him, then fended off a happy, tail-wagging Max, who wanted a kiss as well. Though I didn’t want any lip action from him, I caressed his head and ears instead. Leaning heavily on Avery’s arm, I made my slow way into the TV room where Declan’s teenaged babysitter had been doing her homework.

“Hi, Ms. Maxwell,” she said, gathering her books. “I hope you’re better after your accident.”

I gave her a quick smile. “I am, thanks.”

Still weak and in some pain, I sank to the sofa while Avery walked her out. Max tried

shoving his nose under my arm but petting him proved to be a bit much. I laid on my back and shivered as he pressed his cold nose against my neck.

“Max,” Avery thundered. “Quit that.”

“He’s just happy to see me,” I murmured. “It’s okay.”

“It’s not okay if his antics split your sutures.”

“I’m almost healed.”

Avery bent over and kissed me. “You’re a tough thing, I’ll give you that.”

As he commandeered Declan, took charge of making dinner, and ordered Max into the backyard, I rested with my eyes closed. Off the morphine, the pain killers my doctor prescribed hardly did its job. I ached, and heaped curses upon Carter’s head and soul for making me suffer. Paybacks are a bitch, brother mine.

Detective Jenkins assured Avery and me that all county, state, and federal cops were looking for him. With my eyewitness testimony that Carter had committed murder, he’d likely face the death penalty once caught and tried. Yeah, I planned to testify at his trial. If I don’t kill you first, that is.

I might be death on wings, but was my sibling also a dragon? He had to be, right? Unless we were only half siblings – my father wasn’t my father, or my mother not my mother – Carter was also a dragon. Did he know of his heritage? Until his goon forced me into shifting, I didn’t know I was a dragon.

“I made mac and cheese,” Avery said, standing by the sofa. “Hungry?”

“Not for that.”

I witnessed his dejection cross his face and carefully sat up with a small grin. “But I bet it’s delicious.”

“You’re just saying that to make me feel better.”

“You’re right. But it’s also the truth.”

Nor did I lie. His cooking tasted wonderful, despite my lack of enthusiasm for mac and cheese yet again. I downed two plates and three wieners accompanied by bread with butter and tea. Avery watched me eat with a faintly smug expression, then helped me back to the sofa.

“One thing about mac and cheese,” he said with a grin. “Cleanup is easy.”

I listened to Avery’s and Declan’s horseplay as they tidied the kitchen while I pondered a means to my vengeance. His ego will bring him to me. He can’t risk keeping me alive. By now he knows I’ve spilled my guts to the cops. If he’s arrested, he’ll never make bail.

If he’s a dragon? No jail can keep a dragon contained. I doubted the council’s decree against permitting humans to see us will stop Carter from shifting and bringing the jail’s roof down on everyone inside it. I frowned, wondering how to save Carter from being arrested.

Simple. Burn him and set his ashes loose on the wind.

Except I needed to complete my healing. I dared not face my brother while weakened, in pain. How long before I’d be strong enough to confront him? A week? More? Dragons obviously healed fast, as I’d spent a night in the ICU, then two days in the hospital before the doctor signed me out. Two more days should see my healing nearly complete.

And Carter?

He knew where I lived. I felt sure of it. If he attacked the house, Avery could certainly fight him off. Declan was no mere five-year-old kid. He couldn't fly, but he could flame. His dragon hide would also protect him from almost anything. Against the three of us, Carter stood no chance.

"What are you thinking about?"

Avery sat on the coffee table and took my hands. "You okay?"

"Yeah. I'm just thinking about Carter. If he came through that door right now."

"He's your brother," Avery said slowly. "Is he a dragon?"

"I don't know," I replied honestly. "When I promised I'd kill him, he backed off. If he's a dragon, he may not know it."

Avery kissed my knuckles. "If he came through that door, he'll be drifting on the wind before he can shift."

Carter didn't bust through the door.

I healed faster than a normal human. Within days of leaving the hospital, I regained all my strength and set the pain killers aside. Avery returned to work, and Declan returned to his schooling. Max slept, and the cats wrangled with one another.

Life went on.

Until I clicked Carter's number on my cell phone.

"Sis," he said cheerfully by way of greeting. "I hoped you'd call."

"Are you still looking to talk to me?" I asked, my voice neutral.

"Hell, yeah. We can work this out, I promise."

"By shooting me?"

I heard the hesitation in his voice. "If I wanted to kill you, I'd do it face to face. You think I was the one who shot you?"

"Damn right I do."

"I don't work that way, Jacy," he snapped. "I'd look you straight in the eyes before I shot you."

"So that wasn't you in the truck with the rifle?"

"No, it sure as shit wasn't."

"I don't believe you. You want to work this out, bro?"

"I do."

"Then meet me the night after next. Midnight. At the junction of the state highway and County Road Five. You know where that is?"

"I'll find it."

“Good. I hope you’re ready to die.”

Avery

Jacy troubled me.

She healed at a fantastic rate, yet seemed preoccupied. Upon my return home from the office, she busily prepared mac and cheese while Declan ran around the TV room, laughing wildly while his kittens chased him. Max watched the drama from the sofa with an air of resignation.

“I’m almost to the point of being sick of noodles with fake cheese,” I commented lightly, kissing her neck.

She offered a distracted smile. “Sorry. I just couldn’t think of anything else.”

“We haven’t thawed those steaks in the freezer,” I said, dropping my jacket over a chair and yanking my tie off.

“I completely forgot about those.”

I sat, watching her profile closely. Her instincts apparently failed to let her know I stared at her. She never glanced at me nor asked, “What?” as she normally would. Her stiff posture and slightly tightened lips informed me of her tension. When the boiling pot of wieners overflowed, she didn’t notice until the hot stove sent a flurry of steam upward and hissed, spitting water everywhere.

“What’s wrong?” I asked as she hastily cleaned up the mess.

I received another distracted smile. “Nothing. Why?”

“You seem off. Uptight.”

“I’m fine. No worries.”

“You don’t look it.”

Ignoring me, Jacy strode to the TV room. “Declan, wash your hands. It’s time for dinner.”

Whooping, Declan charged into the kitchen, the cats, as usual, tagging along. If he noticed Jacy’s odd stress, he said nothing. Rather, he climbed onto his stool to wash his hands at the kitchen sink, happy over the prospects of yet another mac and cheese dinner.

Just as she started to dish up the dinner, the front doorbell rang. Max went ballistic, barking while rushing to the door. I eyed Jacy in surprise, who returned the same confused expression. “Expecting someone?”

“No.”

I got up, envisioning Carter on the far side with a gun, and grabbed Max’s collar. Tense, I unlocked the door, then opened it enough to peer around the edge. Max continued to lunge, yanking my arm, exercising his lungs and his duties as a dog.

Detective Jenkins gave me a sheepish grin. “Hey, sorry about not calling first. May I come in?”

I opened the door wider. Max wagged his tail, excited to have a visitor, even if my enthusiasm for such hovered somewhere around my ankles. “We were about to have

dinner.”

“Smells great.”

He bent to pet Max, then stepped around me as though I’d invited him in. Sighing, I shut the door and locked it as Jenkins, escorted by a bouncing, grinning Max, strode toward the kitchen. I followed to find him greeting Jacy with a quick hug and ruffling Declan’s hair. Doffing his coat, he hung it on a chair’s back.

“I really need to talk to you,” he said, seating himself at the table while eyeing Declan. “But not in front of the child.”

I met Jacy’s glance with a shrug. “He can eat watching TV,” I said. “Come on, little man. Let’s set you up in there.”

“No feeding a wiener to Max,” Jacy warned him while fixing Declan’s plate. “He’ll just puke it up later.”

“I won’t.”

I settled Declan on the sofa with his tray and dinner, a goofy cartoon on the tube. With him happily eating his mac and cheese, I returned to the kitchen and found Jacy setting a full plate in front of Jenkins. I sat in my usual chair and asked, “What’s so important that you invite yourself to dinner?”

Jenkins offered up his shit eating grin. “Thank you for feeding me. I sorta hoped you would.”

Jacy also sat, her tension not fading in the least. “It’s my brother, isn’t it?”

“Yep.” Jenkins dug into his mac and cheese with a happy moan. “Delicious. I’ve got

local, county, and state police looking for him. The feds want him on all kinds of charges, not just the killing of your dad.”

“Maybe he’s left this area,” I suggested.

Jenkins shook his head, his mouth full. “Got witnesses IDing him at a convenience store here in town, plus he’s on several security cameras. He’s hanging around and, of course, we know why. Right, Jacy?”

“Because he wants to kill me.”

Jacy nibbled at her dinner, her face lowered, her tension all but making her shoulders shake. My dragon possessiveness and protectiveness rose as did my sudden surge of anger.

“He can try,” I snapped. “If he comes here with evil intentions, he’s one dead brother.”

“Now what did I tell you about doing stupid shit?” Jenkins demanded. “The kind that’ll land you in a jail cell.”

“It’s called self-defense, dumb ass,” I growled. “He comes here with a gun, tries to kill her or Declan or me, I’ll end him and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

Jenkins locked eyes with me for several long seconds, then shook his head. “Make damn sure it’s self-defense, man. Don’t end him on the street, then drag his dead ass inside. I’ll nail you for murder if you do.”

“I won’t break the law,” I told him. “You won’t be arresting me.”

“I don’t suppose you’ll try catching him rather than killing him?” Jenkins sighed.

“Scratch that. You’re a stockbroker, not a member of SEAL Team Six.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” I commented dryly.

“Maybe I’ll end him and end this useless argument,” Jacy grated. “I’m not helpless, you know.”

Jenkins’s eyes widened. “You? You’re just a teensy lil thing.”

“I don’t need to be big to pull a trigger.”

“There you both go.” Jenkins sighed dramatically, then munched a wiener. “Planning to kill a member of your family. I reckon this is what happens when one commits patricide. You piss off the surviving blood relations.”

“Feuds get started that way.” I chuckled. “Incite a clan war.”

“I reckon one has started.” Jenkins sighed again. “Look, kids, Carter’s been fingered in two other murders. He’s one dangerous dude. I’m thinking I should post twenty-four/seven police protection outside your house.”

“No.”

Jacy and I looked at one another after speaking at the same time.

“We can handle Carter,” Jacy said. “This is a small town, and the inhabitants need cops responding to their problems.”

“I don’t want to have to explain to my son why there’s a cop cruiser parked outside,” I added. “Thanks, but no.”

“This is a mistake.” Jenkins shook his head. “I don’t like it.”

“What’s to stop him from blowing a local officer’s brains out, then attacking us?” I demanded, angry again. “You’re just putting another in harm’s way.”

“The police are trained –”

“Blow me,” I snapped. “The cops here aren’t trained to deal with a guy like Carter. They dole out traffic tickets and settle domestic disputes. He’s merciless as we know, and he won’t hesitate to kill a cop to get at us.”

“You insult the people I work with,” Jenkins replied stiffly.

“No. You know I’m talking the truth here. You don’t want to see anyone else hurt any more than we do.”

“Then will you go on an extended vacation? Until Carter is either caught or goes home?”

Jacy and I looked at one another, surprised. “Maybe,” I replied. “I could use a break, siesta on a beach somewhere.”

“Can we afford it?” Jacy asked.

“Sure. As long as we don’t order tons of lobster and mai-tais.”

“That’s good then.” Jenkins beamed. “You three will head south for the winter, stay safe from the bad guy until we can catch him.”

“Are you going to pet watch?” I inquired politely. “Two cats and the dog.”

“Er.”

“I didn’t think so.”

“I’m sure you can find a kid to feed the critters,” Jenkins said easily. “Once Carter knows you’re traveling, he’ll depart for his home territory.”

“Or wait until we get back.” Jacy stood to start clearing the dishes away. “Pounce when we least expect it.”

“Believe me, he can’t stay away from his business too long or he loses both clients and goons. He can’t afford to sit on your house for weeks at a time.” Jenkins also stood and grabbed his coat. “Let me know where you’re going. And when. I’ll need to keep tabs on you.”

He kissed Jacy’s cheek, then dropped his coat over his shoulders. “Thanks for dinner. Stay in touch now.”

“We will.”

I walked him to the door, Declan, cheese smeared around his mouth, watched with curiosity. Jenkins waved to him and received one in return.

“Cute kid,” he muttered as I opened the door. “You and Jacy planning on perpetuating the species?”

“We don’t know yet. In time maybe.”

“You two make a great couple,” he added before stepping out into the cold darkness. “You look good together. Make beautiful kids.”

“Are you married?”

He wagged his beringed finger in my face. “Yep. And have a daughter. Around Declan’s age.”

“And are you and the missus planning to perpetuate the species?”

Jenkins sent me a bleak smile. “I’m afraid she’ll be an only child. Take care, Avery.”

He strode down my walk to his car parked at the curb, then got in. I watched him drive away, suspecting there was much more to Detective Jenkins than what I saw. Much more.

I returned to the kitchen and Jacy. “Are we really going to hide away and let the cops deal with your brother?”

“Nope.”

“I didn’t think so.”

“We’re dragons. Dragons don’t run and hide.” She glanced at me over her shoulder. “I can handle Carter.”

“You’ve just learned what you are, babe.” I put my arms around her from behind. “You’ve never fought another dragon.”

“Have you?”

I said nothing. Jacy laughed shortly. “I didn’t think so. Look, I doubt he’ll be dumb enough to waltz in here and start shooting. He doesn’t know we don’t have machine guns waiting to cut him in half.”

“What if he thinks we’re sitting ducks? We don’t have any guns much less machine guns.”

Jacy turned in my arms to face me. “He kept telling me he wanted to talk. He could have killed me but didn’t. Maybe all I have to do is talk to him and he’ll go home.”

I lifted my brow. “And the shooting that nearly killed you?”

“We don’t know if that was truly his doing.”

“Who else would shoot at you, us?”

Jacy shrugged. “A random idiot with a gun? A gang initiation?”

“No, babe. Jenkins said witnesses saw the shooter waiting. For us. Carter just wants to keep you off guard.”

“Maybe.” Jacy rested her brow on my chest. “Then we should go to a beach someplace. Get off his radar. Let the cops bust him, then he’ll be out of our hair for good.”

“Night, little man.”

Jacy and I both kissed Declan as we tucked him into bed. His cats busily took their evening baths beside him, assuming yoga positions to wash their butts. Yawning, Declan rolled onto his side, his hand tucked beneath his head. “Night, Dad. Night, Mom.”

Hand in hand, we returned downstairs to watch TV for a while. Jacy, again, seemed

preoccupied and said little as I poured wine for us both. Still, she relaxed against me as I put my arm around her.

“Where should we go?” I asked.

“Mexico,” she answered. “Beautiful beaches, not that expensive.”

“You worry about money too much.”

“Comes from never having any.”

“We’ll be fine. I promise.”

“You can take the time off work?”

“Have computer, will travel.” I kissed her brow. “I can work on a beach. Can’t wait to see you in a bikini.”

Jacy laughed. “You’ve seen me naked.”

“Yeah, but a bikini on the beach is oh so sexy.”

“If you say so.”

“I do.”

I don’t know how long I’d been asleep when the sound of my garage door rattling closed woke me. Sitting straight up in bed, I listened, tense, expecting to hear Carter sneaking in through the kitchen door, a gun in his hand.

Yet, Max, the ever-watchful guard dog, stayed silent.

“Wait here,” I began, climbing from the bed.

Even as I spoke, I saw Jacy’s side of the bed was empty.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:47 am

Jacy

I rolled the big SUV onto a wide verge at the designated intersection and cut the lights. The night was clear and very cold. This far from any town and its bright lights, the stars gleamed down brilliantly, like diamonds in a black velvet bed. I closed the door quietly, looking around for Carter or his vehicle.

I saw nothing.

A rustling in the brush just beyond the SUV almost had me shifting, ready to incinerate whatever it was moving out there. Then I realized that whatever shuffled through the brush was far too small to be a threat. A skunk maybe.

I calmed my racing heart, cursing my jangled nerves. If I didn't think I could handle Carter, then why the hell did I make the challenge? I certainly felt much safer as a dragon. Carter could easily find me through a sniper's scope and take me out while I stood by the car dithering.

Headlights gleamed along the state highway.

I straightened, briefly wondering if a traveler headed this way to pull over and take a piss. There's sure nothing out here.

A glowing silver Mercedes pulled to a stop behind my SUV. It's headlights shut down, its purring motor quit.

My brother stepped from the driver's seat, tall, handsome, smiling in greeting as

though he never murdered anyone and had no such intentions toward me.

“Jacy,” he said, his voice expansive. “Good to see you.”

I stepped away from the car and put my hands on my hips. “You wanted to talk. So talk.”

He clasped his arms over his chest, shivering in his expensive coat. “Why way out here? We could have chatted at a nice restaurant where it’s warm.”

His answer took me aback. He wouldn’t shoot me in a restaurant, would he? Uh, Mafia dons were assassinated in their favorite dining halls. Why wouldn’t he follow their example?

“In case there’s trouble,” I replied.

Carter paced closer, his breath smoking in the icy air. “I guess I can see that. Look, I’m not sorry I killed Dad. All right? You know how we felt about one another. He’d have done the same to me if given the chance.”

“I couldn’t see him killing you. Or anyone.”

He snorted. “Jacy, you know damn well he’d killed several people, then climbed over their corpses to get where he was. Yeah, I’m the same as he was. I’m sorry you had to see it, that’s all.”

“You chased me halfway across the country, set your goons to kill me, just to say you’re sorry I saw you kill our father?” My hands trembled with rage. “I’m not stupid, Carter. You know I’m a threat.”

“Are you?” He stepped closer. I refused to back up and stared into his hooded gaze.

“If you swear an oath right now to never tell the authorities about that night, I’ll never bother you again.”

I almost believed him. I wished fervently that I could. To let this all go without bloodshed, for us to simply walk away from one another seemed too tempting to believe in.

Except.

He murdered my father. We may not have loved one another much, but my dad was my dad.

His blood cried out for vengeance.

“Too late, brother mine,” I said. “I already told the local detectives you killed him.”

“That’s too bad, sis.” Carter turned and walked a few paces toward his car. “I hoped I wouldn’t have to do this. Now you made it impossible to walk away. You won’t testify against me.”

I shifted the instant he spun around, the gun in his fist.

His bullet pinged off my hide to whine into the cold dark.

Carter’s mouth dropped. He stared at me with his eyes bulging from his head. “What the ever loving fuck ?”

“I warned you to leave me alone,” I said, bending my long neck to stare into his face at eye level. “You didn’t listen. I asked you once, bro. I’ll ask it again. Are you ready to die?”

His mouth a grim slash, Carter tucked his gun away in his coat. “How’d you know?”

“Your goon – James? That’s his name? When he attacked Declan and me, my dragon took over. His ashes are mixed up with the slag that was once his truck.”

Carter shook his head slowly, chuckling. “You did warn me that day. I guess I should have listened to you.”

His casual confidence warned me. Be careful. He’s very likely a –

Carter shifted.

I instantly leaped skyward.

His white-hot flames passed under me, harmless. I certainly felt the heat, and knew that had they struck me full on, I’d be dead right now.

Climbing for the stars, I glanced under my wing, peering behind me. Sure enough, Carter followed me, cursing, calling me filthy names, his wings straining to catch up.

I laughed. “Is that the best you can do?”

“Bitch! I’ll tear you apart.”

In a move Avery taught me, I ducked low, as though chasing my own tail, twisted, and flew hard into Carter’s face, flaming. Caught by surprise, Carter quickly banked right and down. But not quite fast enough.

My fire caught his left flank.

He roared in agony.

Dancing across the sky, I folded my wings and dove. Carter, still bellowing, kicked out with his left hind leg as though that would ease the terrible pain I'd inflicted. He appeared to not pay much attention to where I was, above him, until I struck his back and shoulders. Raking deep furrows into his hide, I sought to claw my way to his innards.

Screaming, Carter shook me off, his tail whipping around to slam into my belly. The blow took my breath, but I beat my way upward, flying away from his larger and stronger dragon. Below me, he dripped garnet drops that fell far away to the ground.

"Bitch," he roared, his flames lighting the night. "You're so dead. I'll fucking kill you."

"Good luck with that."

His fire reaching for me, he climbed fast, his tremendous wingspan beating the cold air into submission. His eyes glowed with rage and pain, his deadly talons that could gut me as easily as a hunter guts a deer extended. If those razor-sharp claws sank into my hide, I'd never escape the death he planned for me.

Lighter, faster, I banked left and down, forcing him to chase me. Carter did, his wings folded, my death glowing in his eyes.

Just as his talons scratched my hide, I folded my wings. In a tight barrel roll, I ducked out and away from him, unharmed.

Bellowing his rage, Carter fell nearly a thousand feet before his wings slowed his descent and he soared upward again. He bared his long teeth in a grim smile.

"Nice flying, sis."

“Thanks.”

“You know,” he went on, still grinning, “once I kill you, I’ll kill him . And the kid. Just because you pissed me off. I didn’t plan to harm them. I will now, though. You shouldn’t have told the cops anything. You shouldn’t have challenged me, girl.”

His threat to Avery and Declan sent such a fiery wave of rage sweeping through me I couldn’t breathe. “Die, asshole,” I snarled, flaming.

Folding my wings, I dropped fast. Carter, flying upward, saw me coming. His grin didn’t waver. His talons arched outward to grab my throat, his jaws agape and spewing fire, I knew that this was it.

We’d kill each other.

A dragon slammed into Carter’s right flank.

Carter, thrown into a wild tangle of wings and limbs, fell toward the very rocky earth below.

In my drop, I sped past them both in shock.

I spread my wings to slow my rapid descent, astounded, looking up at the third dragon. “Avery?”

He ignored me. His sandy-gold hide gleaming under the stars, his jaws wide, Avery dove in Carter’s wake.

Far below, Carter untangled himself before he hit the ground, and beat his wings. Both flew low over the stony terrain, ducking around trees and boulders, up a hill before diving down the other side. I, too, chased after them, determined to kill my

brother before Avery did.

Carter's knowledge that death pursued him may be what kept him alive.

On what I guessed was pure adrenaline, he outpaced Avery and me both, and he soon vanished into the dark mountains.

Breathing hard, I slowed my pace as Avery swung toward me.

"Avery," I snapped, outraged that he chased my prize away.

"What the fuck were you thinking ?" he roared, flaming. "You took him on alone ? You idiot ."

His anger only fueled my own. "I could have killed him," I bellowed. "He threatened to kill you, Declan. What was I going to do? Let him? You shouldn't have interfered, dumbass. I had him until you chased him away."

"How'd you know he'd come alone?" Avery demanded, circling above me, glaring down. "What if he had two dragons with him? What if you couldn't take him? You'd be dead now and Declan loses his mom. Again ."

"Don't you bring Declan into this!"

"He's your responsibility as much as he's mine," Avery screamed.

"Then why'd you leave him alone?"

Avery's jaw clamped shut. Not speaking, he banked toward the highway and where the SUV, and the Mercedes, were parked. Furling his wings, he dropped lightly to the road beside them and shifted into his human self.

I, too, landed, but refused to shift right away. Avery glared at me, then jerked his head for me to get into the SUV. “Let’s go home.”

“How’d you know where to find me?” I demanded.

Avery curled his upper lip. “The car has a GPS unit installed,” he growled. “I set its coordinates into my phone in case it got stolen. Now get your ass in it.”

I shifted, but not before I raked my talons across the shining silver side of the Mercedes. Only then did I revert to my human shape and stalk to the SUV’s passenger side.

“Feel better?” Avery snapped, starting the engine.

“Yes, I do, thanks for asking.”

Max greeted us as though we’d been gone for weeks, not hours, his tail wagging so hard I thought it might break. Declan slept beside his cats, not waking even if they blinked sleepily in the light from the hallway as we checked on him. While I inwardly fumed at Avery leaving him alone, I also realized only his love for me would force him to risk everything.

Even Declan.

“Want a glass of wine?”

I sat on the couch, thinking of Carter and of how I nearly killed him. Or died with him. “What? Oh. Yeah. Thanks.”

Avery handed me a glass, then sat beside me with a sigh. “You scared the shit outta me.”

“I’m sorry. I thought I’d be back before you knew I was gone.”

“You thought you could take him?”

“Yeah.”

Avery took a deep gulp from his glass. “I have to say, you nearly did.”

“I burned him.”

“Yeah, I saw that.” Avery drank again. “When I hit him. He’ll think twice before challenging you again.”

We drank in silence, in near darkness, for a time. The house failed to creak, didn’t utter a sound, nor did I hear the clock ticking away the seconds. Instead, I heard once again my brother’s dire threats within my mind. I realized I’d wounded not just his skin, but his pride. His ego alone would send him hurtling in my wake yet again. His ego, and the dire threat I posed.

Next time, I might not see him coming.

“I have to kill him,” I said softly. “None of us are safe now.”

“There’s always Mexico.”

“It’s too late for that.”

Avery shifted so he faced me directly. “You’re not alone, Jacy. You don’t have to

fight alone. You've got me."

Smiling sadly, I caressed his bristled cheek. "I know. But if you're protecting me, who's protecting our Declan?"

Avery

I worked from home the next day.

With Carter injured, his threats against Declan, his quest for revenge, I didn't need a seer to tell me he'd return. How, when, and where were the only questions I couldn't answer. Trying to tune out Declan ordering Pete and Wendy to not run off with his Lego building blocks, nor to swat the tower he'd built into a ragged pile, I sat in the armchair with my laptop.

Hardly able to focus on the stock market, I idly watched as Wendy once again pounced on the structure Declan created, sending Legos tumbling.

"Really?" Declan said in the tone of someone twenty years older. "You can't find something else to do?"

I smothered my laughter. He sounded exactly like me when I scolded him.

Wendy laid in the midst of the blocks, her tail lashing, and smacked Declan's hand when he reached for his Legos. Undeterred, Declan patiently rebuilt the foundation while Pete draped himself across his shoulders like a furry stole.

Jacy stood in the kitchen doorway, watching the reconstruction efforts. Max ambled past her to also gaze at Wendy, who now rolled onto her back amidst the Legos, stifling Declan's attempts to retrieve them. He sat back, his small hands on his hips, frowning ponderously.

“Don’t make me send you to your room,” he announced.

Max cocked his head to the side, his ears up and perked forward. He gazed intently at the front door.

My instincts drove me to my feet, tossing the laptop aside.

Carter’s boot kicked the door in, shattering the lock.

The gun in his hand barked, spraying my house with bullets.

Vaguely hearing Declan scream, I charged for Carter, my head down, intending to take him out with my hands on his throat. I caught his feral grin, his gun hand sweeping toward me, aiming the barrel at dead center.

My chest.

Max struck him first.

Carter yelled out as Max bit deep into his wrist, shaking his head, yanking, ripping tendons and shattering his bones. Yelling, Carter fought to free himself from Max’s fangs, his heavy weight, but that damn mutt merely held on, growling deep in his throat. I half-saw Carter’s free fist strike Max on his face and muzzle. Then I tackled him.

My body pushed Carter out the door and onto his back with me atop him. Max’s fangs ripped free of Carter’s wrist, but that didn’t deter my dog from lunging for Carter’s face. Max savaged his flesh, gouging deep bites into his flesh, blood gushing upward to splash my hands as I sought to strangle the life from the bastard.

Carter didn’t give up easily.

His healthy left fist slammed into my right ear.

The blinding pain shattered both my ability to see and to kill him. I rocked sideways, into Max, off balance. Carter wedged his knee between my legs and smashed it into my groin.

Holy hell.

The pain in my head was nothing to the white-hot agony in my nuts. Instantly, I became a writhing puddle of ooze, unable to think or fight. Carter kicked me off of him and staggered upright. Lifting my head a fraction, I saw him kick Max in the ribs and off the porch. Max yelped, hitting the grass awkwardly. But he was on his paws in a nanosecond.

Carter ran for his life.

Max, snarling as ferociously as any well-trained police dog, chased him. His teeth sank into Carter's ass, his thighs, Max leaping upward to bite at Carter's belly. As he had me, Carter kneed him aside and jumped into the opened silver Mercedes.

As Max sought to attack him, Carter slammed the door on his body. Max, yelping shrilly, backed from the car's interior. He leaped again at the shut window, yet Carter had little trouble putting the Merc in gear and racing away, escaping down the street.

"Max," I groaned. "C'mere."

Panting, his tongue hanging halfway to his chest, Max trotted across the yard to me. He nuzzled my face, whining, urging me up, to take charge as I'm supposed to. I managed to gain my knees when Declan's screams pierced my hearing.

Fuck!

With Max at my side, I limped into the house, not caring that the broken door let in the deep winter chill. I saw nothing save my screaming, crying son in Jacy's arms, blood streaming from a gunshot wound. I didn't know what part of him had been hit. Blood staining her face, Jacy looked up at me with a mixture of rage and panic.

"Wrap it, his arm," Jacy yelled. "Slow the bleeding."

I ran past them to the kitchen and grabbed towels from the drawer. While Jacy tried to soothe Declan, rocking him gently, I bound his upper arm with several towels.

"Ambulance," I muttered, staggering to my feet.

"No." Jacy stood with Declan in her arms. "No time. You drive."

After shutting the door and blocking it with the chair, I, my hands shaking, led the way to the garage. Fortunately, the SUV started with the push of a button, or I may not have gotten it started. I opened the garage door and backed the car up so fast I nearly took the door with us.

"You're gonna be okay, baby," Jacy muttered. "I know it hurts, just calm down, okay? I've got you. Daddy's gonna get you to the hospital. You're gonna be okay. I promise."

Declan's screams gradually quieted as I drove from town to the highway, then accelerated to over the speed limit. Weaving in and out of the few cars I overtook, I also kept an eye on Declan in Jacy's arms.

"How bad?" I asked, my voice hoarse.

"Can't tell."

I grit my teeth, forcing my panic in submission. “Is he still bleeding?”

“I think it’s stopped.”

Sucking in a deep breath, I glanced into Declan’s frightened eyes. “You’re gonna be okay, little man. You’re my brave boy. Aren’t you?”

For answer, he turned his face into Jacy’s bosom. Grim, my balls feeling as though they’d swelled ten times their normal size, I drove into the city traffic toward the hospital. Inwardly, I promised Carter a very nasty and painful death as I parked at the Emergency Department’s entrance.

“He’s been shot,” I yelled, leading Jacy, carrying Declan, inside. “Please, my son’s been shot.”

Trauma nurses swarmed around us.

They took Declan from Jacy and settled him on a gurney. By then, Declan’s skin had paled to a ghostly shade that scared me far more than the blood did. Helpless, I tried to follow my son into the trauma room but was pushed back.

“You can’t come in here.”

Jacy slid her arms around me, silent tears tracking through the blood on her face. “He’ll be all right,” she muttered into my chest. “Please tell me he’ll be all right.”

I tightened my grip on her, my face buried in her hair. “He’ll be all right. He has to be.”

Without much surprise, Jacy and I, holding hands, eyed Detective Jenkins as he ambled across the waiting room to us. Without speaking, he sat beside Jacy and patted her hand. As though a member of the family, he sat with us, waiting, watching the slow activity as other families awaited news of their loved ones.

“He’s a tough little bugger,” Jenkins said at last. “He’ll be okay. Right as rain.”

Struggling against tears, Jacy murmured, “Right as rain. Yeah.”

He patted her hand again. “The docs here, they’re great. They know what they’re doing, that’s for damn sure. They took care of you, right? Good job they did, yessir.”

For the next thirty minutes or so, Jenkins sat with us, not talking much. Not asking questions a cop should be asking the victims of a violent home invasion. I appreciated that more than I could ever tell him. In a sweet sort of companionship, we three waited for word of Declan’s condition.

At last, a surgeon in scrubs strode toward us. Instantly, I stood, bracing myself for bad news as I gripped Jacy’s hand tightly enough to hurt her. The doctor introduced himself and shook our hands. Even Jenkins’s.

“How is he?” I burst out before they finished their greetings.

“He’ll be just fine,” the surgeon replied. “The bullet didn’t penetrate, but it skimmed along his outer arm in a rather deep cut. The blood loss appeared worse than it was. We’ve stitched the wound, and I’d like to see him stay the night. Just for observation.”

I thought my knees planned to buckle and pitch me headlong to the floor. “Can we see him?”

“Sure. He’s lightly sedated, but he will be happy to see you. He’s down there. Ask the nurses at the station which room he’s in.”

With a friendly nod, the doctor left us.

“Oh, God.”

Sobbing, Jacy lunged into my arms. Near tears myself, I held her against my chest while Jenkins grinned and thumped my shoulder.

“Told you he’s a tough little bugger. Come on, quit crying, you two. Let’s go see him.”

I didn’t mind that he tagged along as Jacy and I found his room and went in. I ignored his presence upon my first sight of Declan. Lying on a hospital bed far too big for him, he was covered by a sheet with his right arm bandaged to his wrist. He opened his eyes as we loomed over his bed.

“Hi,” he said, and I thought I’d break into sobs right then and there.

“Hi.” Jacy bent to kiss him. “Good grief, did you do all this for the attention?”

Declan giggled. “Yeah.”

I, too, kissed him, forcing a smile onto my face. “I told you you’re a brave little man. Does your arm hurt?”

“Only a little. Can we go home now?”

“Not yet, baby,” Jacy replied, sitting beside him. “The doctors want you here until tomorrow. Just to make sure you’re okay.”

His small face wrinkled into a pout until he asked, “Can I have ice cream?”

“You know it.”

After that, Declan didn’t mind staying in the hospital at all.

“Carter?”

Jenkins pulled Jacy and me from Declan’s room once we’d calmed ourselves. We stood in the hallway as nurses and patients walked back and forth past us. Through the open door, I watched Declan play with the TV’s remote, channel surfing, then nodded. “Yeah.”

“I visited your house,” he went on. “A mess. Can you tell me what happened?”

Between us, Jacy and I told him everything, including Max chewing on Carter’s face and me getting a knee to my nuts. Jenkins nodded, smiling.

“Good dog. We went inside to start the investigation. He thought we were the best thing since Alpo dog treats were invented.”

Jacy chuckled. “He knows the bad guys from the good guys.”

Jenkins met my gaze, his smile gone. “Now you’re not planning a wee bit of revenge, are you? Going on a rampage to slay your future brother-in-law?”

“Is there a reason I shouldn’t?”

“Oh, yeah. The laws of this county, state, and country say you can’t.”

“He put my son in the hospital,” I growled. “He could easily have killed him.”

“But he didn’t.” Jenkins wagged his index finger in my face. “Obviously, Max tore him up, bigly. Carter may seek medical treatment, and when he does, we’ll nail his ass. Without you, either of you, landing in a jail cell. Got that? You take Declan home, clean the house, fix the door, and stay put . If I find you roaming the country with intent to kill Jacy’s brother, I’ll sling you into a cell so fast you won’t have time to blink.”

Jenkins hugged Jacy and kissed her cheek. “We’ll get him, sweetie. Stay with your boy and trust in us. Okay?”

Jacy nodded. After shaking my hand, Jenkins strode away without ever seeing the menace in Jacy’s green eyes.

Jacy

This is my fault. I knew better than to stay here, to risk Declan's life. Risk Avery's.

I gazed down at Declan as he slept, his bandaged arm resting on a pillow, his kittens kneading the blankets covering him. He slept with the aid of a children's pain killer, one that knocked him out almost immediately. Of course, the trauma of having been shot in his own home likely had an effect, too.

"Let's let him sleep," Avery whispered, tugging on my hand.

I permitted him to guide me from Declan's room, then down the stairs. Our hero dog received a steak for his role in saving us from Carter, and he currently slept as hard as Declan on the TV room carpet. I knew he had it in him to be a protector.

"You're unusually silent," Avery observed, sitting beside me.

I refused to look at him. "This is my fault."

"How so?"

"You know the answer to that."

"Actually, I don't. It's mine for not properly protecting my home."

Snorting, I stood up and paced to the hearth and the flickering fire within it. Its heat failed to warm me, yet the dancing flames almost mesmerized me. "I'm leaving."

“No, you’re not.”

“I’m going to kill Carter, then I’m gone. I can’t face Declan ever again. I should never have stayed here.”

“Then that’s my fault for persuading you to stay.”

“Blow me.”

“Come here and I will.”

“Fuck you.”

“I’m here, let’s have at it.”

I glanced at him. Avery smiled, his expression open, sincere, and – loving. I couldn’t handle that. I’m responsible for Declan’s injury, yet he still thinks he loves me. “You’ll blame me sooner or later. In time, you’ll come to despise me, hate me. So it’s best if I go while you still think I’m a good person.”

“Jacy, you are a good person,” Avery insisted, standing up. “I love you. I understand why you think you’re responsible, but you’re not. I underestimated Carter and his determination. I’m to blame.”

I shook my head. “He would never have come into your lives at all if I hadn’t stayed. Goodbye, Avery.”

“Jacy!”

I lunged for the door, knowing he’d physically try to stop me. I yanked the newly repaired door open and plunged down the steps. Outside, a winter storm had arrived,

complete with a howling gale and thick, heavy snow. Shifting, I hit the air just as Avery yelled for me to stop.

In the residential neighborhood, I ducked power lines, canted my wings to fly between them. Rising higher, I circled briefly, gazing down at Avery, backlit by the house's interior lights. I knew why he didn't shift and fly in pursuit.

This time, there was no leaving Declan alone.

"Goodbye, my love, my heart," I murmured, then banked into the storm's fury. "I love you. I always will."

I knew he'd find me.

Winging my way toward the mountains, lost amid the low-lying cloudbank, I mentally planned how I'd carry out the execution. He's injured. He hasn't had time to heal. Max broke the bones in his right arm, as a dragon, that arm will still be useless. I'm lighter, faster, and more agile.

Despite my hiding in the clouds, Carter pounced before I knew he was there.

I heard his swift intake of breath.

Dropping my right wing, I banked hard at a sharp downward angle.

Carter's burst of flame passed me by without harm.

Knowing he'd follow, I barrel rolled left, then right, while still descending faster than a falcon. I suddenly spread my wings, then ducked left. Carter blasted past me, his

wings furled, his talons out and prepared to rip me to shreds.

“Fuck,” he screamed when I vanished. “Fuck.”

I beat my way above the cloud cover, the brilliant stars glittering, while the new moon rose in the east. Higher I flew, gaining altitude, the bitterly cold air slicing into my lungs. In my swift glance back, I observed Carter struggling to follow. His wings worked hard, yet he couldn't seem to gain on me.

Why?

Wary, I circled over him, watching, studying his erratic flight. Just when I realized he faked the handicap, Carter sped up, his jaws gaping, spewing fire that licked my tail.

I folded my wings, dropping faster than a rock. As I blew past him, I slashed his eye and muzzle with my talons, shredding his face.

He screamed.

I laughed.

“Come on, brother,” I taunted as Carter swore, using his broken right arm to stem the flow of blood streaming from his face. “Shall we dance?”

Hoping I'd blinded that eye, I spread my wings once I broke through the clouds and beat my way toward the not too distant mountains. Snow and bitter wind whipped tears into my eyes as I pushed my way straight into both.

“I'll fucking kill you,” Carter roared from just behind me.

Not if I kill you first.

His flames sought my tail, forcing me to dive yet again. He followed, bellowing, making enough noise to deafen any local wildlife within hearing. I doubted many humans lived at this elevation. I rolled left, dove right, thrust my wings into flying up and over, upside down, in an effort to get behind him.

Carter hugged my rear like a curse.

“Time to kill him then.”

I flew over a tall peak, buried in snow, his flames melting a huge swath in his effort to burn my hide from my bones. His gasps for breath said he was winded, exhausted, but I refused to believe it. Soon, I’d grow tired, weak, and once that happened he’d be on me like stink on shit. I scanned the mountains, dimly seen amid the thick snow, and tried to create a plan that kept me alive.

Is that a steep cliff?

Instantly, an idea hatched within my brain.

Speeding up, gaining momentum, putting more distance between my brother and me, I dove headlong down the cliff’s rocky face.

And grabbed the cliff’s flank in my talons mere feet below the rim.

I had seconds to prepare, to launch my body and my flames the instant Carter dove in my wake.

He dove in my wake.

My long gust of flames scorched him from his throat to his balls.

Carter screamed in agony, hurtling downward, his wings useless, his hide on fire.

I let go of the rocks and dropped. Fastening my talons into his back and shoulders, I rode him in his deathly spiraling plunge to the gorge below. I bit deep into his neck, my deadly talons slicing across his throat. Carter gurgled, gasping, his throat spewing blood, my fire sinking into his hide. I scented his burned flesh, tasted his blood on my tongue.

Die, you father slaying bastard.

Carter, my brother, died the instant we both hit the rocky gorge, his neck breaking with a sharp crack.

The impact sent me hurtling into sharp rocks and broken trees.

I cried out as my left wing snapped like busted twigs, my head smacked hard against a rock. My consciousness faded.

He's dead. I'm dead –

Bitterly cold snow stung my eyes as I blinked myself awake.

Lifting my aching head, I gazed, bleary, around me, to discover I still laid on my brother's corpse. His body had grown cold enough to not melt the ice that covered it, and I nearly vomited up my disgust. His jaws were parted, his tongue had oozed from between his teeth to pool, freezing, on the rocks.

I stepped from him, dizzy, my talons sliding on ice coated boulders. I must burn him. Can't permit humans to find his body.

Gaining a bit of distance from him, my left wing dragging uselessly, I turned to gaze at my brother once more.

“This is for what you did to my father.”

A dragon’s fire has no equal. I once turned a truck to a pile of slag. Burning Carter’s body to ash took time, but in the end there was nothing left of him save blackened boulders where he’d died. The bitterly cold wind soon cooled the hot rocks, and snow once again covered where he’d once lain.

I couldn’t fly.

Staring up at the rocky walls that surrounded me, I knew I had to climb or die.

Crying out in agony, I did my best to fold my broken wing over my back. Letting it drag over the rocks would be far worse, I suspected. With it out of the way, I used my talons to grip the rocks and boulders to climb, using all four of my limbs, up the steep wall.

At the top, in a grassy meadow, I collapsed, breathing raggedly. My head spun wickedly, and my wing burned with a fire all its own. I rested for a long while, permitting the icy snow to numb some of my aches. When I felt I could, I stood, shakily, and started to walk.

Avoiding the trees that might drag at my injured wing, I headed downhill, out of the mountains and toward human habitations. What I’d do there, I’d no idea. My heart broken within me, I wept as I traveled, limping, nearly blind, my mind skittering away from thoughts of Declan.

And Avery.

The scent of smoke and ashes tickled my nostrils.

I paused, sniffing the bitter wind.

The odors of cooked food accompanied the other scents. Cold, though, the fire long dead, the ashes stagnant. Still, where food, fire, and ashes were I might find shelter along with the sources of the odors. I increased my pace, hoping the shelter didn't already have inhabitants.

A cabin swirled out of the storm.

No smoke belched from the chimney.

I sniffed but didn't catch a whiff of humans within it.

I shifted and fell to my knees at the agony in my back. The storm lashed at me, driving me to my feet. I had no coat, no boots, to protect my frail human body from the high altitude and the storm.

The cabin's door opened easily under my hand.

Empty.

A pile of dry wood welcomed me as I staggered inside, shutting the door and the storm outside. Shivering, my hands shaking badly, I piled wood in the hearth, found kindling and matches. After a few tries, I got the fire going.

In the flickering light, I explored the cabin. A wood framed bed covered by a bison hide stood against one wall. I seized the hide to wrap around me, hoping to finally get warm. The place held only one room. Shelves with books and canned goods lined the split timber walls. A wood stove for cooking sat in a corner. Nothing at all gave an

indication of whose cabin this was and when they'd be back.

I sat on the hearth, huddled under the hide, and gradually warmed up. Not hungry, I ignored the canned goods, but thought about the bed as a tempting feature. The tiny cabin heated quickly even as the storm intensified around it. The wind howled like a banshee across the mountains, forcing the flames into climbing the chimney.

Safe from its fury, warm, I quickly grew drowsy. My pain subsided a bit as my eyes closed. I drifted, my chin sinking to my chest.

Jacy, the voice whispered.

I jolted awake, panicked, pain surging within my back and my head. "What?"

The fire had burned low. I added a few chunks of wood, blew on the coals until fresh flames licked at the fresh meal.

Deciding I dreamed the voice, I rose stiffly and went to the bed to lie down. Covered neck to toe in the hide, I swiftly fell asleep.

I saw my father.

He smiled at me. You did good, Jacy. I'm proud of you.

Dad –

Jacy, be well, my daughter. Go home. They need you.

The shrill beeping of my cell brought me awake in an instant.

Gasping, still amid the throes of exhaustion and sleep, I grappled to find my phone in my pocket. I blinked twice, three times, before the name on my screen came into focus.

Avery.

Avery

“Pick up, dammit,” I grumbled, driving carefully along the unplowed mountain road.
“Pick up.”

Declan slept in the rear seat while I maneuvered the SUV, in four-wheel drive, along a road we had no business being on. Snow drifts reached the running boards, sometimes higher, as we crept up the side of the mountain. I knew Jacy had to be up there somewhere.

It’s where she’d go to find Carter.

I lost the signal.

Cursing, I clung grimly to the steering wheel, prevented a fatal slide off the edge of the road and into the canyon below. My gut twisted. I risked Declan’s safety in a reckless attempt to find Jacy in the high mountains immediately after a blizzard.

“Why didn’t I find a babysitter, then fly in search of her? Lunatic.”

Upon reaching a swath of road clear of snow, I tried Jacy’s number again. It rang in my ear. Ring after ring after –

“Avery?”

I stamped on the brake and brought the SUV to a shuddering halt. “Jacy! Where are you? Christ, I’ve been looking for you since dawn.”

“I – I don’t know.”

Her weak voice sent alarm bells ringing more loudly than her cell. “Are you all right?”

“No.” Jacy began to cry. “I’m all broke up.”

“Is Carter alive? Is he there with you now?”

I listened as she inhaled sharply. “No. I – I killed him. He’s gone.”

“Jacy, tell me exactly where you are.”

Jacy gulped back her tears. “There was a steep gully. A cliff. I climbed out, my wing broken. I found a – a cabin.”

Gully. Cliff. Cabin. I raked my hand through my hair as I fought to recall the area. I’d flown over the mountains on occasion, though quite a while back, and remembered a deep, rocky gorge.

“A gorge, Jacy?” I demanded. “Deep, very rocky?”

“Yeah.”

“I know where you are. Stay there, do you hear me? And stay on the phone.”

“Okay.”

I drove the SUV higher, following the road and the information she’d given me. An old man in town owned a hunting cabin not far from a gorge that fell more than a thousand feet to the creek below. He often bragged about climbing down into it

without killing himself to retrieve game. By his description, I knew exactly where Jacy was.

The blizzard had dropped a good foot in the clearing where the cabin stood. Blue smoke drifted upward from the brick chimney. Leaving Declan to sleep in the back seat, I surged through the deep snow toward the door.

“I’m here, Jacy,” I yelled. “I’m right outside.”

The door swung open under my boot.

Huddled under a thick hide, lying on the bed, Jacy gazed at me from a too white face. Her smile trembled as I crossed the wood floor to gather her in my arms. She cried out in pain as my arm touched her back. With a hiss, I withdrew from her.

“I can take care of your wing, baby,” I muttered thickly. “I have to get you to a safe place first.”

“Declan,” Jacy sobbed, her head bowed. “Declan.”

“He’s fine, Jacy. He’s fine, he’s in the car. Come on, don’t cry. He’s in the car. I’ll take you to him, right now. Just let me help you up.”

The only safe place to take Jacy to heal her was the basement of my office building. Large enough for a full-sized dragon, it was built with cement walls and held little except scattered and broken office furniture. Nor did office occupants venture down there.

I set Declan, still asleep, on my coat on the floor, then turned to Jacy.

I cupped her cheeks in my palms and kissed her cold lips. “You have to shift, babe,” I murmured. “I can set your bones.”

She leaned into me, her brow tucked against my collar bone. “I’m so sorry.”

“No, no, none of that shit.” I lifted her face to mine. “It’s all good, honey, all good. Once I set your wing, you can stay here, safe. No one will find you. All you have to do then is heal, rest. Okay?”

Jacy nodded, her tears turning her cheeks red. “Okay.”

I stepped back to allow her room.

Jacy shifted. Her broken wing drooped like a fallen sail as she cried out in pain. I’d never broken a wing before, but I’d been told it hurt like a son of a bitch. She towered over me, her head brushing against the cement ceiling. Folding her legs under her, lying down, Jacy made it possible for me to reach the busted bones of her left wing.

I closely examined the fragile bones within her thin hide. They were quite apparent, the fractures obvious as I gently extended Jacy’s wing. Two, no, three, broken bones. Yet, the fractures were clean, without splinters. If I jostled them into place, they’d snap shut like locks.

“This’ll hurt a bit,” I warned her, gazing into her wounded green eyes.

“Do it.” Jacy bared her teeth in a grin. “I’m tough.”

I snapped the bones closed.

Jacy cried out, then smothered the sound with her front talons. As I carefully folded her wing against her back, in a good position to heal, I said, “This won’t take long for

you to heal, baby. A day, maybe two at the most. In your dragon form, you'll heal faster than in your human shape."

Jacy lowered her muzzle to rest it on my shoulder. "I love you, Avery."

I smirked. "Why, isn't that a coincidence? Happens I love you, too."

The town dug itself out of the snow the blizzard had dropped.

I fed us on fast food, take-out Chinese, bottled water, and chocolate. Above us, office workers returned to work, Jacy and Declan both healed at a fantastic speed, and we both slept comfortably within the confines of Jacy's massive forearms.

Two mornings after our arrival, I checked her left wing. Jacy extended it without wincing, then slowly raised it to lower it. "It doesn't hurt."

"It's still weak," I warned her. "No flying for a week or more. We'd better go home before the dog eats the cats."

"Daaad!"

Max, while hungry, hadn't actually eaten Wendy and Pete in our absence. All three devoured their food with gusto upon our return home. Max wagged his tail, pushing his face under Jacy's arm as she sat at the table, grinning up into her eyes. Declan stroked the cats' backs as they chowed their breakfast, apologizing for having abandoned them, albeit briefly.

"We're free."

Jacy's smile melted my heart.

I knelt beside her chair and took her hands in mine to kiss. "We are, my lady, my love. We're free at last."

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:47 am

Jacy

Jenkins smiled gently, his fingertips tapping the table. “Honey. Where’s your brother?”

“Gone.”

He pursed his lips, yet the mild smile never vanished. “Gone? As in how? Gone home? Gone for good? There’s a country song about the word ‘gone’. Have you heard it? No?”

I smiled stiffly. “Sorry.”

Avery poured more coffee from the pot, Declan’s voice shifting between ordering Wendy and Peter to telling them stories drifting from the TV room. As was his wont, Jenkins invited himself over a week after Carter’s unlamented demise.

“He most likely gave up,” Avery added, sitting beside me.

“Is that so?”

Jenkins’s sharp gaze never left my face. Nor did I try to avoid it, despite suspecting he pulled the information I kept from him from my mind. He knows. How he knows, I can’t imagine. His cop instincts, maybe.

“Tell me what I want to hear, Jacy.”

“Is that all?” I widened my eyes, lifting my brows, in feigned innocence. “All right. Carter wanted my oath I’d never tell the cops about what he did. I gave him my word. He went away.”

“That’s not what I wanted to hear.”

“Then what?” I demanded. “A confession that I killed him?”

Jenkins’s enigmatic smile grew. “Did you?”

Shit! He can smell a lie ten miles off. “Why would you think that?”

“Ah, the old answer the question with a question.” Jenkins chuckled. “You’re dancing, honey. But I know the beat very well. Come on, tell Uncle Truman what happened to big brother.”

“You have no proof I did anything.”

Dammit! That’s the wrong thing to say. I’m sure he noticed my inner wince, for he laughed.

“I didn’t ask for proof, honey. I asked what you did.”

“You can’t accuse her of anything,” Avery protested.

“I certainly can.” Jenkins leaned forward, his gaze intent. “I accuse you both.”

“Of what?” Avery snapped.

“Of being shifters.”

I froze. I dared not look at Avery, dared not look away from Jenkins. I swallowed, hating myself for showing that much weakness.

“Shifters?” Avery asked, his tone deadly.

“Dragons.” Jenkins sat back, his fingers tapping once again. “Fess up. You both are dragons, and you killed Carter, then burned his corpse. Don’t play innocent with me, children.”

Jenkins’s shape suddenly blurred. Reptilian eyes gleamed from a dragon’s face, a muzzle filled with sharp teeth. A split second later, Jenkins, in his human form, grinned.

“How’d you know?” Avery asked, his tone awed.

“Come on,” Jenkins snapped, impatient. “You kids may be blind, but I know a fellow dragon when I see one. Let’s stop the games. Who killed Carter?”

“I did,” I replied. “It was part self-defense, part challenge. I dropped him into a canyon in the mountains, then burned his body.”

Jenkins slapped the table with his open palm. “Now that’s all I needed to know. Why’d you make it so difficult?”

“Because you’re a cop?” I answered, shrugging. “You’ll want to toss my ass in jail?”

He snorted. “What jail can hold a dragon? No, honey. Your brother was an honest to goodness bad guy, and the world is better off without him. And you got your revenge? Yes? For your old man’s death?”

“I did indeed.”

“That’s what matters.”

Avery looked long at me, then at Jenkins. “You’re not going to arrest her?”

“Do I want Jacy dropping me into a canyon and burning my body? No thanks. My report will say I’ve no idea where Carter went and demand the feds find him.” He smirked. “I’m just a small-town cop, what do I know?”

I burst into laughter as Avery grinned and shook his head. “Ignorance is bliss.”

“I’ll drink to that.” Jenkins lifted his coffee cup with a wink.

The doorbell rang. Max went off in a torrent of barking.

I looked at Avery, who glanced at Jenkins with his brows up. “Expecting someone?”

“Not me,” Jenkins replied, sipping his coffee.

“At least it isn’t Carter,” Avery said, standing.

I followed him into the TV room in time to see Declan, Max barking up a storm, beside him, charging for the door. My first instinct was to yell, don’t open it!

The new lock broke just before he reached it.

As though in slow motion, history repeated itself. A man, armed with a gun, kicked the door open and stepped inside. For a moment, I swore I saw Carter, his mocking grin in place, lift the weapon and aim it at me.

The man wasn’t Carter.

He was Ian.

Max's barking turned to snarls, perhaps recognizing the gun, the lethal threat. He lunged at Ian, fangs bared, and tore into Ian's gun hand, yanking, shaking his head, in a repeat of what he'd done to Carter.

"Fuck," Ian screamed.

He seized the gun from his right hand with his left and brought it down atop Max's head in a heavy blow.

Max fell to the ground, twitching.

"You hurt my dog!" Declan screeched.

Before anyone moved, he shifted.

A dragon the size of a pony lunged at Ian, flames licking Ian's clothes. Dancing aside, Ian avoided Declan's fire, aiming his gun at a downward angle. Declan reared up on his hind legs, his front talons raking at Ian's face. In response, Ian stepped back, turning his face to the side, but his gun was still aimed at Declan.

"No!" I screamed, running forward.

Avery, too, lunged into action, charging beside me as we both raced to save our child.

A gun barked.

Ian staggered, a small round hole appearing in the middle of his forehead. As though stupefied, he stood for several seconds, long enough for Avery and me to grab Declan and drag him away. He stared at us – then collapsed in a heap in the doorway.

Sobbing in relief, I hugged Declan around his long neck, Avery, his body shaking from reaction, seized us both in a tight embrace. Admonitions raced through my mind – what were you thinking – but I voiced none of them. Declan lived while Ian died.

Declan lived.

I lifted my head when Jenkins's movement caught my attention. His gun in his hand, he strolled casually toward Ian's corpse to gaze down. His lips pursed as though he tried to puzzle things out, he finally glanced at us. "My number one suspect."

What? The word formed in my mind but failed to reach my mouth.

"Suspect?" Avery's voice sounded hoarse.

Jenkins tucked his gun back in its holster. "Jacy's shooting. Carter didn't do that, Ian did."

Declan's shift back into his little boy form brought both Avery and me to our feet.

"What are you talking about?" Avery demanded.

"The council sent me a message," Jenkins replied. "Keep an eye on you two. They had intel that Ian planned a rampage, yet they couldn't stop him. After Jacy was shot, I did some poking around. Ian drove a dark truck. He matched the witnesses' descriptions. Like with Carter, no one knew where he was."

"Why didn't you tell us?" I yelled. "He could have killed us."

"I was keeping a watch over you." Jenkins smiled. "You didn't need the stress of two bad guys wanting your hides."

Max heaved his way to his paws. Declan ran to him, hugging him around his neck. “Good dog,” he said. “Good dog.”

Max wagged his tail in agreement.

I sagged to the couch, glowering. “You had no right to keep that from us.”

“What’s done is done.” Jenkins patted Max’s head, tousled Declan’s hair. “The council won’t have an issue with this, I’ll take his body to the mountains and burn it. He won’t be missed.”

Avery dropped to the couch beside me. “Fuck.”

“Language,” Jenkins commented. “Young boys have big ears.”

I started to laugh. Once I began, I couldn’t stop. Laughing wildly, tears rolling down my face, I laughed until my ribs hurt and I gasped for breath. A single glance into Avery’s confused expression set me to laughing all over again.

“Did I miss something?” he asked.

Jenkins sat in the armchair. “I missed it, too.”

I shook my head, unable to explain why the sheer relief, the absence of danger, the fresh freedom to start a family with Avery, to begin my life again brought me to such gales of laughter. Declan crawled under my arm, giggling along with me.

I armed my tears away, still chuckling. “I guess this is the best time to make an announcement.”

“What announcement?” Avery asked, sliding his arm around my shoulders.

I smiled at all three of them in turn. “I’m pregnant.”

“Wait. What?” Avery stared at me, his expression flickering between shock and awe, as if his emotions couldn’t catch up with his thoughts.

For a few seconds, he just pulled me into a silent hug. Then, his voice broke. “Thank you, Jacy. This is the best day of my life.”

Tears slipped down his face, and my heart ached at the sight. I knew he’d been through so much—more than anyone should. And in that moment, I wished I could go back and shield him from every ounce of pain he’d ever endured.

I closed my eyes and rested my head against his chest, letting the steady rhythm of his heartbeat sink deep into my soul. The warmth of his love wrapped around me, and for the first time, I felt completely home.

Avery

A Few Months Later...

The house was still.

Max snored at my feet, tail twitching every so often in his sleep. Inside, the soft creak of the heater was the only sign that time hadn't stopped altogether. For once, there was no threat. No shadows creeping at the edges. Just peace.

I stood on the porch, coffee in hand, watching the first light stretch across the mountains. It was the same view I'd looked at every morning for years—but now it felt different. Full. Like everything in me had finally stopped aching.

Behind me, I felt her before I saw her.

Jacy.

She padded out barefoot, wrapped in one of my old T-shirts, her hair a sleepy mess, hand resting over the gentle swell of her stomach. Our baby. Our second chance.

She smiled at me like she did every morning now, like I was someone worth waking up for. I still didn't know what I did to deserve it—but I'd fight to keep it. Every damn day.

"Did you sleep well?" she asked softly.

I nodded. “Better, knowing you’re here.”

She stepped into my arms like she belonged there—because she did.

“I love you,” she said.

“I love you too,” I held her close, breathing her in, grounding myself in the truth of this moment. She was safe. Declan was safe. We were all still standing.

And for the first time in a long time, I let myself hope.

Things would change. Babies would cry. Declan would test his fire. The council would call eventually. But right now? She was in my arms. A future was growing between us.

And I’d burn the world before I let anyone take it from me.

THE END

Beth

Beth heard a loud banging sound next to her head and she jerked awake.

“Stop hitting the damn snooze button already! Get up!”

Beth shook her head and sighed. She hit the wall hard with her hand, telling her neighbor to leave her alone. Beth had lived in the apartment building for over two months now. She’d signed a one-year lease and wished that she hadn’t. Her neighbor was a nightmare who had no problem yelling at her through the walls. She was warned her first week there by her new friend Maddie, but it wasn’t enough. She should have known about Cole Castille before she signed the lease. Beth imagined that she never would have signed it at all.

She was stuck now though and had learned to just yell back at him. Beth had started out so differently, sending a plate of cookies to her other seven neighbors in the building when she first arrived. She’d wanted to make a good impression. When she had gotten to the single man that lived next to her, the one she occasionally fantasized couldn’t speak, he had taken a bite of one at the door, told her that they sucked, put it down, and shut the door.

Beth should have known then...

Cursing underneath her breath because she was late, Beth went to her son’s room, calling to him as she tried to find her bra. It was going to be one of those days, and it was all because of the damn neighbor who couldn’t keep his nose out of her business. She had to race back into the room and turn her alarm off, which was going off again.

“Don’t you dare bang on the wall. I shut it off!”

Beth wouldn’t have imagined herself in the position she was in now, yelling through a wall at some guy she couldn’t stand. She missed her old apartment, old life, everything that was familiar. The life she was in now, didn’t even feel like her own. It felt like she was living it for someone else, and she wasn’t too happy about it.

Jesep was up and smiling when she got back into the room. She’d found her bra on the sink in the bathroom. She needed a shower, a proper twenty minutes with hair and makeup, but that wasn’t to be. Sighing and picking up Jesep for some love, she asked him how he was feeling and how he’d slept.

His answer was always good. Jesep was the easiest person alive, and Beth knew that she was lucky for it. She was barely hanging on doing it all by herself, and Jesep was the light at the end of her tunnel. His smile was enough to make it worth her while.

She fried an over-easy egg, while she made him some toast and cottage cheese. He ate it every morning with half a banana, the other half going toward her breakfast, with a cup of coffee quick brewed in her machine. While he was eating breakfast, Beth got ready for work. She was going to be late and needed to get Jesep to the daycare center.

“Mom, you have no shoes!”

Beth looked down and sighed. She checked Jesep’s feet to make sure he did and raced to get hers.

“What would I do without you?”

“Have no shoes?”

Beth agreed and then took his hand to walk him out to the car. It was already warmed up and ready to go, at least something was. She gave her neighbor's door a hard look, willing him to open it so she could give him a piece of her mind, or at least the same dirty look that the door got. He was unbelievably insufferable, and she wanted him to know it, if he didn't already. Beth figured he didn't. People like that were so unaware of themselves.

He didn't come out though and it was just as well because she was late. Her son loved his daycare, was happy to go, and told her all about the big face-painting activity that was planned for the day. A local artist was going to come in and paint their faces. He was excited, so Beth couldn't help but feel the same way. There were some bright spots in her sudden move to York Town, but she wasn't sure if it was enough. Sometimes she questioned moving there at all, leaving her life behind. Then, she remembered how 'great' it was and knew that it was not just the right decision, but the only one she had.

Beth dropped her son off at daycare, something that pulled at her heartstrings every day, because she went to a job that she could have done without. It was a decent paying job, considering the small town that York Town was, but it wasn't the sort of work that she wanted to do. Beth was a creative, but those gigs didn't pay the bills. She wanted to create works of art in many mediums, but she found herself sketching out ad campaigns for big companies instead. It was heartless work, though Beth was good at it.

Her boss was Leroy Mallard. He was tall, broad-shouldered, and way past his prime. He must have been something in his prime, those blue eyes more boyish than lecherous, because he was constantly hitting on everyone in the office, like he had a chance. Beth got creeped out by Leroy, kept her distance, and tried to make sure that she stayed away from him as much as possible. She didn't want a misunderstanding to ruin her new job. It was paramount to the new life she was building for herself.

“You’re late.”

“I know, but I have sketches for the Goodling Company that they are going to love. You can send them over, save yourself a meeting, and we all win.”

Leroy wanted to be mad at Beth, but once the sketches were in his hand and he took a look, he smiled. A rare occasion, but he agreed that it was worth the ten minutes she was tardy. Beth held her tongue to the tone and way he said it. She couldn’t yell at him like she could her neighbor. It would have been easier. Beth found her relationship with Cole was strained naturally, but at least it was honest.

Beth

“Maddie, I need to ask you a favor.”

“Does it involve some coffee from Darrisha’s?”

Beth chuckled and agreed that it did.

“Yes, I will go swing by and get him after work. What are you wasting your talent on nowadays?”

Beth sighed, looking out the window that was tiny and let in only so much light. It felt proper to how she felt about her job. It was holding her back, barely giving her any light, and Beth didn’t need the reminder that it all felt like a waste.

“I will have you know that razors are needed in society, or we would all be hairy.”

“Well, I guess you can save the world one smooth leg at a time.”

Beth scoffed. “I paint and sculpt, Maddie. I’m not a doctor. I’m not saving anyone.”

“I don’t know, Beth. Some of your paintings haunt me. I felt changed.”

Secretly, Beth was trying to move people and when she did, her whole being smiled. It was the whole point, to feel and to make others feel. Art was funny in that way, subjective and so necessary, but hardly ever valued. Beth wished it was different, but it wasn’t. She wished she didn’t have to stay later, but with a coffee, Maddie would

watch Jesepe, and she knew he was in good hands.

“Well, I owe you big time.”

“Hell, you pay better than my job, so I don’t mind. Besides, you know I fell in love with Jesepe at first sight.”

“He has that effect on people.”

“You would have that effect on people too, if you gave them a shot.”

Beth didn’t want to talk about her lack of a dating life. Maddie and many others thought that she needed to get back out there and date, but it wasn’t in the cards for Beth. She’d had enough of men.

“Yeah? I would beg to differ.”

“You’re talking about Cole I take it.”

“He’s a troll, banging on my wall this morning.”

“He’s a hot troll.”

Beth had to agree, anyone that saw him would. He had the dark and mysterious thing down pat. She liked the way he looked. Dark, smoldering eyes, strong jawline, insanely well built. The problem was that his eyes were usually looking down on her, and everything that he had said to her was basically incredibly rude. It was hard for Beth to see past those qualities to the hot guy underneath.

Maddie sighed. “I have to go. I will see you in a bit, okay?”

Beth agreed and realized that she was late for a meeting. She felt like she was running

in place and getting nowhere, certainly not getting on top of it all.

Maddie was excited for her coffee, it was just that good. Beth got one as well and brought dinner with her. Jesepe and Maddie were building a fort with blocks, and he didn't want to stop long enough to wash up for dinner. The living room was the start of a small city and it only reiterated how long Beth had been away. It was another late night, and it was almost time for her son to go to bed. She'd missed it all.

Maddie stayed well into the night, the two women switching to wine after Jesepe went to bed. Maddie was in the midst of a love crisis and Beth was happy to help. She knew that Maddie loved too hard and fast. She had done the same thing not too long ago, but Beth was learning fast. She'd learned too fast that relationships could sometimes be the worst.

"You know what I'm going to say."

"Single life rocks?"

Beth agreed and really meant it most of the time. There were long nights where sleep wouldn't come, but she would get up and paint, create something until she was tired from the work.

"Something like that."

"Do you really believe that?"

"Most of the time."

"I don't know why you haven't tried to talk to Cole in that way. He is gorgeous and how convenient, right next door."

Beth blew out a breath.

“Yeah, and he’s an asshole. Could you imagine being with someone like that? I can, and no thank you. Those broody, tortured types are good in theory, but they will wreak havoc on your life. Cole does mine and he’s just the neighbor.”

Maddie left a little after midnight. They both had to get up early, but Beth was restless. She was thinking about the past, the present, the eternal rat wheel she was on. She walked upstairs to the loft, a small room with the best window and her own little sanctuary. Jesepe was asleep downstairs, and Beth spent another hour or two, working into the night on her latest painting.

It was a painting of a man, who for the longest time, didn’t have a face. She knew who she envisioned there, knew who was to be there, but she didn’t understand why. Beth could see the finished piece in her mind, which was how she knew what to paint, but it still stumped her as to why it was Cole that she was sketching. Why was he constantly on her mind?

Beth decided that it was just proximity and his looks. He was attractive, she wouldn’t deny it, and it was clear that he had gotten into her head. She hoped that once the painting was complete, he would leave her mind, like all her other creative endeavors did. Beth would make it and then be done with it, just like she was done with the man himself.

END OF THE SAMPLE!