

Working Manuscript
The We're In This Together Project

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Chapter One
The Box

Imogen

My head came up when the Rolls made a turn and road got bumpy.

We'd been following a mountain path so long, the twists and turns, I'd been lulled. We were at least a half an hour, maybe longer, from the center of town.

Truth be told, to keep my mind from this upcoming meeting, I wished I didn't get car sick when I focused on something while riding in a vehicle. I'd have been all over marathon texting one of my kids. Getting caught up on Insta. Playing that game I downloaded which I seemed to be able to get lost in for hours.

Hell, just last week, before I found out what had happened with Corey, my phone had warned I was at 10%. I'd looked at the time and it was two in the morning. I'd started playing when it was 8:30.

But then life changed.

I got the call.

Corey had killed himself.

Then I got other calls.

From my manager.

My publicist.

I needed to make a statement.

Corey Szabo, self-made tech billionaire behind Corza computers had committed suicide.

Corey.

Corey.

And, of course, being one of his dearest long-time friends, Imogen Swan, America's sweetheart, had to have something public to say about it.

What to say about my beloved Corey?

My childhood friend.

The boy, and then man, who'd been in my life the longest.

There weren't enough words in all the languages of the world to share how shattered I was that he'd taken his own life.

I closed my eyes tight, before I opened them and stared out the window at the thick trees we were (very slowly on this gravel road) passing.

Because this would be what Corey would do.

What was happening right now.

Me, on my way to visit Bowie.

Bowie hadn't come to the funeral. I had no idea why. And I thought the worse of him for it.

Then again, it didn't take much for me to think the worst of Bowie.

In grade school, all through high school, they'd been the best of friends.

Duncan "Bowie" Holloway and Corey "The Stick" Szabo.

The jock and the nerd.

Impossible.

But there you are.

Then, when Bowie got shot of me, he got shot of Corey.

I had no idea why.

On both counts.

Though, Bowie had told me, rather explicitly, if completely, tortuously and heartbreakingly erroneously, why he was done with me.

Therefore, it was only for Corey's sake I would be in the back of that car, right now, heading to Bowie's house.

I knew he lived in Arizona, like I did.

I knew this because somehow, the fates had made him impossible to avoid.

Like Corey.

And me.

Knowing Duncan was that close, it had honest to God been the only reason why I hesitated moving from LA to Phoenix.

But he didn't live in Phoenix.

And I was done with the industry, the traffic, the mudslides and fires, and it bears repeating, the industry, but I did not want cold, snow or the possibility of days filled with fighting what humidity did to my hair.

So I moved to Phoenix.

Suddenly, the landscape opened up, and I wasn't the only one in the car that gasped. Rodney, my driver did too.

Good Lord.

Was that...?

I clenched my teeth as my heart squeezed.

This would be what Duncan would pick if he had the money.

And he had the money.

So there he was.

That lake.

God.

And that house.

Sheer sprawling, rustic, monied perfection.

Even with the lake surrounded by the trees and mountains being such a breathtaking vision, I couldn't take my eyes off the house as the Rolls rounded the graveled drive and came to a stop at the bottom of the steps that led to the carved-wood front door.

Wrap-around porch. Pine-green tin roof. Log cabin style. Multiple stone chimneys.

Outbuildings, several of them.

It was like I drove two hours out of Phoenix and found myself on the set of the Yellowstone series.

But with better scenery.

As Rodney got out, my stomach pitched, not with nerves, but with fury.

Why did Corey, as one of his last wishes, decide to put me through this?

Seriously.

I pushed open my own door and folded out, just as Rodney got to my side.

"Can you get the box, do you mind?" I asked him.

"Of course, Ms. Swan."

I nodded. Smiled.

And braced.

I looked up the steps.

As the years passed, I tried not to pay attention. He wasn't like Corey. Me. You couldn't escape Corey or me.

But he looked how he looked. And he did what he did.

Therefore, he was in the public eye and he got photographed.

And I figured he lived up here in the middle of nowhere to do what he could to avoid it.

Duncan "Bowie" William Holloway, founder and CEO River Rain Outdoor stores. Where you go for your every outdoor need.

Duncan William Holloway, ardent environmentalist, giving and raising millions to save any and every species, our wetlands, our rain forests, anything from fracking. You name it, he was on the front lines to save it.

Bowie was and always would, in some way, be the hero.

Except to me.

And there he was, standing at the top of the steps, wearing jeans. A lighter-colored denim shirt. A down vest over it.

Dark hair too long, messy.

Legs long and shoulders broad.

Features that were a jumble of perfect and imperfect, making them extraordinary.

Hawk nose.

Perfectly angled cheekbones.

Small eyes, but they were hooded.

Square jaw, almost always covered in stubble or a beard.

Like now.

A beard.

He seemed bigger than before.

Younger, he'd had the long, lithe, muscled body of a linebacker.

Now, he looked like a heavyweight boxer.

But of course.

Of course Duncan would only get better.

There was a woman beside him. Diminutive. Casual dress. Older than him.

She was practically wringing her hands as she stared down at me.

By the look of her, the age of her, she was a *Rita's Way* fan.

Maybe *All Roads Lead Here*.

But more likely a fan of Imogen Swan, the actor who played Bonnie in the insanely popular, award-winning, critically acclaimed television series *Rita's Way*.

If they didn't have the Rachel cut, back in the day, they had the Bonnie.

In that show, my love interest Devon and I were both the standouts. And fortunately, the veteran actors were cool about it.

Devon and Bonnie, finding their way through young love, committed to each other through thick and thin. The thin being Bonnie coming up pregnant, so they discussed it, at politically correct length, with a good deal of angst, and in the end, decided to keep the baby and get married. More thin when young Devon fought cancer.

Poor Bonnie and Devon didn't have a lot of thick. They lived mostly through thin.

And the American people (and eventually those around the world) rooted for them the entire way.

Nine seasons.

We should have stopped at seven.

But by the end, the residuals meant my children's children were not going to have to worry about anything monetary.

So there was that.

I looked from the woman back to Bowie.

He was staring down at me, hands on hips, face registering no emotion.

Not surprising, it had been a long time since he blew us apart.

Sadly, I could not say I felt no emotion being there, seeing his home, *him*.

Fortunately, I was an award-winning actress, so I was pretty certain I was hiding it.

Rodney returned to my side, holding the heavy box that Corey's lawyers had been instructed to give to me. It was sealed. And it was not meant to be opened unless both myself and Bowie were present.

Only Bowie and myself.

I'd had my assistant Mary make the arrangements. I had no idea if he'd balked and had to be talked around.

I just knew I was now right there.

Rodney and I walked up the steps.

“Duncan.”

“Imogen.”

Well then.

Right away, I knew.

All these years, and he could still cut me.

Even just that took a slice.

He never called me Imogen.

Gen.

Genny.

Beautiful, gorgeous, babe, baby, darlin’, sweetheart...

Love of my life.

Never Imogen.

“Before Bettina loses her mind,” he went on and shifted slightly, taking a hand from a hip to indicate the woman beside him. “This is Bettina. She takes care of the place.” Hesitation. “And she’s a big fan.”

It wasn’t snide, that last bit.

Not overtly.

It was still mocking.

It said Bettina was a big fan, but he was absolutely not.

I turned to the woman and offered my hand. “Bettina. Lovely to meet you.”

She took it, that familiar light shining in her gaze. Excitement. Open indication that in shaking the hand of a perfectly normal individual, she could not believe her luck.

“Sad circumstances,” she said, her voice trembling, probably with nerves. “But it truly is an honor to meet you.”

“That’s very sweet,” I replied.

“Let’s get this done,” Duncan grunted. “Is that it?”

I released Bettina’s hand and looked to him just in time to see him jerk his head to the box Rodney was carrying.

“Yes,” I replied.

Duncan moved to take it from him, but Rodney turned away.

“I got it,” Rodney said.

Duncan looked to me. “It’s my understanding this nonsense is supposed to be done, just you and me.”

“Rodney, you can give him the box,” I said to my driver.

“Ms. Swan,” he demurred.

Somewhat surprised, I took a second to study him.

He didn’t like Duncan.

Something about that made me ridiculously happy.

“I’m fine,” I assured.

I didn’t have a full-time driver. The days where I could go nowhere without people doing everything from fawning to accosting me were long gone. Over the past seven years I’d lived in Phoenix, I’d even done my grocery shopping repeatedly without being recognized.

It was like a liberation.

Rodney was one of two the agency sent when I ordered a driver, but he was the one I had most often.

I didn’t know if it was just because I was nice or because he admitted his mother was a big fan, and I didn’t share it with him, but I went to visit her in her nursing home, though it was clear his mother had told him I’d popped around.

Whatever it was.

He took care of me.

Right now, he was taking care of me by handing over the biggish, and definitely heavy box to Duncan, but obviously not liking it.

“We’ll do this in my office,” Duncan decreed.

The man was then on the move.

I followed him.

Duncan didn’t hesitate to share even further that he wanted this done. He did this by walking very quickly.

And I didn’t want to admit (but I did), that I found this disappointing.

Mostly because, upon entering his home, I wanted to stop and take it in.

Instead, I sensed vastness...and lots and lots of wood as I scurried on my heels behind him.

It wasn't lost on me that I could drive myself and I owned a vast array of casualwear.
So I didn't need Rodney.

And I didn't need to wear these winter-white silk gabardine slacks with the long-neck, soft-taupe, slouchy, lightweight sweater with interesting ribbing and (one of my pairs of) Prada slingbacks.

But there I was, putting on a show for Duncan Holloway.

Apparently, old habits did die hard.

He entered a room and trailed him in.

But he stopped, and holding the relatively heavy and unwieldy box one-armed, once I was fully inside, he threw the door to.

This made me uncomfortable.

There was no reason the door needed to be closed. It wasn't like Rodney followed us like a guard dog.

I was left with no opportunity to question this.

Duncan was heading to his desk.

However, this offered the opportunity to at least look around his office.

I saw instantly it was heavily decorated in the motif of "I have a penis!" with not very subtle nuances of "I could survive *Naked and Afraid* for an entire season, no sweat. And I wouldn't even need a match or a knife."

I considered the idea that perhaps I was being unkind in this assessment.

Bottom line, the office was very Bowie.

It was very much what I would have suspected from the man who grew from the boy who took Corey and me on long hikes as often as he could, no matter how much Corey complained about mosquitos biting him or his feet hurting. The boy who could name the wildflowers or sense a deer even before the deer sensed us. The boy who forewent birthday parties in a deal with his folks so they'd take him and his two besties horseback riding instead.

But the gods' honest truth was that it was also very much the office of the man who accused me of cheating on him, refused to listen to my denials, told me he had it on "good authority," even though he would not share who that authority was no matter how much I begged.

Because, "Genny, *you know.*"

I did not know.

And oh, how I'd begged to know.

Groveled.

Completely humiliated myself in an effort to get him to just *listen to me*.

However, whoever it was, Duncan trusted them more than me. Because he walked out of my apartment, and thus my life, breaking more than my heart. He broke my soul, my innocence, and my stalwart dedication to my view of the world through love-hazed, sex-hazed, *I've got this, whatever it is, whatever may come, because I've got this man* glasses.

I never saw him again.

Until now.

When he left me, he didn't just avoid me and change his number.

He moved to Utah and disappeared for a while, emerging as the CEO of an up-and-coming outdoor store where all the cool kids wanted to get their camping, climbing and kayaking gear.

It had taken me years to get over him.

Years.

It took less time to become a mega-star in Hollywood than it took to get over Bowie Holloway.

But it wasn't like I didn't have forewarning.

He'd scraped me off in high school too.

It had started his glorious senior year, when I was a sophomore, and he'd come clean after all our years of friendship that he was into me.

And then it was us.

Us. Us. *Us.*

My every thought. Both of our every moments. Even apart. It was *us*.

And that summer after he graduated, I knew he was the man I'd marry. I didn't mind one bit I found him so early. I was all the way *down* with him being my one and only until the day I died.

As such, I'd given him my virginity and he'd treated accepting it like it was the greatest gift God had ever created.

That was a memory, even with all that had come in between, that I still treasured. Every girl should have that experience. And in all that had happened between Duncan and me, there was no taking away that he'd given it to me.

Then he'd dumped me the day before school started my junior year.

He'd gone then too, but just to move to the city in order to continue his promising career of being a mover.

And right then, as I watched him commandeer a letter opener, raring to get this done, I remembered other things too.

That he wasn't as confident and cocksure as everyone thought he was. Those good looks. That body. His prowess on the gridiron. Everyone knew Bowie Holloway was *the guy*. Popular. He could get any girl he wanted (and this was true). He could best any challenge (this was not true).

They all bought into the ideal.

Except Bowie.

I remembered, too, that there was a reason he and Corey got along so well. Because under that hot guy exterior was a nature nerd, but the relationship Bowie had with his father meant he had to keep that buried way down deep.

I also remembered that the first time his father made him kill a deer, and gut it, earning the nickname "Bowie," he'd come to my house that night. He'd climbed through my window and cried in my ten-year-old arms his twelve-year-old tears, declaring he was never going to do that again, "Even if Dad hates me."

He didn't do it again.

And his father grew to hate him.

I had wondered, and as I ended up being his girl, twice, but I was his friend what seemed like forever, so I did not hesitate to ask why he'd kept the name Bowie.

"To remember...never again," was his answer.

It was implacable.

He could be an intensely stubborn kid.

And I'd lived the nightmare of him being that same kind of man.

But there was more to him that I had not allowed myself to remember, until now, as I watched him standing behind his large, handsome, masculine desk, slitting open that box that was smack in the center.

This was what sent me to stand opposite it, and say, "You look well."

His head came up. His hazel eyes locked on me.

And his mouth moved.

"Let's not."

Well then.

“Of course,” I murmured.

“I don’t know what Corey was thinking,” Duncan stated. “And as usual, I have no goddamned clue what’s goin’ on in your fuckin’ head,” he continued. “But for the kid I knew who was my brother, I’m doing this. With you.”

He would obviously not know what was going on in my head because he didn’t ask, and if I spoke anyway, he wouldn’t listen.

I did not get into that.

I was right then just as keen to get this done. See what was in that box. And get the hell out of there.

I nodded.

Duncan slit open the box.

I took a step closer to the desk.

He folded open the flaps.

I leaned, peering in.

And I did not understand what I was seeing.

It looked to be filled with reams of paper, computer printed, and there was one lone #10 envelope on top, sealed, with something handwritten on the front.

Though as my eyes processed what I was seeing, I could make out what the papers said.

And my blood ran cold.

Over and over...

And over and over...

I’m sorry.

Three tall stacks, side by side, the boxed filled, the top pages all covered in the same thing.

I’m sorry. I’m sorry.

I’m sorry. I’m sorry.

I’m sorry. I’m sorry.

I’m sorry. I’m sorry.

I’m sorry. I’m sorry.

Duncan’s large, veined hand reached in, nabbed the envelope and then shifted some papers aside, exposing the same underneath.

If it was all like that, it was thousands and thousands of *I'm sorry*.

“This says...”

My eyes darted up to Duncan, who was reading from the envelope.

His voice was quieter.

And I was very aware that I was incredibly disturbed by the literal thousands of apologies when I had no idea what Corey would need to apologize for—to Duncan *and* me—and I did not think that was a joke.

I still saw that Duncan had lost some of the color under his healthy outdoors-man tan.

“...I'm supposed to read this out loud with you here,” he carried on. He looked to me. “I'm not allowed to read it myself. He says he wants us to hear it first at the same time.”

“Duncan—” I could not hide the disquiet in my voice.

“Let me just read it, Genny,” he whispered.

There he was.

There was my Duncan.

My Bowie.

Mine.

Mineminemineminemine.

I couldn't stop my head ticking, which made his eyes narrow in concern he didn't hide, before I again nodded.

He didn't hesitate to slit the envelope open. Pull out the tri-folded letter that was on such fine-quality stock, I could see it without feeling it.

Duncan unfolded it, and through a dead man's hand, delivered a blow neither of us was prepared to absorb and neither of us would recover from.

Ever.

“Dun and Genny, I can't say it enough. I'm sorry. It was me. And it was me because I loved you, Genny. God, you never figured it out. I thought I was so obvious. But you never figured it out. And you picked him.”

“What?” I asked softly.

Duncan didn't even look at me.

“So I told him. I told you, Dun. I told you Genny and I slept together. And I told you because I knew you’d believe me. And I loved Genny so much, I was willing to sacrifice you to have her. So I lied and told you we’d had sex.”

The chill of shock slid over my skin, forcing me to take a wooden step away from the desk.

“And I was married. God, what a fuckup. I did it to myself, giving up on Genny and marrying Samantha. Of course both of you would come to my wedding. Of course both of you would remember how into each other you were. And of course you would hook up and be inseparable again. I couldn’t even get either of you on the phone because, if you weren’t working or sleeping, you were fucking. And every day it kept going on, turning to weeks, months, an entire year. It was torture. It made me crazy. I had to make it stop.”

I was trembling.

Duncan stopped reading, I knew he did when he said gently, “While I finish this, why don’t you come over here?”

I tore my eyes from the letter in his hand and looked to him.

I should have kept them on that despicable, foul, *hideous* letter.

Because Duncan looked ravaged.

Not pale.

Not stunned.

Not angry.

Destroyed.

I knew why.

His best friend had betrayed him.

And he’d done that by convincing him that the woman he’d loved had done the same.

Corey was that good authority.

I got it then. I understood.

I even understood why he didn’t tell me who told him.

He didn’t think he had to.

But he’d believed *Corey* beyond doubt.

Because there was one person on this earth at that time that Duncan would trust more than me, even if that person was betraying him at the same time, something that would never in a million years occur to him.

Corey.

“Just get it done,” I said.

“Genny—”

“Just read the damned letter, Duncan,” I snapped.

It took a moment, and I knew why.

Duncan despised his father and all he stood for.

But he could not escape his blood, and in having Burt Holloway’s blood, he did not like to be told what to do.

And he did not like it when he was denied something he wanted.

In this instance, he beat that back and returned his attention to the letter.

“I told Sam the same thing so she’d leave me, and she did. I had no idea she was pregnant.”

And that explained that.

Goddamned Corey.

At the end of them, Sam had cooled to me, significantly.

It hurt, because I had no idea why she suddenly disliked me so much, outside the fact their marriage was ending, I was Corey’s friend, her not-even-two-year-old-marriage was over, and she was carrying a baby.

We hadn’t been close, but we’d liked each other and were becoming friends.

Now I knew why.

“But that was the end. She didn’t forgive me and Dun, you didn’t forgive Genny, and I got part of my way, you two were over. But then Gen, you moved to LA, and Duncan, you went to Utah, and all I managed to do was make certain no one had what they wanted.”

He certainly did that.

“I knew, way back then, I should say something. I knew way back then, I should come clean. I should tell you, Dun. Or you, Genny. Make it right, at least between the two of you. But I didn’t have the guts. I told myself I was working up to it, but—”

“You can stop now,” I interrupted. “I don’t really care to hear Corey explain why he betrayed the both of us, and his pregnant wife, in order to have something it was not his to have.”

Duncan tossed the paper to his desk and looked across it, into my eyes.

It was very bad form, and moot at this point, not to mention childish, to tell him *I told you so*.

Therefore, I refrained.

It wouldn't matter.

He knew it. I could read it on his face. In fact, it was written on every inch of him.

But that was not my problem.

“Well, there you go,” I stated. “Corey proving indisputably that Corey was what the media alluded to repeatedly. Socially awkward. Single-minded. Driven to extremes. And willing to do absolutely anything, walk over people, tear them down, annihilate them, to get what he wanted.”

It was just, I never believed that.

That wasn't *my* Corey.

I was very wrong.

Duncan had no response.

At least not verbally.

But Duncan was not a man of limited emotion and he fought hard not to be like his father. A man who hid the fact he was the same because having emotions was not what a real man had.

And now, Duncan was processing.

He did this by reaching into the box and taking a sheaf of the papers out. He sifted through the *I'm sorrys*. Then he tossed them on the desk beyond the box.

Out came more papers, which Duncan inspected while I watched.

And again, he tossed them, most of these sliding to the floor at my feet.

There were many things I had loved about this man beyond reason.

One of them was what I was witnessing now.

It might seem weird, but I'd thought it was incredibly mature, especially back then, when we were so very young.

Because Duncan had a temper. It was explosive. He let it loose, and if you were not used to it, it would be terrifying.

But he knew enough about himself to do it. Even in his early twenties. Enough to know those feelings had to be let go and he had to control them to the point he didn't hurt anyone or himself.

But that was all the control he wielded.

Best of this, it was then done. He flamed bright and searing.

Then he flamed out.

And this was going to happen now.

“Du—” I began.

Too late.

The box was up, and with a powerful heave, it flew across the room, hitting a winged-back chair. The box tipped, the apologies flooding the seat of the chair and the floor, the box wedging itself between the arms.

I did not move through this maneuver, or after.

He then turned burning eyes to me.

“You told me,” he said softly.

“I—”

“*You fucking told me!*” he bellowed.

Yes, his temper was terrifying.

Though I knew him, even though the years had been long since I’d witnessed it, so I was not terrified.

I remained silent.

“I didn’t believe you,” he stated. “I didn’t believe you because he told me. He told me the two of you got drunk, and you fucked him. Because you weren’t sure of the future I could give you. But you were sure of him.”

Well, hell.

Apparently, Corey was socially aware enough, or humanly aware enough, to know just how to dig right into those soft, vulnerable spots.

And then shove the blade deeper.

Because even then, Duncan was a mover.

By that time, he was foreman of a crew, but he was “only” a mover.

But Corey had been hired out of college on a six-figure salary, was on a rocket trajectory, and even at the time, I thought it was strange (not to mention, it annoyed the hell out of me), not just more of Corey’s overcompensating and lack of confidence, how much he didn’t let Duncan forget it.

Though perhaps what Corey didn’t know was that Duncan already wasn’t ever going to forget it.

Or perhaps he knew that all too well.

“And you were. You were so sure of him,” Duncan continued. “So proud of him. ‘*Corey’s gonna rule the world someday, wait and see.*’”

My words of yore coming back to me in this instant made me feel nauseous.

“He was remorseful,” Duncan informed me. “He told me he’d understand if I never forgave him. It was a moment of weakness. You were beautiful and he thought the world of you and admitted he had a crush on you and the booze made him stupid. He’d take that hit, of losing me. But I had to forgive you.”

Which, of course, would lead a man to think, *Yeah, he was drunk, it’s a guy thing. I get losing control. But her? She’s a slut out for the best thing she can get.*

Not to mention the reverse psychology.

Boy, Corey had this down.

At age twenty-six.

However, this water was so far under the bridge, it had evaporated, rained down, flowed back under that bridge, and repeat.

Therefore, it was no matter.

“There’s no point going over this,” I declared. “What’s done is done. Corey’s dying gift was a one final fuck you. However, I’m taking it as finally having the understanding he was who he was and the relief that my grief at losing a lifelong friend will not last as long as I thought.”

“No point?” Duncan asked.

“Sorry?”

“No point going over this?”

“Well...no.”

“You were the love of my life.”

My stomach folded in on itself so powerfully, I thought I would vomit.

“And you were that from the minute I met you when you were eight,” he carried on. “I knew it when I threw that frog at you and you marched up to me, shoved me and said, ‘Gentlemen don’t throw frogs. You’ll hurt *the frog.*’”

God, I remembered that.

And I also remembered how disappointed I was he threw that frog, because he was so cute, but he was also clearly a jerk.

It didn’t take him long to reverse that opinion.

“It was little kid love, but it never died,” he finished.

“Yes, it did,” I pointed out.

He flinched.

My heart hurt.

Time to go.

“I’m sorry I pressed this. I should have just opened the box without subjecting you to—”

My preamble to my departure was interrupted by Duncan.

“You wouldn’t want me to know? You wouldn’t want me to know that you didn’t cheat on me with my best friend?”

“It hardly matters now. You haven’t seen Corey or me in over two decades.”

“It hardly matters?”

“Yes.”

“You ride around in that Rolls everywhere, Genny?”

Damn.

I forgot.

I knew Duncan.

And Duncan knew me.

Duncan didn’t let up.

“Hollywood’s down-to-earth female Tom Hanks throws on some heels and folds into a Rolls to take a two-hour trip up to a mountain house in the middle of nowhere?”

His tone was dripping disbelief.

“I think we’re done here. Goodbye again, Duncan.”

And with that, I turned on my Prada kitten heel (when normally, for the most part, I went barefoot, and if I *needed* to put on shoes, they were slides or T-strap flat sandals, and yes, the slides were Valentino and the T-straps were Chanel, but neither were Prada slingbacked kitten heels), and I started to the door.

I stopped when Duncan cut around me and barred it with his big body.

“We’re not done,” he declared.

“We’re very much done,” I stated.

“Genny, we need to talk this out.”

“What is there to talk out?”

His head jerked, violently, and angry lines formed between his brows.

And his answer was, “Everything.”

“Everything what, Duncan? Seriously, *what?* There is nothing to salvage from this. You’ve been out of my life more than half the time I’ve been living it. And if Corey has not just demonstrated to you that he is not worthy of your time or emotion, he has *to me.*”

“I fucked up.”

“Yes, you did, twenty-eight years ago.”

“And we need to talk that out.”

“I disagree.”

“Gen, you’re single. And I’m single.”

He had to be joking.

I felt my eyes grow wide. “Are you *mad?*”

“If you mean angry, fuck yes. Blind with it at Corey *and* me for fucking up so colossally.”

“I didn’t mean angry, I meant crazy,” I explained.

“Then I’m not that. I’m very sane and I’m very serious.” He took a step toward me. “And you know it.”

“I actually think you’re crazy,” I contradicted.

“You couldn’t get enough of me,” he declared suddenly.

It took all my talent, of which many were convinced I had a great deal, me not so much, to force nonchalance.

I waved my hand between us. “I was twenty-four years old and—”

“I’m the love of your life too,” he bit out.

“You were *then*, Duncan, but my life went on without you at your choice.”

“I had no reason not to believe him.”

Oh no.

I shook my head. “We’re not doing this.”

I tried to step around him.

He stepped in front of me.

I snapped my head back. “Let me out of this room, Duncan.”

“It destroyed me, walking away from you.”

I threw my arms wide. “And yet here you stand, healthy, living your dream.”

“Yeah, you’d know about my dream, Genny, wouldn’t you?”

Goddamn it.

But he wasn't finished.

"And here *you* stand, tricked out, showing at my cabin in a Rolls."

"This isn't a cabin, Duncan, how many square feet are in this house?"

"Six thousand."

Oh my God.

Was this the stupidest conversation in history?

"Seriously?" I asked.

"He wanted this, Genny." He jabbed a finger at the chair with the box and flood of paper on the floor. "Those apologies mean dick. That is not his final message for us. What he really wanted was you standing in a room with me, knowing what would happen if we did."

"Nothing's going to happen, Duncan."

"Nothing *never* happens between us, Genny."

This was frighteningly true.

And thus, I was at my end.

I changed tactics.

"I cannot describe how little I care that Corey maneuvered this nearly thirty years down the line," I shared. "He doesn't get to explain away tearing the man I loved from me with the proverbial thousand apologies and the lame excuse of, 'I didn't have the guts to right my wrong.' He's not fifteen anymore where we covered his awkwardness for him, and he wasn't fifteen back then when he drove us apart."

"Gen—"

"I'm not done," I clipped.

Duncan closed his mouth.

"And I'm not going to stand here and listen to you try to explain why you didn't believe me."

"It was Corey."

I touched my hand to my chest. "And *I* was *me*."

That shut his mouth.

"We can't go back and not only because I don't wish to go back, because we can't. I have a life, a career, and three children—"

"All grown and no man."

"After what you put me through, and what Tom put me through, do you think I want a man?"

There was a subtle but distinct rumble to his, “What’d that guy put you through?”

And again, there was my Bowie.

Protective, almost to a fault.

I shouldn’t have brought Tom into it.

I shook my head. “It’s none of your business.”

“Genny, for Christ’s sake—”

“It really turns on a dime like that for you?” I demanded.

“It never turned the other way,” he shot back.

Oh my God.

I felt those words through every cell in my body.

And so, I had to do it. I had to pull her up.

Bonnie.

Sweet and kind and funny.

But more importantly, strong and smart and able.

“Well, I’m very sorry, Duncan,” I said quietly. “Truly, I am. But it did for me. And there’s no turning back.”

We stood there, staring at each other.

And it was with no small measure of pain that I took him in, knowing the last time I saw him in person he was twenty-six and glorious.

And now he was fifty-four and no less glorious. Silver in his hair. Also his beard. Lines on his forehead, around his eyes. And maybe part of that heft he had was some weight in his middle, because Duncan was always active, but he loved his food.

And oh, how much I would have treasured being beside him along the way to see him become the man who stood before me.

But that was gone.

Corey took it away.

And Duncan let him.

Yes, most importantly, Duncan had let him.

And that was the Duncan I had now.

Because he was going to do it again.

He stepped out of my way.

But this time, he allowed *me* to walk out of *his* life.
And that was what I did.

Chapter Two

The Operation

Chloe

Sitting in her car, she watched her mom walk into the hotel.

And her mom could fool a lot of people.

But she couldn't fool Chloe.

Therefore, once Mom disappeared inside with Rodney, Chloe put the bright red Evoque in drive and slid out of the parking spot.

Driving while hitting the buttons on the dash, she called Mary.

"Oh God, I knew it," was Mary's greeting.

"Instigating Operation Happiness," Chloe replied.

"Your mother is going to fire me."

"She is not."

"If I interfered in *your* love life, would you continue to be my friend?"

"If you reunited me with a serious hot guy who stood for everything I stand for who I'd pined after for years, yes."

Mary didn't have an answer to that.

"There's no time to waste," Chloe told her. "And anyway, you're hardly on the front lines with all of this."

"You're always so dramatic."

"Someone in this family has to be."

"You compensating for your parents' absolute dedication to being down to earth always gets *me* into trouble."

"Now who's being dramatic?"

"I have things to do."

"Yes, you do. Byeeeeeee," Chloe signed off.

After she'd disconnected, she made her second call.

"Oh shit," her baby sister Sasha answered.

"It didn't go well."

"Poor Mom," Sasha whispered. Then, "Is Mary on it?"

"Totes."

"Mom's gonna be pissed."

"Yep. Then eventually, she'll be happy."

"You know..."

Sasha trailed off and didn't start up again.

"I don't know unless you tell me," Chloe prompted.

Sasha sounded like she was sharing a guilty secret when she said, "Uncle Corey, he always gave me a bit of the heebie-jeebies."

Sasha was not alone in that estimation.

"He was into her," Chloe stated.

"So into her."

The sisters were silent.

Sasha broke it.

"Okay, take good care of her, okay?"

"You know I will," Chloe assured.

"Should I fly home this weekend?"

"No. I got this."

"Are you going to tell Matt?"

"Absolutely not."

Their brother would ruin everything.

"Right," Sasha muttered.

"It's going to be okay, *la petite amie*."

"Yeah," Sasha said.

"Stay cool."

"Stay smart."

"*Au revoir*."

"You're such a goof. *Ciao*, sis."

Chloe disconnected that call, and then hit more buttons.

“Did you talk with her?” her dad asked in greeting.

Not exactly, she did not answer.

“Well...”

That was all she was going to give him.

For now.

“Tell me. How’d it go, kiddo?” he pressed, knowing mother and daughters had always been close, but once she and Sasha grew up, Mom shifted, and Mom-Mom became Mom-Friend.

Chloe could not say they told each other everything.

But they shared.

A lot.

And Mom had shared this, maybe because she was hurting and fragile after Uncle Corey died.

But mostly because they were tight, and honesty had always been encouraged in their family.

In fact, as far as she knew, it was only Chloe who played fast and loose with that last, occasionally roping her sister in on the act (though never her brother—solid, dependable, do-the-right-thing Matt was apparently working toward sainthood, and it was *so* annoying).

And, it couldn’t be avoided, in one terrible instance, her father had done the same.

“Not too good, Dad.”

“Hell,” he whispered.

“She went right to the hotel.”

“Hmm.”

Hmm was right.

After whatever happened, happened, Mom not asking Rodney to take her right home was telling.

At least Chloe thought so.

In fact, it was lunacy (and also telling), that before she even headed up, she had Mary make arrangements so Mom could hit that hotel, book a facial, while Mom made plans the next day with friends who lived up in Prescott, all of this after taking that box into the mountains.

If Mom was over that guy, she’d just come up and do what Uncle Corey wanted done and come back down.

And after they'd done whatever Uncle Corey wanted, if Mom was pissed and over it, Mom would cancel everything and drive right back down the mountain and be done.

But she wasn't.

She was sticking close.

In Prescott.

To him.

"You're not to get involved," her father said in Dad Voice.

Uh-oh.

"Dad—"

"Chloe, I know you. If there's no drama, you create it. And losing Corey, especially him taking his own life, now whatever happened with this, she's had enough drama for a while, don't you think?"

"There's good drama and bad drama, Dad."

"Says only you."

Chloe could debate that, but now was not the time.

"I'm driving, so maybe now isn't a good time to have an annoying conversation with my dad."

"Honey, leave it alone."

She was not going to lie outright to her father.

But she was not above a sin by omission.

Thus, she said nothing.

"Chloe, did you hear me?"

"I heard you, Dad."

"Christ, I could have skipped a generation of another one of your grandmother. It'd be cute, having a granddaughter who was a pain in her parents' ass. A daughter, not so much."

Chloe fake gasped and said, "I'm wounded, *mon père bien-aimé* calling me a pain in the ass."

"Stop speaking French at me."

"If you didn't want me to speak French, you shouldn't have sent me to France."

"We didn't think you'd stay there for three years."

“I can’t imagine why, you’d both been to France, repeatedly. And you both know me, through and through. You knew, once France met me, and I met France, if I didn’t love you so much, which necessitated me returning home occasionally, I would never leave.”

“The worst part about that is, I can’t argue it.”

Chloe grinned.

“Honey, seriously,” he said, and he did it sounding serious, “think hard about whatever it is you’re doing.”

She already had.

So she felt it wasn’t (exactly) even a fib to say, “I will, Dad. Love you.”

“Love you more.”

That was their usual sign off, so she disconnected.

She then drove the rest of the way out of town, eventually turning into a gravel drive.

She hadn’t gone this far when she’d followed Rodney up. She’d driven past, turned around, and waited for their exit.

She didn’t actually need to do this sleuthing stuff, Mary had given her his address.

But she couldn’t track her mom’s movements real-time if she didn’t.

Now, by the time she’d stopped in front of that *magnificent* house beside that *stunning* lake she oh-so-*totally* saw her mom loving, and loving to live there, and she got out of the Range Rover, he was standing at the top of the steps.

She’d Googled the hell out of him when her mom shared all that was going down, so it was not lost on Chloe that Duncan Holloway was a looker.

But even if he wasn’t her type, and he was old enough to be her dad, IRL, he was *gorgeous*.

She rounded her car and he called, “Can I help you with something?” as she headed toward the steps.

Nice voice too.

She kept going and stopped two steps down from him. “Hi, I’m Chloe Pierce.”

She sensed a pang of not-quite-recognition, maybe because she looked a lot like her mom, maybe because he knew the name Tom Pierce.

But he did not know her.

Beautiful, super-famous Imogen Swan and talented, hot stud tennis player Tom Pierce suffered the paparazzi and fans like the pros they were.

But both morphed straight to feral when it came to their children.

In other words, she, nor Sasha nor Matt, had been paraded around as accessories.

Her parents' public life was public.

Their private life, especially family, was vehemently private.

To the point the world went apeshit when they broke up, thinking that they were solid and always would be.

But after some time, they got it (or got used to it), when Mom and Dad did it in a way they actually fulfilled the usual lie of "we remain the best of friends."

They were, to this day, the best of friends.

Chloe had struggled with it at the time of the split. Her relationship with her dad took a hit.

She might be a drama queen, a personality trait she nurtured gleefully.

But she was still her mother's daughter.

And in that, the lesson of, "People do things for a myriad of reasons, darling. Just because you don't know what it is, or you do and you don't like it, doesn't mean it isn't valid. But at the end of the day, you have the power to forgive and move on. It's the most selfish thing you can do, letting go of that weight so you can move forward in life without carrying it. It just happens that it's the most compassionate thing you can do too."

Chloe had a feeling she was going to need to count on this.

"I'm Genny Swan's daughter. And we need to talk," she finished.

Instantly, he gave her precisely what she needed in order to know she was doing the right thing.

His middle swayed back like she'd delivered a gut punch.

And his handsome face went haggard.

He also did not move to hide this last.

And the kicker?

He drank in her features like he'd been a man straggling through the desert for days and she was his oasis.

And then he asked, "You drink beer?"

"I'd prefer a martini."

"I'll see what we got."

He then moved to the side in invitation.

Chloe proceeded up the steps.
And she did this fighting a smile.

Chapter Three *The Hotel*

Imogen

Shaken after the events at Duncan's home, and because of that, and the necessity to box it up, set it aside, and move forward without falling apart (until I could do that alone), I was going through the motions as I walked into the hotel.

Since Trisha and Scott (my friends who lived in the condo next to mine, but had moved up here permanently three years ago) had shared that this property had been purchased in order for an extensive renovation that would end it in being an exclusive boutique hotel, we'd wondered if the owner was a lunatic, or a visionary.

And I'd wanted to visit since it had its grand opening.

Thus, I decided to take that opportunity on this trip, as well as spend some time with Trish and Scott, not to mention Heddy.

Therefore, after I'd given Corey his final wish for me (and now, the fact I'd done it for that man infuriated me) I'd planned to stay the evening, booked a late facial in their spa, and after, intended to get room service, relax and read that night. The next day was all about Heddy, shopping, tapas at El Gato Azul for lunch, and dinner with Trisha and Scott at Farm Provisions.

In fact, I always enjoyed a visit to Prescott, even knowing Duncan lived close.

It wasn't exactly a remote, low-population town. It was relatively large in and of itself, and a favored destination for Phoenicians to go for a day, or a weekend, to avoid the heat in the summer. And others to buy properties up there, again to avoid the heat (something, once Trish and Scott moved up, I'd considered...but then...Duncan).

But it wasn't Flag. It didn't have ski slopes to attract greater masses.

It had lakes. Hiking trails. The Dells. Shopping. Whiskey Row. And for a week in the summer, Frontier Days.

Mostly, it was pretty sleepy, and partly because it was beautiful, but undoubtedly because it was laidback, slower-paced and the people less harried and more friendly than in the city, it was enticing.

I should not have been enticed.

Not this time.

I should have headed home, to the condo, holed in, made myself a pitcher of gimlets, and contemplated how I'd gone so very wrong for so very long when it came to Corey.

Instead, I took in the interior of the lobby of the hotel, which was decidedly Victorian in a rather close, heavy, dark, fabulous way, with its green-and-gold scroll wallpaper. And the tall desk behind which stood a stylish young woman wearing a slim-fitting, dark-pink dress that had an attached scarf artistically tied at the side of her neck.

I unconsciously braced as her eyes fell on me, ready by rote to handle however this proceeded.

Fortunately, as I stopped in front of her, Rodney unnecessarily at my side, rolling my Tumi that I could roll myself, but also cutting me off from view of the bar that was also on this floor, she simply smiled before she spoke.

"Ms. Swan. We're delighted you're staying with us at The Queen. And I'm happy to report, your suite is ready for you."

"Thank you," I replied.

Her eyes shifted to Rodney, and back to me, and she asked, "Would you like us to help you upstairs with your bag, or—?"

Rodney butted in. "I have it."

"Of course," she said to him. But to me, "Your PA's instructions for check-in have been understood."

Translation: I was booked under the name Virginie Forbes.

Even now, semi-retired, precautions had to be taken.

"And the manager of the spa has been alerted to your appointment," she went on. "Just so you're aware, when you arrive at our facilities, a member of staff will escort you to the locker room, and make sure it's cleared so you can change. And phones have been banned in the lounge, though we encourage that anyway. Regardless, you'll be escorted straight to your treatment room, once your valuables have been secured."

“That wasn’t necessary,” though it absolutely was, “but thank you.”

“Ms. Sinclair believes it is,” she replied, referring to the owner of the place. Having been fiddling with things at her desk, she handed me my key card. “You’re on the top floor. Room four-oh-one. With a view to the square. We have your credit card on file, so all is well. The elevator is behind me, to your right.”

“Again, thank you.”

“My pleasure, and should you need anything else, please don’t hesitate to ask any member of staff.”

I nodded.

After she gave me a thankfully non-obsequious smile to end the equally thankfully non-obsequious check-in process, she busied herself with something at her desk.

Rodney continued to shield me from the bar as we moved beyond it toward the elevators.

When we’d stopped at them, and he’d shifted in order to shield me from the lobby, I looked up to him.

“Honestly, I can take it from here.”

“I’ll see you to your room, Ms. Swan.”

I was sensing from his demeanor that he would.

I gave in. We entered the tiny elevator. And we were silent on the way up, the short walk to the door to my suite, and through it after I touched the key card to the pad.

Rodney moved directly to the sizable, antique, free-standing wardrobe as I looked around.

The room was large, as it would be, considering it was their deluxe suite, taking half the top floor and spanning the entire front of the hotel.

Six arched windows (I suspected two more in the bathroom). Black-backed wallpaper adorned with gold and blue and cream with purple-edges flowers. Camelback settee with scrolled arms covered in an ivory brocade damask. Tufted armchairs angled across from it in brown velvet. Heavily carved, oval coffee table in between that held an attractive urn stuffed full of fresh peonies, dahlias and trailing greenery that looked tipped with berries.

The king bed up against the wall to the right was high, huge, dizzyingly carved, padded and radically covered with pillows.

There was a writing desk at an angle beside one of the two fireplaces, facing the room. It had delicately swooping legs and was accompanied by a Belvedere oval-backed chair.

There was also a small bistro table with two chairs in front of one of the windows, the better to enjoy morning coffee and a croissant with a view to the bustle of the square.

And oddly, since it was situated all the way across from the bed, double doors opened to an extravagant Victorian bathroom with gold wallpaper, marble-edged copper basins, a sunken tub, intricately carved wainscoting painted coin-gray, all of this topped with an opulent chandelier.

Last, there was a silver bucket containing a bottle of champagne, a napkin precisely folded and draped over it. And beside the floral arrangement was a plate of what looked like homemade chocolate chip cookies under a glass dome.

It was extraordinary.

I loved every inch.

So much, I could stay in that space for weeks.

But honestly, they had me with the cookies.

My son called me the Cookie Monster.

And there was reason.

Rodney's voice took me out of my admiration of the room and thoughts of my second born.

"Are you sure you don't want me to take you home?"

I turned to him to see him at the door, but on my way, I noted he'd erected the luggage stand, and laid my suitcase on it. "I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

I licked my lips and felt my face soften.

Even the best of actresses could not pull one over on the kindest of souls.

He knew nothing, and yet, having sat often behind the wheel with me in the back, or me in the back with one or both of my daughters and/or my son, he sensed everything.

"Truly, I'll be all right," I lied.

He knew I was lying and did not hide that fact.

Even so, he said, "I'll be back tomorrow at eight to take you home."

I nodded.

He moved to the door.

He then gave me a long last look, dipped up his chin, and left the room.

I stared at the closed door and my eyes started stinging.

"No, no, no, after the facial," I said to myself, and then got busy.

Unpack first, since I hated living out of suitcases, even only for a day, and hated more not having my toiletries and toothbrush at hand when I needed them.

Check.

Go to the floral arrangement and read the note sticking out. Heavy stock. Folded once. And at the front, an embossed SIENNA SINCLAIR.

Handwritten inside,

Ms. Swan,

*We're honored you selected *The Queen*.*

If there's anything my staff or I can do to make your visit more enjoyable, please do not hesitate to ask.

Yours,

Sienna

Nice.

Classy.

Read.

Check.

Peruse room service menu and call down to order, giving them a time to deliver, so it'd be ready when I was. Then ask them to refresh the ice in my champagne bucket so I could enjoy it with dinner.

Check.

Change from fancy outfit I never should have worn when confronting Duncan into dove-gray pleated joggers and slightly see-through, v-necked, long-sleeve tee and pull out gray Valentino slides to wear down to the spa.

Check.

Text Chloe and share I was good, and I'd call her later.

Check.

Text Mary and share that I'd arrived, the hotel was fabulous, and I was going dark for a bit so I could enjoy my facial and some downtime.

Check.

Turn off phone.

Check.

Slip on the slides, grab keycard, lock my purse and valuables in the in-room safe, and head to the spa.

Check.

“Hey, Mom.”

Hearing Chloe’s voice, all was well in the world.

At least for now.

“Hey, honey,” I replied, stretching out my legs and leaning back in bed with my champagne.

The room service tray was in the hall.

The cookies were up next after I talked with my girl.

And now, I’d just turned on my phone and called my Chloe.

Unsurprisingly, it had immediately binged with a text from Mary.

I ignored that to focus on my daughter, who I knew would be worried about me.

“How’d it go?” she asked.

“It went,” I answered, just as my phone binged with text two, also from Mary, and it started with nothing but !!!!!.

My brows inched together as I took a sip of champagne in preparation to set it aside and swipe.

“That’s it, it went?” Chloe pressed.

I paused before swiping.

Because this was a situation that Tom and I had created.

That being drilling into our children’s heads the concept that honesty and transparency was the most important thing in any relationship.

And when they were little, if they came to us with an issue, or if they’d done something wrong or bad, and confessed it, we were very careful to temper our reactions, and if there was any punishment, to allow for their honesty.

We’d done it with the goal that they would feel open when the issues became serious, like sex, contraception, possible bullying, plans they wanted to make for their futures. And then we could tackle them before we had such things as unplanned pregnancies or cutting.

However, to teach, we also had to demonstrate.

This was something I began doing with much more openness when they got older, to the point that, since Chloe was living in Phoenix now, meant I'd shared with her about the box...

And Duncan.

Not in detail.

But I felt it safe to explain he was my first love, and how it had ended, and where (I thought at the time) Corey fit in all that.

Now, this life lesson didn't seem so good and not because I didn't want to talk about it due to the fact that, when I did, there was a very real possibility I would break down.

It was because she had a relationship with Corey.

To the kids, he was Uncle Corey. He'd been in their lives since they could remember. He'd loved them, and they'd loved him.

But to have kids who did, indeed, approach when kid-stuff got serious, this kind of situation occurred.

And at least what I had on my hands now was far better than what Tom dealt with when we'd decided to divorce, and why, and then we'd had to tell the children.

Tom didn't lose his girls. They were daddy's girls, for one, and although they were disappointed and things were tense and upsetting for a good while, they were also momma's girls.

They came around.

Matt's relationship with his father, however, still needed a good deal of healing.

"Mom."

Chloe was getting impatient.

I sighed.

And I made the only decision I could, considering.

Then I asked, "You know how I told you that Duncan broke things off with me because he thought I'd cheated on him?"

"Yeah."

Now she sounded hesitant.

I thought I knew the cause, considering what her father had done.

“I didn’t, honey,” I assured. “But what was in that box was a letter explaining that Corey told him I did.” God, could I say it? I guessed I could. “With him.”

I fancied I heard a wooshing in my ear, considering all the sound left the world in that instant of her silence.

Then, my oh-so-beautiful diva Chloe shrieked, “*What?*” But before I could say anything, she asked wrathfully, “*With him?* Like, *with* Uncle Corey?”

“Yes.”

“*You* and dweeby, gawky, skinny Uncle Corey?”

“Yes, Chloe, and a person is not just what they loo—”

“This guy’s best friend?”

“Yes.”

“*Your* best friend?”

It was harder to repeat it on that.

But I did.

“Yes.”

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

“A lady doesn’t—”

“Mom, this is a fuck moment for certain.”

I didn’t argue and not only because I didn’t have the chance.

“What now?” she demanded.

“Sorry?”

“What now? With you and this Duncan guy?”

Another text came through from Mary, but I sat motionless on the bed, staring at the phone lying on my thigh, speechless at her question.

Because there was no “now” with this Duncan guy.

But damn, how my heart had skipped a beat when she’d said that.

“*Mother,*” she hissed.

“Nothing now, honey. It ended years ago,” I forced out.

“Okay, so, you guys were like, in love. Like, the way you described it, *really* in love. And you can’t think you told me about him, and I didn’t Google the shit out of his ass. He’s *way* hot, for a

dude that could be my dad. He's rich, maybe not as loaded as you, but with all those stores, he can't be hurting. He's also divorced. And so are you. So what now?"

"Chlo—"

She didn't even let me finish her name. "What did he say about all this?"

"Well, I mean, it's not like he's unaware that there's a great deal of water under the bridge," I hedged.

"That isn't an answer to my question. What did he say when he found out Uncle Corey did something that whacked?"

"He was understandably upset."

"And?"

"And...we both were. Upset that is. We shared some words. But there's nothing we can do about it now."

"Why did Uncle Corey do that?"

"He, well, he had a crush on me."

"Yeah. *Duh*. He was totally in love with you."

This stunned me.

Was I the only one who didn't see?

"But I'm in love with Ryan Reynolds," she ranted on. "And I'm not going to do something psycho to break him up with Blake."

"You don't know Ryan Reynolds, darling."

"The point stands, *Mom*."

It did.

"Okay, honey, the truth is, I'm having a real tough time wrapping my head around why Uncle Corey would do this to me. To me and to Duncan, but real honesty, especially to me. He was like a brother to me. He knew how I felt about Duncan. And he knew I did not feel that for him. So I have a bottle of champagne, courtesy of the owner of this lovely hotel, and a plate of chocolate chip cookies that look divine. Not to mention, Mary is texting with a goodly number of exclamation points, so I need to find out what's happening with her. To end, I can understand you're upset, because he was like an uncle to you. But I really cannot process this with you now."

Her tone was much calmer, and definitely tender, when she said, “Right, Mom. I was just freaked.”

“I understand that feeling.”

“Yeah, I bet you do. I’m so sorry, Momma.”

I was too.

It was like he’d died all over again.

But worse, because I didn’t even have the memory of him to sustain me anymore.

“Me too, darling. Now, you’ll come over for dinner when I get back. I’ll make something you love.”

“No way. Beckett’s Table. My treat. I’m jonesing for their short ribs.”

My girl, dramatic.

And driven.

She’d come back from France, took her trust fund, and to her father’s despair, and my concern, opened a boutique in the Melrose district.

But she had style. She had flair. And she was, as her brother described her, *baller*.

That boutique was a year old, it was turning a tidy profit, and she’d already made the cover of *Phoenix* magazine, their cover model for an article on up-and-coming female entrepreneurs.

And during their interview, they’d only asked her one question about her father and me.

In other words, she could buy me dinner.

Though, that was not happening.

“It’s a date,” I agreed.

“Great,” she replied. “Now, are you going to be okay? Do you want some company?”

“I’m two hours away, it’s getting late, and I’m fine. I mean, not *fine*-fine. But I’ll be okay. I have a great day planned tomorrow. And then I’ll be home.”

“I’ll come over tomorrow night.”

“I won’t be home until the earliest ten.”

“So? I’ll mix up some gimlets and we’ll binge *Glow* or something.”

“We’ve already binged *Glow*.”

“Yeah, that’s why I added *or something*.”

“Smart aleck,” I teased mock-severely.

“Momma, you love me just as I am, so don’t even try to pretend you don’t.”

And again, I felt better.

My daughter knowing that with that kind of certainty?

Yes, all was well in the world.

“Love you, darling.”

“Love you more, Mom.”

“Thanks for chatting.”

“Anytime, and Mom?”

“Right here.”

“Don’t think you got around the talk about this Duncan hottie.”

I said nothing, because she disconnected.

I took a fortifying sip of champagne to get me past her parting comment, and another one before I opened my texts.

I didn’t get to read them.

The screen came up with Tom’s picture telling me he was calling.

Damn.

I answered because I knew he’d be worried too.

“Hey there.”

“Hey, Genny, honey, you okay?”

“I’ve been better, but I’ll survive.”

A moment of silence, and then, “Gen.”

On his knowingly saying my name, I had the rare thought that perhaps our decision to be adult and get beyond his betrayal and my inattention to salvage the friendship part of our relationship in order to keep our family strong was the wrong one.

And then I said, “It was Corey. The box had a letter sharing that Corey told Duncan that I’d slept with him. Corey, that is. He told Duncan that I’d slept with his best friend. And he also shared he’d been lying in order to break us up, because he was in love with me.”

Another moment of silence, and then, with what after years I knew instantly was barely controlled rage, “Why would he do such a thing?”

“He was in love with me.”

“And I’ll repeat, why would he do such a goddamned, motherfucking, obnoxiously selfish, insanely damaging *thing*?”

“Tom, calm down.”

“Calm down? Seriously? How can *you* be calm about this?” he asked in disbelief.

“I’m not. Though it’s not brand-new news to me.”

“Jesus Christ,” he bit out.

“I’m processing now with champagne and chocolate chip cookies, homemade. And tomorrow I’ll process with Heddy. Then Trish and Scott. And Chloe is coming over for gimlets when I get home tomorrow night.”

“Thank God you have the cookies.”

I nearly laughed.

Because he was serious.

“Tom, I’ll be okay,” I told him.

“It’s good that asshole is dead, because if that geek punk was alive, I’d kill him.”

“Tom,” I whispered.

“You know, you had history with him, so I had to assume you knew something I didn’t. But I cannot tell you how relieved I was when my thirteen-year-old son came to me, obviously uncomfortable, and shared he didn’t like his mom being around his Uncle Corey, because he thought his Uncle Corey was a creeper. Until then, I thought it was only me.”

I was stunned.

“That happened with Matt? And you felt that way too?”

“Absolutely.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Because you adored the guy. And then he’d do shit, for you, the kids, that made me, and since Matt and I eventually started talking about it, also Matt, feel like assholes for thinking the way we thought. But I should have listened to my gut. And my son is no fool, *his*. Last, as a father, witnessed how Corey treated his own son, and know to my bones his soul was black.”

I wasn’t there yet, to see Corey as having a black soul.

Perhaps mentally ill in some way.

But not that.

However, bringing Corey’s son Hale into the conversation, Tom had a point.

“Tom, I really can’t—”

“I know you can’t,” he said tersely, not angry at me, frustrated there was nothing he could do to help.

That was Tom, my second love, the father of my children, and that was also part of the reason we remained friends.

Because he hurt me, and he did it badly.

He was still a good man.

“But I’m here if you need me,” he finished.

Yes.

A good man.

“Thanks, honey.”

“Take some melatonin so you can sleep,” he advised.

“Right.”

“Champagne won’t do it, Genny. People think wine is a sleep aid, and it absolutely is not.”

What to do when your years as a top-ranked professional tennis player were behind you?

Well, if you have abundant personality and good looks, you get into commentating, like Tom did.

And as a side hobby, you train to become a sports medicine doctor.

Like Tom did.

Overachievers, both of us.

And we watched our children like hawks, terrified our shadows would shrivel something in them when we wanted them to plant the roots of their lives and grow strong.

So far, we hoped, so good.

“I’ll check in,” Tom said.

“I’d appreciate it,” I replied.

“Love you, Genny.”

“Same back, Tommy.”

We hung up.

I looked to the ceiling and gave that call some time.

Then I returned my attention to my texts.

At what I read, even if my glass was not even close to full, I nearly spilled what was left of it.

I then called Mary immediately.

“Finally!” she cried.

“What’s going on?” I demanded.

“First, Cookie is safe with me.”

Cookie. My cat. A rescue. Pintsize body, big ears, white with black splodges, some brown, and fur that felt better than mink.

The sweetest feline on the planet.

And the best company.

“There’s a flood in the condo?”

Even her tone said “euw” when she replied, “Sanitation.”

“Oh my God,” I breathed.

“From the top unit. They’ve been on vacation and they didn’t know things were backed up. Building management as yet doesn’t know the extent of the damage. I’ve removed your valuables. Given them access to your unit. I had a look around and I couldn’t see anything wrong in your space, I think it happened on the other end. It’s just the smell. Right now, they’re estimating it’s going to take at least a few days, probably a week, possibly even longer, to get it all cleaned up and contain the smell. So I phoned the hotel, booked you in for that week. I’ll talk to Chloe, between her and me, we’ll get your car up there so you can get around.”

I sounded strangled when I asked, “What hotel?”

“The Queen.”

“*Here?*” I squeaked.

“Yes, I spoke with them and they said I can bring Cookie.”

“Mary—”

“I’ve called around. Something must be happening in town, and not just a mass exodus from your building. There isn’t a suite available for you at the Phoenician, or the Royal Palms, or the Biltmore—”

“I can take a simple room.”

“Why, when you have a suite in a cool boutique hotel in Prescott? I mean, it’s fall, so you’re not avoiding heat, but...*Prescott. Awesome.*”

Prescott was awesome.

But I could not stay here a week, and that wasn’t about Prescott.

I opened my mouth to tell her that (or part of it), but my with-it Mary got there before me.

“I’ll pack a bag. Or two. I might have them couriered up there so you’ll have some selections, just in case it takes me a while to coordinate getting the Cayenne to you.”

“Mary, I’d rather be down in Phoenix.”

“Okay. I’ll get you a room. But I’m going to have to keep Cookie. Those hotels don’t take pets.”

I hesitated.

I wanted to believe Cookie could not do without me, but in truth, she probably could.

However, she wouldn’t like it.

She loved her mommy.

“So which one? The Phoenician? The Biltmore?” Mary prompted.

“They don’t take pets?”

“Well, not cats.”

This never failed to annoy me.

Dogs always got preferential treatment.

Not that I didn’t like dogs. I loved them.

I just didn’t like them getting preferential treatment.

“Maybe I can stay with Chloe,” I murmured.

She snorted.

Actually *snorted*.

Yes, that was not a good idea.

Chloe loved and adored Cookie like Cookie was her actual blood, except feline.

She also loved and adored me.

But she lived in a small, trendy condo in a downtown, trendy neighborhood that was covered from morning brunch, until nightclub-hopping night with hipsters.

She didn’t have an extra bedroom, for one.

And just leaving her place, I’d be covered in millennials fresh off a *Rita’s Way* Netflix binge.

It had happened.

It wasn’t pretty.

“I’ll stay here,” I allowed.

“Cool,” she said breezily.

“But please, stay on top of the situation at the condo. I’d like to be home as soon as possible.”

“Do you want Cookie going with the courier or—?”

Had she lost her mind?

“No, no strangers. But if Chloe can’t come up with you very soon with the car, I’d like you to come up with Cookie. Or we can hire the service to follow you up and you can drive my car, then they can take you back down.”

“You got it. And I’ll cancel them for tomorrow.”

“Thanks, as ever, for taking care of things.”

“That’s my job, boss. As you know.”

I rolled my eyes.

I had Mary as my snappy assistant.

I had Chloe as my dramatic daughter.

I had Matt as my in-his-father’s image (though I’d never say that right now, but it was all the *good* parts, and my boy would remember soon there were a lot of them) sweet, funny, protective son.

And I had Sasha, my beautiful boho brat, camping at Coachella and up to her knees in mud at Glastonbury.

I downed the rest of my champagne.

After that, I said goodbye to my assistant.

I then got off the bed, put my phone on to charge, filled my glass, and took the dome from the cookies so I could take the plate to the bed.

One of the many wonderful things that came from semi-retirement born of financial and career freedom, and being at an age where they didn’t care much about me, and I no longer cared about them, but having a name that gave me endless clout, was the fact that I didn’t have to starve myself to meet the ideal of every producer, director and studio head who had control over me and whether or not I would work.

This was the thought I had before I bit into the first cookie.

Sadly, the loveliness of that faded when my thoughts turned to the fact that I was, in a sense, stuck in what was now Duncan’s hometown.

He didn’t strike me as a man who lunched on tapas or browsed through art galleries and boutiques. He had a business to run, likely trails to hike, perhaps horses to ride, etc.

Therefore, it was improbable I would run into him.

And I ate my way through two cookies, attempting to convince myself that was a good thing.
But there were not enough cookies in the world to beat back the emotions when the box I'd been holding Corey's treachery in burst open.

And the pain, when it came, was acute and very, very real.

So real, I had to set my champagne aside and double over to fight it.

Twenty-eight years, we'd had dinners, lunches, even holidays together.

Twenty-eight years, he'd spent time with my husband, my children...*me*.

Twenty-eight years, he'd allowed me to show him love, friendship. He'd come to me to support him when he broke up with girlfriends, come to me to listen to him rail about his enemies, come to me when his dad died, when his protegee left and set up his own company.

Ah, the betrayal!

He'd taught that guy everything.

How could he do that?

How could he do that to poor, billionaire, perfidious Corey?

"How could you do that, Corey?" I whispered to my thighs, beginning to rock in the bed.
"How could you do that to Bowie?"

Yes, rocking, rocking deep.

"To me?"

At that, the sobs came.

And such was my heartache, much like when I lost Duncan...

No, *exactly* like when I lost Duncan, and wouldn't Corey be so proud he'd accomplished this?

The tears never consciously abated.

Because it took hours.

And I cried myself to sleep.

Chapter Four *The Breakfast*

Duncan

"Holy shit, my man."

Duncan was curled over his coffee at their table at Zeke's, his eyes aimed to the java, his hand rubbing the back of his neck.

He'd just told Harv the story.

All of it.

From meeting Corey when they were six. To throwing the frog at Genny when he was ten. To slowly falling in love with her and finally doing something about it when he was seventeen. To cutting her loose because he was such a loser when he was eighteen and hooking up again when he was twenty-four because he'd turned into an asshole.

And last, what had happened yesterday, from her showing like she'd showed, what had come of that, to her daughter's surprise visit and even bigger surprise message.

And that was Harvey's response.

Which didn't touch the half of it.

"And now the woman's daughter wants you to make a play for her mom?" Harvey continued.

Duncan dropped his hand, lifted his head, sat back in his chair and looked at his friend.

He'd met Harvey twenty years ago when Duncan had moved to Prescott. They were friends first, and Duncan recruited him later.

Now Harv was COO of River Rain.

Big guy. Burly. Lots of hair everywhere. So much it covered his arms and ran up to the base of his neck, thick and now graying.

Also a good guy. Loved his wife. Doted on his girls. Doted on Duncan's boys. And even after the divorce, which had gotten messy before he and Dora (and he was not being a dick in saying especially Dora) got their shit together, Harvey doted on Dora.

Duncan definitely got Harv and his wife Beth in the divorce.

But functions where there was necessary mingling weren't uncomfortable anymore.

And that had a lot to do with Harvey.

"She doesn't want it, man. She *ordered* me to do it."

Harvey's face contorted with trying to beat back his smile.

"I'm not sure I'm feelin' a lot of humor in this situation," Duncan pointed out.

Harvey got serious. "I can imagine, Bowie. I still can't believe Corey Szabo did that shit to you guys. I can't even believe you were that tight with Corey Szabo. I mean, you mentioned you

grew up with him and used to be friends, but Jesus. However, suffice it to say, I'm pretty stuck on the fact your ex-girlfriend is Imogen Swan. Something, I'll note, you never mentioned."

Duncan wrapped his fingers around his coffee and took a sip before saying, "It wasn't something I wanted to talk about."

"I get that. And I'd heard her and Szabo were tight since childhood, so I shoulda put it together but, Jesus again."

Mm-hmm.

Jesus.

Harvey kept talking.

"You know, I mean, Beth's list includes Antonio Banderas, Javier Bardem, Benicio Del Toro, and she's got two more I've blocked out, but I think you can get from that she's got a type, and it is not me."

Duncan couldn't stop his lips from twitching.

"But full disclosure," Harv went on, "I got a type too. My list includes Cate Blanchette, Anna Torv, Robin Wright, but I do not need to go on because I'll point out something you already know, they all look like Beth."

Duncan wasn't feeling amused anymore.

And he told his friend why.

"And Genny," he grunted.

"She's the top of my list, bud," Harvey confirmed.

His list.

Duncan knew what he was talking about.

The list of fake freebies you could fuck even if you were committed to another person.

"Christ, Harv, why would you tell me that?"

"Because you should know, straight up, since you're gonna go for it, that that's the case before Beth blabs it. Which she will. But I'm the best friend who *isn't* a horse's ass. Who'd never go there. And no offense to you and my deep abiding love for you, but my love is deeper and more abiding for my wife, so that's a non-starter."

"This isn't funny, Harvey."

Harv ignored him. "And just to say, I'm still reeling that you call Imogen Swan 'Genny.' Though, more importantly, when I meet her, if I act like a fool, just ignore me. I'll eventually get

over it. And I figure that'll happen around the time we're fully gray and our RVs are parked beside each other somewhere and Beth and *Genny* are fryin' up some tots while you and me grill the burgers."

"You're not going to meet her because I'm not going to make a play for Genny," he declared. Harvey's thick eyebrows shot up. "You're not?"

"Hell no."

"Why not?"

"Harv, I told you, she was pretty firm about not wanting to go there."

"She also showed at your house all dressed up, wearing heels. And trust me, you got two sons, but to my everlasting dismay and wonderment as to what I did that God wished to punish me so severely, I got three daughters. And I can tell you, when a girl is done with a guy, she's *done*. She doesn't care anymore. Case in point, Mandy was at Costco with me the other day, and she was what they call 'day three' in her shampoo regimen, and don't ask, they've explained it, I still don't get it. I just know it's important. No makeup. Hoodie. And Robbie strolls up to her, and two months ago, this kid had her in vapors. He talked to her and she spoke words back, but I still don't know if she knew he was there. When they were done, he looked crushed. She just turned and asked if we could get a shrimp tray."

"Genny isn't a high school girl."

"Bowie, with the dating you been doin' since you and Dora split, have you not figured out they're never *not* girls? Try buying a woman a vacuum cleaner for her birthday. That's a mature, adult, 'hey, we're doin' this, makin' a life together' gift. It's not like you're declaring she's the only one who's going to use it because she's the little woman and you got football to watch, not rugs to vacuum. But Christ, she'll act like you just called her ugly and went out and killed her dog. Buy her somethin' pink, and it doesn't matter what that something is, it could even be a pink goddamn vacuum, she'll kiss you all over and remember that shit when it's bedtime."

"Harv—"

Abruptly, Harvey leaned across the table as far as he could get, and his face had turned to granite.

"Fuck him," he whispered. "And Bowie, this is the best way to *fuck him*. And I'm not advocating this just for revenge. Lord knows, what Dora put you through, I wanna see you happy. And from what I can tell, Imogen Swan is a stand-up gal. It'd be good she's got some

happy too, and I know you'll break your back to give it to her. But take back what he took from you. I can't imagine what this feels like for you. But as your friend, it burns in my gut, way down deep, that a man you called friend did that to you. Reverse the damage, Bowie. You got a chance. Don't blow it."

Duncan could not let his friend's words get in there.

He wanted to.

But this was about Genny.

He had to look after Genny.

"You did not see her back then, Harv. You did not see her when she was begging me to listen to her. When she was swearing she'd never do that to me. When she was telling me she loved me, she'd never love a man like she loved me. I was it for her, I was her future, she'd *never* step out on me. You did not see her, buddy. She was *wrecked*. *I wrecked her* because I didn't listen to her. I listened to Corey."

Harvey leaned back a little, shook his head and replied, "Okay. I get that had to be rough, for both of you, and you're in a bad spot because you didn't listen. But honest to Christ, Bowie, this came out of the blue. Even she has to admit that if Szabo came to her and told her he knew beyond a doubt you were cheating, she'd take a minute on that."

Duncan did a slow blink.

Because he hadn't thought of that.

She would.

Genny absolutely would take a minute.

And he'd have had to talk fast, shout, beg, plead, crawl to get her to listen.

That was who Corey was to them.

The both of them.

"This guy was your guy. Both of your guy," Harv spoke Duncan's thoughts. "Neither of you could have any clue he'd purposely, with evil intent, and premeditation, inflict that kind of damage on you."

Jesus.

"Country fried scramble," the waitress stated, dumping a plate covered in food in front of Harv, who moved back from the table to receive it. "Green chile and cheese omelet." And Duncan had his food. "Be back 'round for a top up. Anything else?"

“No, Shirl,” Harvey replied.

“Thanks, honey,” Duncan said.

She winked at him, shot Harv a sassy smile and said, “Don’t mention it.”

Then she sashayed away.

Duncan went for his cutlery.

So did Harvey.

They started eating.

Harv was the one who took them back to it.

“You know, I’ve met the man, and truth is, a man like that is no man at all.”

Duncan lifted his eyes from his food to give them to his friend.

“Sorry?”

Again, it was like he didn’t talk.

“And you are not the man you were back then,” he kept at it.

Duncan had a sense he knew what this was about, and it was no longer about Corey.

“Harv—”

“Your father was a jackass, Bowie.”

Yep, that was what he’d sensed.

Harvey raised one of his big mitts and waved it before he carried on talking. “Sorry, but you know it’s true way more than me. He fucked with your head. And Szabo was a genius and proved at his end that came in a variety of ways. He fucked with it too. You’re beyond that now, and she should know the man you became, despite those two.”

“My weakness destroyed us,” Duncan pointed out.

“Brother, you were twenty-somethin’ years old. You barely knew your ass from a hole in the ground.”

“That still happened.”

“You know, I had a dad who was proud of me from the minute Ma pushed me out. And he made no bones about it. And growin’ up, that was everything to me, Bowie, everything.”

Duncan said nothing, pleased as fuck Harv had that.

And to that day, fifty-four years old, missing it like a lost limb that he did not.

Harvey kept going.

“I know moms alone can raise good sons. But there’s somethin’ about a boy and his father. When I met him, that dude, your dad, was past it, looked a million years old, and could barely get around, and he was still swinging his dick like anyone gave a shit how big it was. You are respected and successful, you know it, he knew it, and he still treated you like you were a bum. Nothin’ woulda been good enough for him, Bowie. You told me you didn’t wanna play football, but you did it anyway, because he wanted you to. You made All-State, he gave you shit because you didn’t get a full ride to his alma mater. That is not a father, man. That’s a jackal whose only sustenance to keep himself feelin’ steady is feeding on his young.”

“I got two boys, Harv, I know this.”

“Well, shouldn’t she know it too?”

Duncan ate a forkful of egg, chiles and cheese and didn’t answer.

But that also got in there.

“Now tell me if I got this wrong,” Harvey kept at him.

But Duncan had had enough.

“Listen, Harv—”

“She’s her, pretty, talented, wants to make it big in Hollywood as an actress, and you’re the man your father convinced you that you were. How relieved were you when you had a valid reason to cut her loose?”

Duncan’s throat closed.

What he was feeling inside must have showed on his face, because Harvey nodded once, decisively.

“Just what I thought,” Harvey muttered, and shoved eggs, biscuits, gravy and country fried steak in his mouth.

But Duncan was thrown.

Because this was something he’d never told anybody.

He’d barely admitted it to himself.

But as obliterated as he was, thinking Genny had done that to him, as time went on, he could not deny he’d felt relief.

Not at losing her, never that. He wasn’t even certain he’d breathed the same again after she was gone.

Until yesterday, when she stood at the foot of his steps.

But they'd been gearing up to move. Possibly to New York, but she preferred the idea of LA, because of the weather, and there were more opportunities there that interested her.

She'd been the lead in all the high school plays. The drama teacher adored her, said she had something, said she had what it was going to take, and encouraged her at every opportunity.

She'd gone to college, double majoring in drama and education, in case acting didn't work out, she could teach and have a fallback position.

But she had dreams, goals, and a plan.

And they were on the cusp of executing that plan.

But Duncan could not deny he had concerns about it.

Because he could get a job doing anything, if it was manual labor.

But she was going to be someone.

And he'd had his own plan, and at that time, it seemed a more distant dream to reach than Genny's dream of making a career of being an actor.

And that was when Corey struck.

Fucking hell, that guy had known precisely what he was doing.

Further, from that very night he slept without her for the first time in over a year, to what he had to admit was now, it had haunted him, like the ghost of a shackle cuffed to his ankle, one he had no hope of losing, that what had actually happened was what Harvey just said.

He'd jumped right on what Corey told him so he could set Genny free.

Free of the burden of him.

Free so she could be all she was supposed to be.

"Am I gettin' in there?" Harvey asked with mouth full.

"You're an asshole," Duncan replied, and shoved more food in.

"In this instance, I'll take that as a compliment."

Duncan's phone vibrated in his breast pocket.

He reached in, pulled it out and saw it was a text from Chloe.

She had his number because she'd confiscated his phone, demanded his passcode, and she was Genny's girl.

For the life of him, he could not refuse her.

He didn't and she'd texted herself from his phone

So now he was open game.

He sighed before he read the text,

Plan in place. Noon thirty, El Gato. Our partner in crime knows what to do.

“Shit,” he murmured.

“What?” Harvey asked.

“Chloe, she’s full steam ahead.”

“And?”

“She wants me at El Gato at twelve thirty.”

“I could use some beef pinchos,” Harvey declared before shoving more food in his mouth.

Duncan stared at him a beat before he stated, “If I go, you are not going with me.”

“I totally am,” Harvey declared in return.

“Bud—”

“And you’re going.”

“Har—”

Harvey put his hands, still holding fork and knife, to the table and gave Duncan his full attention.

“Jesus, Bowie, you know I’m gonna tell Beth all this shit and you know she’s all romantic and you know she loves you like a brother and you know she’s gonna lose her shit if she finds out I didn’t get your ass to El Gato at twelve thirty. And last, you know she’s gonna ride *my* ass if you balk and keep ridin’ it until I get your shit together. So throw a man a bone, please. I don’t need her nattering in my ear, and *you* don’t need Beth wading into this situation.”

One thing in all of this Duncan did know.

That was the truth.

With less bullshittery, Harv asked quietly, “Seriously, my man, what will it hurt?”

“It might hurt her,” Duncan said.

“I see this as a concern,” Harvey allowed.

“I think Corey and I have done enough, don’t you?” Duncan asked.

“Corey, yes. You...”

Harvey looked him straight in the eye.

And lowered the hammer.

“Not even close.”

Doing what he did to Genny.

Walking away from her.

Not reaching out for twenty-eight years, if only to reestablish some connection after all they'd been to each other.

What Harvey said was another thing in all of this Duncan knew.

His friend was right.

Chapter Five

The Lunch

Imogen

“Are you *high*?”

Heddy's voice was rising.

“Keep it down,” I hissed, not a fan of any scene, but definitely not one that involved me.

Already, I'd noticed one person not-quite-surreptitiously holding their phone pointed our way.

One thing in this life I knew for certain.

The advent of phones with cameras *sucked*.

“He told...the man...you loved...the man... you grew up with...as your best friend...the man...who you gave...your virginity to...the man...”

She was stuttering all William-Shatner-like, I could tell it pained her, it was paining me too, thus I had to stop her.

“Yes, that man,” I confirmed. “And yes, he told him what I told you he told him.”

And sitting on the patio of El Gato Azul, I was seeing that Corey's final fuck-you was going to have long-lasting effects.

I was also debating whether or not I'd tell Trisha and Scott that evening.

Scott would blow his stack.

Trisha would lose her mind.

They would both be hurt if I didn't share, because I knew they were already more than their usual keen for this visit, seeing as they were worried about me due to the fact Corey committed suicide.

But I was done living Corey's latest betrayal.

I'd had long enough of that, thank you very much.

Even though, until recently, I didn't know it was happening.

"And *that* man barricaded you into his office with his body saying you needed to talk things out, and you *left*?"

"Heddy, what he wanted to talk out was a long time, a career, a husband, and three kids ago," I pointed out.

"Ohmigod," she breathed. "Again, are you *high*?"

I sat back in my metal chair on the crowded patio and sighed, all while reaching to my rosé wine in order to take a fortifying sip.

"You know, I've seen him around, and I will preface this next by saying, when it happened, I had utterly no clue that he was yours, but I've seen him and I've had some very lustful thoughts," Heddy declared.

I wished this did not affect me.

But even way back when, Duncan being a fifteen on a scale of one to ten and the amount of female attention he got because of it always stuck in my craw.

And as ridiculous and nonsensical as that feeling was to have now, I was having that feeling.

I did not share this with my friend Heddy.

At least I thought I didn't.

But she hooted and then stated, "You're jealous."

"I am not jealous, and he is not mine," I retorted and finally took my sip of wine.

"Okay, I'm a tertiary character on a huge-ass television show, my character has a short, but heartbreaking story arc as the friend Bonnie makes at the hospital while Devon is fighting cancer. The friend who bites it, because...duh, she's got cancer. My career tanks because I tell *one* director to shove it because I was tired of people telling me my ass was fat, even though my ass is fat. I get the hell out of that demon industry, only to have that super-famous chick I made friends with on the set have superhuman dedication to keeping friends. Therefore, she kept me as a friend, no matter the time or distance. I then find myself fated to live in the same town her ex-boyfriend, first-love, keeper of the gift of her cherry lives. I lust after him and share that. She gives me the look of death. And he's not yours?"

Obviously, after my crying episode last night, and too much alone time over croissants and coffee at the bistro table in my suite, by the time I'd made it to the restaurant, I was ready to unload.

Something I did.

So much of it, we'd managed to order wine, but not any food.

And it was something I wished right then I did not do.

"Your ass is not fat," I snapped.

Heddy grinned largely. "Babe, this is demonstration of your superhuman dedication to keeping friends, that in all of that, not only do you pick the thing to address that would make me feel better, you do it subtly dropping the hint I should let this Duncan Holloway thing go. PS. I'm not letting this Duncan Holloway thing go."

"I don't have superhuman dedication to friendship, Heddy. My best friend in all the world accused me of cheating on him. He then disappeared from my life. After that, I became famous and learned very quickly the wealth of ways people can, will and do use you or screw you over because you're famous. So I put a fair amount of effort into keeping the good ones."

She looked remorseful, but just said, "Babe."

I picked up the menu, tipped my gaze to it and requested, "Can we just select our tapas and stop discussing this?"

When it dawned on me she didn't answer, I looked her way and saw her attention was to the doorway out to the patio.

She must have felt my gaze, because she belatedly answered, "I'm thinking yes on both, since it'd be rude to discuss someone when they're sitting right there and it's time for us all to have some lunch." She then raised her hand, waved, and called loudly, "Yoo hoo!"

My skin tightened, my eyes flew to the doorway and yes.

Snaking through the many tables was a big, handsome bear of a man.

And behind him was Duncan.

Good God.

Too late, I reached for Heddy's raised arm, but even if the damage was done, and Duncan and his friend, as well as everyone else, were looking our way, Heddy leaned so far to the side, her chair almost toppled over, and she kept calling out while waving.

“Yes. Here. We know them. And we have two extra seats! Save a table! They can sit with us!”

“I swear to God, Heddy,” I hissed under my breath.

But to no avail.

“Yo!” the big man boomed, smiling so big, *my* face hurt, and adjusting their course to head our way.

Duncan, studying me closely, followed.

Someonekillmesomeonekillmesomeonekillme.

#SecondWorstDayEver

Okay, maybe third, after Duncan dumped me, then yesterday.

What was I thinking?

Fourth.

Because the day I found out Tom was cheating on me absolutely vied for the top spot.

“Hiyeeee!” Heddy said brightly as they made the table.

“God. Jesus. Will you look at this,” the big man with Duncan said, staring down at me.

Then he moved, and with an ugly metallic scraping sound, my chair was back, and I was hauled out of it and into two arms that had closed around me in a tight hug.

What was happening?

He jostled me rather mightily before he loosened his hold enough to pull back and look down at me.

“Whaddaya know, you’re Genny, Bowie’s girl,” he decreed.

I didn’t know what to make of any of this, but the crazy thing about it was, I mostly didn’t know what to make of *that*.

I’d been Imogen Swan for so long, I forgot what it felt like to be just Genny at all.

Bowie’s girl or not.

“I—”

He let me go, but only partially. He took my hand and pumped it, vigorously.

“Harvey. Harvey Evans. Friends call me Harv. Bowie’s my boy,” he introduced himself.

“Harv, man, you think you might wanna not tear her arm off?” Duncan suggested.

He let me go. “Right. Sorry.” He turned to Heddy. “Yo. I’m Harv.”

She stuck an enthusiastic hand his way. “Heddy. Long suffering friend to this tall gorgeous drink of water.” She jerked her head my way.

“Heddy—” I tried.

“Sit down, sit, sit, sit.” Done shaking Harv’s hand, Heddy was gesturing magnanimously to the table.

Harv did not hesitate to make motions to take a chair.

Duncan did.

“Hi, you’re Duncan, right?” Heddy called. “I’m Heddy. And I’m *so* glad to meet you. Sit!”

She practically shouted the last word.

I was acutely aware all eyes were on us.

I sat and stated somewhat urgently, “Yes, please. Sit. Just sit.”

I felt Duncan’s attention as he shifted his body to do as I asked, but then I heard, “No. You. There by Gen. You by me, Harv.”

Oh God.

Since Heddy and I were sitting kitty-corner, her words meant, at the small square table it was going to be boy, boy, girl, girl, with Duncan at my side.

And his knee far too close to mine.

His explosive temper didn’t terrify me.

But *that* did.

“Is this okay, Genny?” I heard him ask softly.

I was busy rescuing my napkin that had fallen out of my lap and onto the stone floor amidst my enforced bear hug.

I smoothed it in place and muttered, “Yes, yes. Please just sit,” without looking at him.

“Sit, bud,” he ordered low to his friend.

“Right,” Harvey mumbled.

Heddy leaned deep into the table and whispered conspiratorially, “She gets attention. It’s not like she isn’t used to it, it just, you know, can be oppressive if there’s too much of it. Dig?”

I aimed my eyes at her. “I can speak for myself, Heddy.”

She leaned back and shot big eyes at me. “All right. Chill out, mama.”

Someonekillmesomeonekillmesomeonekillme.

Duncan’s knee brushed mine as he scooted in.

Frissons of electricity shot from there, up my thigh, straight between my legs.

SOMEONEKILLMESOMEONEKILLMESOMEONEKILLME.

“Right. Yeah. Cool. The ladies got their wine. Nut Brown, on tap. And while we’re perusin’ our menus, bring us some of those beef pinchos,” Harv ordered.

I looked up to see the waitress standing by our table.

“And the fig with goat cheese,” Heddy added.

“Is that good?” Harv asked her.

“Oh my *gawd*,” she said as answer.

“Should we get two ’a those?” Harv inquired. “’Cause even though Bowie’s mostly veggie, I think we should get two ’a the beef pinchos. Breakfast wore off at least an hour ago.”

Heddy was about to answer, but I was so stunned at what Harvey said, I turned my head Duncan’s way and asked, “You’re a vegetarian?”

He opened his mouth.

But Harv answered.

“Mostly. Something about methane. I can coax him into a burger every once in a while. And chicken, if he’s assured they’re free range.”

“I can speak for myself too, Harvey, and it’s not just methane,” Duncan said to Harv and turned to me. “It’s the rain forest.”

“Of course,” I murmured.

“Since we got a veggie amongst us, we’ll do the brie nachos and falafel too,” Heddy decreed, then queried of Harv. “You down with that, big man?”

“For starters,” he allowed.

“Liquid Amber,” Duncan stated his drink preference when the waitress cast her gaze his way.

“I’ll get those drinks in and your tapas out when they’re up,” she promised and took off.

Heddy instantly turned to me. “Speaking of the rain forest. Do you remember that dress you wore to that fundraiser to save it?” She didn’t let me answer. She turned her attention to the gents. “She looked *beautiful*.” She then homed in on Duncan. “And she gave, like, I don’t know...*a bazillion* dollars to that charity.”

“*Heddy*,” I hissed.

When I received her gaze, it was all innocence. “What? You did.”

I ignored her, turned to Harv and began to explore new territory in a desperate attempt to change the subject.

“So, Harv, what do you do?”

He jerked a thumb at Duncan. “Work with this guy. I’m his COO.”

“Oh,” I mumbled.

Perhaps we were in new territory.

But not the right territory.

“Best gig I ever had,” Harv stated. “We were friends, see. Been friends *years*. Back then, I managed a pro shop. Made shit...’scuse my French, money. But that shop was in the shitter, ’scuse my French again, when I started there. Bitched, damn, ’scuse my French *again*, to Bowie the whole time about the hassle it was. He gave me a couple pointers, which were helpful. The story is longer, due to the fact the employees were a pack of hyenas, but makin’ it short, after I turned it around, he poached me.” Big grin. “The owners were *ticked*. The history of that shop was not good, they were finally turning a profit, and their manager is gone. Though, big risk for Bowie, seein’ as there’s a difference between managing one little shop and overseeing the operations of fifteen of huge ones. Though that was then. Now we got seventy-five.”

He turned to Duncan and gravely bowed his head.

And then kept talking.

“My wife thanks you, seein’ as she’s toolin’ around in a shiny new GMC and not that crappy ten-year-old minivan. And my daughters thank you, seein’ as they won’t have to sell a kidney to go to college, and they found it embarrassing, being ferried around in that crappy ten-year-old minivan.”

Duncan said nothing to Harvey.

He turned and said it to me.

“We have a River Rain here in Prescott. It’s not far, though if I take you now to get you some waders, something I think we both need considering how deep it’s getting out here, we’ll miss the goat’s cheese.”

It came out before I could stop it.

A rush of laughter.

This was something else I had not forgotten about Duncan.

How funny he could be.

And how much I'd loved I had a guy who could make me laugh.

I managed to get a handle on it as fast as I could.

But I would find it wasn't fast enough.

For when I was done, Heddy had a gleeful expression, Harv had a hopeful one...

And Duncan's eyes were soft and warm on me.

God.

"Okay, there's an elephant on the patio, and before that bastard sits on us," Harv started, attention on me, "he's my boy so I'm his boy and she's your girl so you're her girl and we all obviously know what's goin' on here so I'll just say it. Your dead friend was an asshole. He did you so dirty, it's killin' me he's dead so I can't track his ass down and choke the life outta him. But that said, I'm glad you two are gonna have the chance to talk things out."

"I, well—" I didn't quite begin.

"Me too," Heddy chimed in.

"You wanna give it a rest?" Duncan said words directed at his friend that seemed like a suggestion, but the tone in which they were spoken stated clearly they were not.

"I *am* giving it a rest," Harv replied. "Is Beth here?"

"Jesus Christ, if you call her—" Duncan clipped.

"I'm not above it," Harv stated. "The threat is real, my man. So get with the program." He lifted an exceptionally large hand and whirled it over the table. "Talk amongst yourselves. I'm sure me and Heddy got all sorts we can gab about."

He then went so far as to turn a shoulder to the table and lean toward Heddy, who did the same damned thing.

I huffed out a breath, reconsidering my dedication to remaining friends with Heddy.

Duncan turned to me.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"It's okay," I replied. Then asked, "Who's Beth?"

"Harvey's wife."

"Is she scary?"

"No. But if she wants something, she's single-minded about getting it."

"I think we've had enough of people being single-minded about things they want in regard to us, don't you agree?" I inquired.

“There’s an important difference when it comes to Beth. She’s only single-minded when she wants something for someone she cares about. And in this case, it would be me being happy.”

I had nothing to say to that.

Though I was lamenting my choice of wine and wondering where our waitress was and if it would be gauche to order an entire bottle of gin.

He shifted a little my way.

I stiffened.

He shifted no further.

But his voice lowered. “I would still like the chance to talk.”

I caught his gaze. “And I still feel there’s nothing to say.”

“In discussing this with Harvey this morning, some things I wasn’t admitting to myself came clear, and Gen, I’d like to share them with you, and I’d appreciate it if you’d listen to me.”

“I know a few things about wishing someone would listen to what you have to say.”

His lips tightened and his jaw popped under his beard.

Then his expression grew perplexed as he focused over my shoulder.

He returned that focus to me. “There’s someone taking a picture of us.”

I didn’t bother to look.

I fluttered a hand between us. “It comes with the territory.”

“Do you want that?”

“It doesn’t matter what I want.”

“And I can take from that response you don’t want that.”

“Again, it doesn’t matter.”

I barely finished the words, and he was pushing out of his seat.

We got Harv and Heddy’s attention, but I moved quickly to grab Duncan’s forearm.

“Duncan, sit down,” I ordered.

He looked down at me. “I’ll ask nice that they stop.”

“Please sit down.”

“I won’t be a dick about it.”

God, he was stubborn.

“Bowie, *please*, sit down.”

His head cocked sharply.

Then he moved to resume his seat.

I removed my hand from his arm.

He then shifted into me and didn't stop until he was right in my face.

"They're gonna post that on social media," he declared.

"Yes, they probably will."

"I know you're used to that, Genny, but—"

"Duncan, it hasn't escaped me that you are no stranger to the media feeds."

"Yes, pictures taken at events, and rallies, and press shit we do for the stores. Not at a restaurant where I took my boys and their mother to eat, repeatedly, but now I'm sitting next to a beautiful woman who is not their mother. She's a world-famous actress who they don't know their dad once loved more than his own life."

I could feel my pulse beating hard in my neck.

He continued speaking.

"So it may be no big deal to you, just another thing you put up with because that's a part of your life, but it isn't part of mine."

I'd seen him.

But I hadn't researched.

I'd wanted to.

However hard it was (and it was *hard*), I wouldn't allow myself.

Thus, now he'd mentioned it, I had to know.

"You have boys?" I asked quietly.

"Yes. Two. Sully and Gage."

I wondered if they looked like him.

"And are they not over your divorce?" I queried.

"They were so relieved we ended it, I think Gage considered writing us each a thank you card. And he's never done that in his life without his mother riding his ass to do it."

So it wasn't a happy home.

"That doesn't sound very good for you or them or her."

"It wasn't. It was unhealthy, but I put an end to it before it became destructive. But they're good kids and they care about their mother. More, we're tight and they'd be pissed, I was with a woman and they didn't know about her, at least before we were all over Instagram. And that

would be even if you weren't who you are. But it goes without saying, it'd be worse that I didn't tell them because you are who you are, and more, you are who you've always been to me."

I didn't field that last part.

I wasn't even planning on thinking about it.

"We are not out together, Duncan."

"We're sittin' side by side, Genny."

I suspected my lips thinned at that.

I unthinned them to ask, "How long were you married?"

"Sixteen years, six divorced. And yes, it took me so long to find someone partially because no one was as good as you, but also because I was tryin' to make a go of my stores, because I wasn't gonna hook up with another woman and not be able to provide for her the way I needed to do that."

This was a refrain I knew *oh so well*.

And even now, it irritated the hell out of me.

Because of the reason behind it.

"The way your father made you *think* you needed to do that," I corrected.

"The way *I* needed to do that, Genny," he retorted.

"So he *is* actually stuck in your head," I deduced.

"No, honey, you dreamed of having your own trailer and making acceptance speeches. And I dreamed of not having to worry about money, being in a position my family would not worry about it either and living in a big house surrounded by nothing but trees and maybe a lake."

He didn't need to tell me that.

I knew his dream.

"So we both got what we wanted in the end."

"Yeah, but it would have been nice to have had the shot to do it together."

"Sadly, that didn't happen."

"We finally agree on something. Though 'sadly' for me isn't a strong enough word for it."

Time to resume our earlier topic.

"And why was your marriage unhealthy, Duncan?"

"Because Dora was great. She was fun. She could cook and she loved hiking and mountain biking and she had a beautiful smile and she had drive to make something of herself. In the

beginning, and for a long time, she was light in the darkness. She also had two assholes cheat on her before she met me. I did not know this next part. She did not know it. Neither of us saw it coming. But they did a number on her. And for some reason somethin' twisted somewhere along the line and she got it in her head I was fucking everything that moved. No matter what I said, I could not convince her otherwise. No matter what I suggested to get her head straight and our marriage back on solid ground, it didn't work. It was frustrating. Then it got old. Then it got aggravating. Then it got crazy. And when that crazy was looking like it would infect our boys, I ended it."

This wasn't a fun story.

In fact, living it had to have been agony.

What it also was, however, was a perfect opening.

And in an attempt to guard my peace of mind, I strolled right through it.

"I know a little something about how you felt, Bowie," I said smoothly.

"And don't think that hasn't been the top thing on my mind since the instant I saw those 'I'm sorrys'," he returned. "That was my punishment, a thousand-fold, for what I did to you."

I felt my head twitch in surprise.

"So you knew what was coming when you saw those apologies?"

"It felt like I was on the gallows and they were putting on the noose."

"That's rather dramatic," I scoffed.

"That I knew in that moment I threw you away for nothing at the same time I personally understood your pain? That isn't dramatic?"

Understanding that pain, and only having the one incidence of it, not what sounded like a rather uncomfortable, heartrending and demoralizing amount of time in failing to protect a marriage because of it, I couldn't argue that.

Duncan didn't make me try.

He said, "Though, I didn't throw you away for nothing. I did it because I was weak, and I was an asshole because I knew after I ended us in high school that we shouldn't get back together until I had something worthwhile to give you. But I saw you and I couldn't stop myself. That was the weak part *and* the asshole part."

God!

It was like being thrown back in time.

“I already had the something worthwhile I needed, Bowie,” I told him something he knew.

“Yes, Genny, baby, and you said that a million times then and you coulda said it a million more. But honest to God, if I said I wanted no part of LA or New York, that to have me, you had to stay in Chicago, I would have taken something integral from you that you needed.”

That made me angry.

“I wasn’t holding you back, Bowie.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“It sounded like that.”

“What I meant was, we were too goddamned young to be able to handle how big what we had was. I had come nowhere near sorting out the harm my father inflicted on me. And I was all about you. Lost to you. And I was that at the same time I was not the man I needed to be for you. And I *needed* that, Genny. Whether you get it or not does not negate the fact I *needed* it.”

Since this made sense, even though I didn’t know precisely how in the context of how he’d ended us, I decided it was time to move back to an even earlier topic.

“Should we have this talk you wish to have, a talk we’re not going to have, and it got past the beginning phase, which it wouldn’t, then it would eventually get to the part where you would have to understand that people taking pictures of me, approaching me, even touching me, people I do not know, *is* a part of my life, Duncan. Everywhere I go, I do it ready to face something like that. It’s automatic. It used to disturb me, but now I’m used to it. And anyone in my life would have to be used to it too.”

His lips hitched before he said, “Not sure how you missed it, beautiful, but we just had the first, second and maybe even third parts of our talk. And just for the record, if you’re used to it and don’t care, it doesn’t bother me as long as it won’t upset my sons.”

I blinked at him.

“Food’s here, baby,” he whispered.

Stiltedly, my head turned to the table.

Tapas were all over it.

The beers had been served.

Heddy looked gleeful.

Harv looked hopeful.

But Duncan?

He reached to grab a falafel.
And he was smiling.

Chapter Six *The Afternoon*

Duncan

Considering Chloe was hanging on his porch with Bettina as he drove up to his house after lunch, Duncan didn't head around back to the garage.

He parked out front.

She was keen, worried about her mother, so he wasn't out of his Tesla SUV before Chloe was skipping down the stairs in her ridiculously high heels.

And he hadn't quite rounded his vehicle, and he definitely didn't have a chance to tell her not to skip or she'd break her neck, though she appeared to wear heels like they were a pair of Chucks, before she was calling, "Well?"

"Let's go inside, honey. We gotta talk," he replied.

Her face fell.

"It didn't go badly," he told her quickly. "And because of that, we have to talk."

A light of excitement hit her brown eyes that was so Genny, he felt it like a punch in his throat.

She then skipped back up his steps.

Duncan followed more sedately.

He sent a glance Bettina's way, and his housekeeper was practically wringing her hands with worry mingled with enthusiasm.

This meant, although Duncan did not share, Chloe did.

He sighed.

Bettina had been with them since Dora and he split. Even before he'd built this house.

She didn't live with him, but she came every day to tidy, or clean on the rotation she had in her head, do his laundry (and the boys' when they were home), stock his kitchen and sundries,

deal with any house issues that sprang up as well as normal maintenance and overseeing Bill, the man who saw to the grounds.

And she took care of the horses, chickens and garden when Duncan wasn't around to do it.

This was not a full-time job.

For her what it was, was a job she could do on her own schedule that paid well and she'd be finished by one at the latest and then could look after her grandchildren when they were done with school. Because her daughter had to work a job that didn't pay enough for childcare and she also had a baby daddy who was a fuckwit.

"It's all good, you can go get the kids from school," he told her.

"You all right?" she asked.

He was tentatively fucking great.

"I'm fine," he answered.

She gave him a long look before she nodded.

He followed Chloe into his house.

Now Chloe...

She was temporarily living there.

Her decree, not his invitation.

The woman was a steamroller.

Not like her mother at all.

But Duncan found it cute, mostly because of why she was that way.

The afternoon before, Chloe had shared with him that she intended to stay close, but could not stay in town, lest her mother see her (and she'd used the word "lest") and cotton on to what was happening.

So with him it was.

But even if she'd given him a choice (which she hadn't, but he could have pressed it, something he did not do), he wouldn't have denied her.

The opportunity to get to know Genny's daughter?

No way in hell he was going to pass that up.

So there she was and had been since yesterday, late afternoon.

She had her father's more dominant features, dark hair, dark eyes.

She had her mother's extreme femininity. Heart-shaped face. Tall, slim frame. Graceful hands. Long, elegant neck.

Mostly, though, she was her own being, and the force of her personality proved it.

Unless her father was aggressive about getting what he wanted, of course.

Duncan took over the situation when they both were inside, and he led her to his office.

This had to be more formal, because she was not going to like what he had to say, and he had to push it and not cave.

Not even a day with this young woman, and he was glad he hadn't had daughters at the same time he was feeling Harvey's pain.

In other words, he was a total pushover.

He had utterly no qualms about that.

But he could see it causing problems.

When they arrived at his office, he gestured to a chair in front of desk as he moved behind it.

"Well, doesn't this feel like I'm going to get a talking to," she remarked as she sat across from him.

Duncan had a feeling she was no stranger to "talking tos."

He sat as well, eyes on her.

The clothes she wore were Genny too.

Even back in the day, when neither of them had any money, his girl did what she could to be a fashion plate.

And there, in the mountains, when no one in Prescott dressed like Chloe, but definitely not in a home a ways out of town that was large, and luxurious, if rustic, but in the end it was just a big log cabin, she was wearing slim jeans, a fancy blouse and pumps with death-defying heels that probably cost a quarter of a semester of Gage's college.

"Right, we had lunch. My friend Harvey went with me. And your operative Heddy was on the ball. She got us to the table and your mom didn't object," he opened it.

Chloe smiled smugly.

"I told Harvey what's happening, he's on board. And between Heddy and him, Genny and I had no choice but to chat."

Her smile got even more smug to the point it was triumphant.

Christ, some man or woman out there was in for one helluva wild ride.

“And now it’s done,” he stated.

Her expression faltered. “Done?”

“I’m going to the hotel tonight and coming clean about this plan we’ve been instigating.”

Her big brown eyes grew enormous and she leaned forward, crying, “You can’t do that!”

“Honey, listen to me,” he said calmly. “I’m a veteran of two spectacularly failed relationships. So trust me on this, because I know. You do not start something, whether it’s important or not, but I think all involved know how important this is, so *especially* this, on a play. A lie. A deceit.”

“It’s not a deceit,” she declared heatedly.

“Do you deny we’re playing your mom?”

She said nothing.

Right.

He smoothed his voice even further before he shared, “I think I got in there, and if I don’t waste any time, I can get in further. But whether I do or not, that has to be her choice and she needs to be in control of the process of making it.”

“Someone has to right Uncle Corey’s wrong—”

Fuck, but if it did not borderline enrage him that this sweet, if forceful, girl called that man “Uncle Corey.”

He could not get hung up on that.

“And I’m all over attempting to do that.”

“And I want my mom to be happy.”

He felt that.

The thought he could give that to her mother, and she thought he could do that too.

He felt it warm and sharp, like a cut to lance a boil, releasing poison. It hurt, but still, the relief was sweet.

“And I’ll be all over attempting that too,” he said quietly. “If she’ll let me. But she has to make that choice, not be manipulated into it.”

She opened her mouth.

He raised his hand, palm to her.

She closed her mouth.

He dropped his hand and said, “We were both manipulated, Chloe, and I made a fatal decision during that. I understand your motives, and if I still know your mother, she will too. But we have to stop this before it gets any further. And now, you need to leave this to me.”

“So you’re going to just throw us all under the bus, and I’m not unaware, as the ringleader, the person farthest under that bus will be *me*?”

“Are you saying your mother doesn’t know you well enough to know you’d pull something like this?”

She hesitated a second before she rolled her eyes.

As he suspected.

This was not out of character.

At all.

“I’ve got this,” he assured her.

It took a second, she shifted in her seat during that, then she said, “My dad—”

“Don’t, honey,” he whispered. “You know, if this happens like we want it to, your mom has to give that to me.”

She straightened her spine. “He’s a good guy,”

That remained to be seen.

“And you have to know, they’re still the best of friends,” she continued. “They talk, like...every day.”

“Again, this is for your mother to give me if it gets to that.”

“It’s going to get to that.”

He hoped like fuck she was right.

He didn’t say that or anything.

He just nodded.

“She’s going to dinner with Trisha and Scott tonight,” she informed him.

“I know, you told me that already. I’ll head to the hotel after.”

“That means I’m making us dinner.”

“I just had more tapas than a man should ever eat.”

“Well, I’m not serving it *now*.”

He grinned at her.

Then he stated, “You don’t have to do that.”

She stood, retorting, “I totally do. I cook *French* and I *rock it*. Your taste buds will not know what hit them. But to do that, I need preparation, I need time. The French do not hurry anything.”

“Have at it then, darlin’.”

“I’ll assess your larder, but I’ll probably have to go to the grocery store.”

“You need money?”

Another eyeroll and a drawn out, “Pu-lease.”

“Right,” he muttered, trying not to laugh.

“Though, I do want to drive your Tesla.”

He could no longer hold back his laughter.

And through it, he said, “The fob is in it.”

Yup.

Total pushover.

“*Merveilleux*,” she replied before drifting an arm his way and swanning out.

He waited until she was gone to pull out his phone and engage the screen.

He’d texted both his boys before he drove home, telling them he wanted a call back as soon as they had a chance.

Sullivan was in Indiana, studying environmental engineering at Purdue.

Gage was in Tucson, studying beer pong at U of A.

He hadn’t missed a vibration.

Neither had texted him back.

Duncan turned his gaze out the window to the lake, but he didn’t see it.

He thought about lunch.

Like they were practiced tacticians who’d planned and synced their mission down to the finest detail, the moment Duncan and Genny had turned their attention to the table, Harvey and Heddy had taken over.

They commenced what was a poorly disguised “Friends of a New Couple Getting to Know You Better” session that culminated (unsurprisingly from the person she seemed to be) in Heddy demanding Harvey arrange a dinner so she could meet “my soon-to-be-new-bestest-bestie, I can feel it” Beth without delay.

In truth, this was them giving Genny and Duncan the opportunity to be in each other's company without having to deal with communicating with each other, either in meaningful, life-altering ways, or something less burdensome.

It worked.

Genny relaxed, not entirely, but enough that she joined the conversation, even if she rarely looked at Duncan when she did, or when he did the same.

However, he knew the woman who sat at his side during lunch.

And she'd been the way she'd been at that table before.

It was not distant.

It was shy.

And very aware of the man sitting next to her.

He knew this because that woman was the girl who, right along with Duncan, started to become aware that "The Three Amigos" they had always been was shifting to three friends, two of which were terminally into one another.

Well, it would seem, both of the male amigos were into her, one even more terminally, but even Duncan had been blind to that.

Then again, he'd confessed to Corey way before he'd ever said a word to Genny what his feelings were about their girl.

And Corey had—the lying, pissant, piece of scum maggot—been entirely enthusiastic.

His eyes fell to the letter that still lay on his desk that he hadn't touched since he'd dropped it, therefore he hadn't finished reading it.

He, like Genny, did not give one shit what else that asshole had to say.

But before he could nab the letter and do something like burn it in the fireplace, his phone went.

It was Gage.

He took the Facetime call.

And said not a word before Gage shouted, "Jesus Christ, Dad! You had lunch with *Imogen Swan*?"

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

"Gage—"

“My phone is blowing up. Some of my friends follow her. She’s been tagged, like, a *billion* times. And so have you.”

He really should get on social media.

He had an account, but he never looked at it. It was run by a professional social media manager that was contracted through River Rain.

Duncan did not personally engage as an attempt at self-preservation.

Sully would be smart. If he did it, he wouldn’t announce it to the world, but the kid was so hyper-responsible, he probably wouldn’t do it.

Gage, however.

If Duncan saw the shit he was certain Gage got up to, he’d consider chaining his son in the basement.

“Son—”

“Do you know her from knowin’ that guy who makes Steve Jobs look like a pussy? And not in the physical sense, because...no shade, your old friend was a runt...in the ‘I got enough money to buy an island, and that island is Australia’ sense.”

“I think we’ve had several conversations about your usage of the word ‘pussy,’” Duncan growled.

Gage shut up.

“And yes. I know her because I grew up with her.”

“What?” Gage asked. “That’s *insane*.”

His phone shook, a notification came up, and Sully wanted to Facetime.

Goddamn it.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Gage demanded.

“It’s a long story and—”

“Yeah, it looks like a long story. You’re practically kissing her.”

Goddamn it.

“Listen—”

“And she looks like she wants to swallow you whole,” Gage declared.

That had Duncan shutting up.

It also had him wanting to see this picture.

“Are you guys like...*seeing each other*?” Gage asked.

Sully had disconnected, only to try again.

“Okay, Gage, listen and don’t interrupt, are you hearing me?”

Gage nodded.

“Like I said, it’s a long story, and it’s time you heard it. I wish I could tell you face to face when our faces aren’t projected on screens, but that doesn’t seem like it can happen. And now your brother is trying to connect, and I need for both of you to know. So even if this is not how I’d like to do it, the truth of the matter is, Genny was my high school girlfriend. I broke up with her after I graduated, but we got back together again a few years later. It was intense. It was forever. And then I made that not so for a variety of reasons I may share one day, but today is not that day. We both went our separate ways, but now she’s back in my life and it remains to be seen *how* back in my life she’s going to be. What I can tell you is, I loved her very much. She was my world. It killed, letting her go. But now is now and we’ll just see.”

Gage was silent a beat before he asked incredulously, “*Genny?*”

It’d be good when all the people in his life got over this.

“She *was* my girlfriend, bud.”

“Does Mom know about this?”

He nodded. “I told her a long time ago. Though, I don’t know if she knows that Genny’s back. That said, we’ve both moved on, as you know. So I don’t see it as an issue for your mother.”

Something occurred to him, and as usual with Gage, he didn’t hesitate to share it, no matter how inappropriate it might be.

“Oh my God, you’ve had sex with Imogen Swan. My dad has had sex with *Imogen Swan.*”

Duncan closed his eyes and tipped his head back.

“I don’t know whether to think this is awesome or hurl,” Gage shared.

He looked back to his son. “How about not thinking about it at all?”

“That’s a good call,” Gage muttered, his face twisted in disgust, then something else occurred to him and he got right on letting that out. “Holy shit, if you guys become an item again, everyone is going to know my dad is doing *Imogen Swan.*”

“Gage, let’s get off this topic, yeah?”

“Totally,” Gage agreed.

“Are you okay with this?” Duncan asked, feeling his neck muscles contract as the question came out, because the answer could change everything.

But Gage just looked confused.

“Okay with what? You hooking up with a movie star?”

“Yes, and should that become more,” Duncan confirmed.

“Dad, serious.” Gage now looked serious. “I mean, do I have to count this down?”

“Considering the fact you’re my son, I love you, your thoughts and feelings matter to me, and this woman was important to me, that never really stopped being the case, even if we moved on with our lives, and I’m hoping that she’ll be big part of my life again, which means yours, yes. You have to count this down.”

“Right, but you can’t get pissed about how I do it.”

Fabulous.

“Just share, Gage,” Duncan sighed.

“One, and you can’t argue this, she’s a MILF.”

Jesus.

His son.

“I mean, seriously, she’s gorgeous. Like, Gwyneth Paltrow gorgeous. I’d totally do Gwyneth Paltrow.”

“Stop speaking,” Duncan clipped.

Gage grinned, shameless.

“Second, my dad might be hooking up with a hottie. I agree, it’s too bad we aren’t doin’ this face to face so I can’t high five you.”

Jesus.

His son.

“Third, if I’m reading this right, this might lead to Imogen Swan being my stepmom and that would totally not suck. I mean, everyone knows she’s like, the coolest chick in Hollywood.”

“She lives in Phoenix, Gage.”

“Better, she probably has an awesome pad and lives next to Larry Fitzgerald or something and we can ask him over for a pool party and he and me could be buds.”

The tension eased out of his neck as Duncan started chuckling.

It shot right back when he heard the tone of his son’s voice and saw the change come over his features when he said, “I’m not sure I want the whole story, seein’ as it obviously gutted you so much you didn’t even tell us she was a part of your life. And you’re this all over getting her back

when it had to be that guy dyin' that started this, and he offed himself, like, I don't know, maybe a week ago. So you aren't wasting time. But if she treats you right, Dad, without any crazy, I'll love her forever."

Jesus.

His son.

"Your mother isn't crazy," he said carefully.

"I know, but she was messed up for a long time, Dad, and it wasn't lost on Sully or me that you shouldered even more of it than she shoveled at you so we wouldn't feel it. I know she's got her shit together and I'm proud of her and I love her. But I love you too and it would far from suck, seein' you have it easy and good for a change."

Okay.

Maybe he hadn't shielded his sons from the damage.

"That's good to hear, bud. But not to get your hopes up, things are uncertain with Genny and me. But I'm hoping to change that, and I need you on board before I do."

"I'm on board."

"Thanks, son," he murmured.

"Dad?"

"Yup."

"Don't let the bright lights, glitz and glamor change you. I like you simple and no frills, just the way you are," he joked.

But it hid his true message.

He believed in his dad and he knew he had this.

That felt fucking great.

And Duncan hoped he was right.

"I'll try not to get a big head. Now go do something useful, like, I don't know, *study*. I need to call your brother."

"Later, Pops."

"Later, kid."

They disconnected and he went right to Sullivan.

Sully engaged immediately.

And while Duncan was in the process of saying, “Hey, son,” Sully asked, “Does Mom know?”

“You’ve seen the picture with Genny,” Duncan deduced.

“If you mean the one with Imogen Swan, yes. Does Mom know?”

“Your mother and I are past the point where we share about these kinds of things,” he said cautiously.

“Yeah, when you were dating Betsy, even if that was getting serious, though it didn’t go that way. But this is *her* and Mom knows about her.”

Duncan went very still.

Of course Dora knew about Genny. He’d told her. She was his wife. He shared everything with her. And he did that before she was his wife.

What he did not know was how his son knew that.

Before he could ask after that, Sully stated, “And this is gonna mess her right up.”

“Your mom is solid, Sul,” he assured. “She’s found a therapist she’s connected with. She understands the obsessive paths her mind can lead her on. And she now has the mental tools to avoid them, and she uses those tools.”

“It was her.”

“What?”

“It started with her.”

“What are you saying, Sullivan?”

“Imogen Swan. What kicked it all off. Ground zero. Her being yours. It’s what kicked it all off. It was her.”

Duncan’s chest started burning. “How do you know this?”

“That time you were up in Oregon. Opening the store in Bend. Do you remember that?”

Shit.

That had been a particularly bad episode with Dora.

“Yes,” he bit out.

“You asked her to come with you. You even begged her to come with you. I heard her. She said you had to go alone. It was a test.”

There had been a number of tests with Dora.

He’d always failed.

“I remember this, Sully.”

And he did.

He just hated his son had heard this and he had no idea, until then, that he had.

“Well, Gage was on that camping trip with Jack. And I was at a sleepover at Ryan’s, but Ryan got to not feeling good and his dad brought me home. And when I came in, Mom was on the phone with you. And she was losing it with you.”

Duncan said nothing.

He thought he was beyond the disappointment, and at times fury, other times frustrating impotence, and other times debilitating sadness, of what had become of his wife and their marriage.

But the fury was returning.

“I remember this clearly, Sully, and I didn’t know you didn’t have that sleepover,” Duncan stated.

“Yeah, because she made me promise not to tell you because of what happened after she hung up on you.”

Yes.

Fury.

“She made me lie to you, Dad. And that sucked. It really pissed me off. Because you never lied to us. You made a big deal of it. And there I was, Mom making me lie to you.”

Mm-hmm.

Fury.

He could not deny he had guilt, feeling it, since Dora was unwell.

However, that was not news even back then.

But the number of therapists she’d fired because “we don’t connect” and his constant offers that she remain at his side, even when he was at work in his office in town, so he could show her whenever he left her, it was not about another woman, all of that couldn’t be erased.

He was not a man who thought he’d allow any illness, no matter the cause of it, to end his marriage.

But as he’d have to face the consequences of a wife who decided to treat cancer with homeopathic remedies that had no hope of rooting out that disease, he faced the consequences of

a wife who had lucid stretches of understanding something was terribly wrong, and deciding to take the path of denial and not treatment.

That was Dora's.

And eventually, she'd owned it.

Unfortunately, by the time she'd done that, not only was their divorce final—and it being further after he'd endured more abuse from her accusing him of picking up with “his women” after he “got done with her,” when, for her sake, he hadn't even started dating—she'd finally found a therapist who could reach her.

But it was too late.

Because he'd met Betsy.

He hadn't started anything with her, but he'd met her, and he intended to start something.

He did.

Betsy had since moved to Park City, a move that Duncan was not willing to make with her, and she was not willing to stay in Prescott, which told the tale of how committed they truly were, and that ended.

But now it was Imogen.

And he had no idea what Genny had to do with anything.

He'd told Dora about her before he'd even asked her to marry him.

And from that time on, it had never come up.

They'd opened their store in Bend eight years ago.

Sully had been thirteen.

And Duncan knew nothing about this.

“What happened after she hung up?” he asked tightly.

“She lost it, Dad. Totally destroyed the kitchen. Tore everything out of the fridge and threw it around. Ketchup everywhere. Tomato sauce. Salsa. Mayonnaise. Broken jars. Stuff came out of the pantry and mixed with it. Pasta. Flour. Spices. Bottles rolling around. Her slipping all over it. I stopped her before she got out the plates. But I had to do that physical. I had to lock her down. In the end, she threw back a pill and went to bed, but it took me, like, three hours to clean up that mess.”

“Son, you should have told me.”

The pain for his boy carved through his voice.

And his heart.

“Dad, what would *you* do? Seeing that and her coming to, you know, like she did, snapping into being with it, and then getting so worried you’d be mad and making me promise.”

“I wouldn’t have been mad. But I would have done something about it.”

“Well, I was too young to know then. I see it now. It was her being, you know...*her*. How she’d get shady. Like, she fed off being sick. She got something out of it. You know, negative attention is still attention. That kind of thing. And she didn’t want you to take it more seriously, how messed up she was. Maybe commit her or something.”

Duncan drew a sharp breath into his nose and said nothing because they both knew all of this was true.

“And while she was throwing shit around, she was ranting about Imogen Swan. How you were trying to find her again. How all your ‘other women’ were blonde and blue-eyed and she was the love of your life. And you were longing for her. And since she was married to some tennis guy, you’d never have her back, so you were fucking a hundred Imogen Swans to get her back—”

“Okay, son,” Duncan cut him off, not for himself, but because this couldn’t be easy on his boy.

“I’m not done, Dad. She showed me a picture of you two. After she calmed down. To prove to me she wasn’t crazy. She showed me a picture. And there you were, together. But she said you kept it in your wallet with you all the time. She found it there. In your wallet. She didn’t seem to get that you were in Bend, we were in Prescott, and she went to the basement to get that picture, so obviously it wasn’t with you all the time in your wallet. It was something in those old boxes of junk you said you’d get around to clearing out, and never did. And she found it and, well...it set her off. And that’s it.”

Duncan did not know what to say and he had no idea what to do.

Which brought back the feeling of frustration he thought he’d left behind, because he had spent a lot of the last part of his marriage not knowing what to say or do.

“Mom follows you on Insta, Dad,” Sully warned.

“I don’t know how that works, son,” Duncan reminded him.

“You can follow a tag or a hashtag. And that pic with you and Imogen Swan has been both. By the way, you guys’ hashtag is *isitgonnabeimoway*.”

“What?”

“Imoway. Imogen and Holloway mashed together. It’s what they do with famous couples.”

Fucking hell.

“Sully—”

“I saw that picture, Dad. And I’m not just talking the one on Instagram.”

Duncan remained silent.

“I’m not saying Mom had any reason to say what she said or be how she was because of whatever you two had. I remember the good times, before she got sick. I know you loved her. You didn’t hide it. You always told us not to bury our feelings or hide them and you were about tell, but also about the show. But I saw that picture, Dad, and it wasn’t hard to see you two loved each other. I don’t know why that didn’t work, but you’re available, and so’s she, and it sucks, your old friend killed himself. But if that’s how you two have reconnected, then I hope something good comes of it. And it isn’t your problem anymore, but someone is gonna have to tell Mom. If you want that to be me, I’ll do it. But I hate to say it, it probably should be you.”

He was right.

And maybe Duncan wasn’t going to be able to go visit Genny tonight to find some way to explain what they’d all been up to and hope her interest in his life and bashfulness at his side at lunch meant they were going to finish talking things through, find a way to let go of the past, and explore a future.

Because he needed to deal with Dora.

And that might take a while.

“I’ll call your mother,” he agreed.

Sully tried to hide looking relieved, but he didn’t manage it.

“And I don’t know what’s happening with Genny, son,” he continued. “But I need to be clear that if something is happening, you’re okay with that.”

“Totally,” Sully said. “Aubrey and Charlie had such a huge fight about whether or not she was robbed of an Oscar for her role in *It Wasn’t Easy* that they made us watch it. And Aubrey was right. She was really good in that. But I, you know, avoided her, after the whole mom thing. But Aubrey’s a huge fan of hers and she talks about her sometimes and what she says, she seems really cool.”

“I’m not sure what’s gonna go down, Sul, but since you mentioned this, it’s important to understand that her life is very different from ours.”

“Yeah, like you going to El Gato for lunch and it being all over the world in matter of seconds?”

Duncan smiled. “Yeah. Like that.”

“Dad, you’re famous too. You’re like the Ralph Lauren of outdoor gear.”

“What?”

“I don’t know. It’s something Aubrey says. About how Ralph Lauren became the face of his company and lived the life he was trying to sell with his clothes and home stuff. She was watching a documentary. I wasn’t paying attention. I had a test to study for.”

“Well, I understand what Aubrey means, but I can go to El Gato and not have it all over the world in a matter of seconds.”

“I’m just saying, it’s a non-issue. If you like her and she makes you happy, who cares about anything else?”

In all that was going down, one thing he knew felt great.

He’d raised good boys.

“I’ll handle your mom. Don’t worry about it. Now go do something that might not involve cramming. Call Aubrey. Have some fun. Live a little.”

“No way to get summa living a little.”

“Sul, there’s more to achieve in life than achievements.”

Sully grinned at him. “Epic, Dad. I was wondering what to get you for Christmas. I’m putting that on a coffee mug.”

He shook his head but did it with his lips twitching.

“Okay, go study. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Love you, Pops.”

“Love you too, kid.”

They disconnected and Duncan was interrupted in pulling his shit together so he’d have the patience to deal with Dora if she was off the wagon due to Genny being back in his life, not to mention controlling himself from going over old ground neither of them could change with what she’d asked of their son that was the opposite of okay, when he saw the Tesla take off down the drive.

Apparently, his “larder” was not appropriately stocked.

That made him grin, but it faded when his eyes fell on Corey’s letter again.

He was reaching for it when his phone chimed with a text.

He looked down at it, expecting something from Dora.

What he saw was a number he didn’t have programmed, but it had a six-oh-two area code.

And when he opened it, his smile was wide.

This is Imogen. You’re right. We need to talk in order to have some closure. Do you have plans this evening? Could you meet me in the bar at The Queen at around 8:30?

No dicking around, he immediately texted back.

Yes.

It might not be right, but after getting that from Genny, it was what he was going to do.

So he opened up his text string with his ex-wife and asked, Do you have time to talk tomorrow?

He got a, See you then. from Imogen.

He was texting a, Count on it. back when he got a reply from Dora.

I saw. I’m fine. Don’t worry about me. You’ve done enough of that.

He was staring at that in shock when another text came in from his ex.

Be happy, Duncan. We’ll have lunch some time. If I’m not incarcerated after driving down to Tucson and holding my son at gunpoint to force him to study. Remain off Instagram. I’m deleting my account. He’s killing me. Slowly.

It was not lost on him that when she found help that worked for her, Dora had come back. The woman he’d married and made a family with who he’d loved.

It was too late, what they’d had and built was gone, regrettably, but irrevocably.

But knowing she had this kind of lock on it, that she could joke and be real...

Again, for the first time in a long time, Duncan’s breath was coming easier.

We’ll do an intervention at Thanksgiving. He texted back.

If he survives that long. She replied.

He gave her a thumbs-up emoji and a smiley.

She returned an angry face and an eye-rolling emoji.

He was grinning when he opened up the Instagram account that he had not touched since his assistant had downloaded it on his phone.

It took him a minute, but he finally found it by searching #isitgonnabeimoway.

And when he found it, he could see it.

How they were bent toward each other, faces close, focus intense, no one in that restaurant but them.

They were having a deep, informative, but not entirely comfortable conversation.

The picture did not say that.

It looked like he was about to kiss her.

Hard.

And she wanted to swallow him whole.

Duncan was grinning again when he got up and walked out of his office.

Completely forgetting about Corey's letter.

Chapter Seven

The Drinks

Imogen

I sat at the bar, knowing this was a bad idea.

There were so many reasons it was a bad idea, it wasn't funny.

First, Cookie was upstairs, as delivered by Mary, who was already likely back in Phoenix, this as delivered by Rodney.

Chloe wasn't available to help her with getting my cat and car to me, so she did what Mary always did. Took the bull by the horns and got things done.

So now Cookie, her litter box, her food and water bowls, the placemat I kept under them and about a month's worth of cat food was up in my suite.

All of that along with the contents of four additional suitcases, including the huge ones I took when I spent time in Europe. Offerings, after I'd unpacked them, that I saw afforded me every possible wardrobe change, including accessories that did not stop at shoes and handbags.

I could not focus on why Mary was behaving like I was moving for half a year into the deluxe suite of The Queen.

I had a great many other things to focus on.

I'd managed to be able to spend about a half an hour with my cat in new surroundings before I'd had to go to dinner, and I didn't feel that was enough time.

She needed her mommy.

I'd been up to check when I got back from dinner, and okay, when I'd opened the door, I woke her up from napping.

But I still sensed the unease.

The second reason this was a bad idea was that, within seconds of sliding on my barstool, Matt had texted.

His text had included four words.

Who is this guy?

And a photo.

One of the ones taken of Duncan and I at lunch.

I'd had no choice but to text back, An old friend of Uncle Corey's and mine. A long story. I'll catch you up later.

Matt didn't reply.

Which was a concern, considering that photo looked like were on a date, but one hundred percent not a first date.

More like the seven-hundred and fifty-seventh one.

Which, if it was a date with Duncan and me (and it wasn't), was maybe close to the right number.

But I thought making a big deal about it and pressing explanations on my son, when it was *not* a big deal *at all*, and would soon be easily explained away when I could get home and resume normal programming, was not a good idea.

Thus, I let it be.

The third reason was that I had a variety of wardrobe changes, and for some reason I could not even begin to understand, because this was *not* a big deal *at all*, I'd changed clothes to go to dinner with Trisha and Scott.

An outfit that Chloe brought over a couple of weeks ago.

Slightly faded dark-gray jeans. Slim black belt. Shiny, silky, blousy off-black top cut low. Stretchy black tank under it. And sexy red pumps that gave some serious toe cleavage.

I'd had a stylist, who Chloe fired, saying, 'The woman dresses you like you're Betty White. You're fifty-two, not one hundred and two.' And although this was not entirely true, including the fact Betty White was not that old (though she was close), it wasn't entirely false either.

Now Chloe was my stylist. And after self-appointing this role, she'd dumped half my closet (and by that I meant she auctioned it off for charity), declared my look was "edgy elegance" and then she proceeded to fill my closet with that.

I had to admit, since she took over, I'd made a lot of best dressed lists.

But this was an issue now.

Because instead of looking like this was casual and it didn't mean anything to me, and thus I showed at drinks in the same outfit I'd been in at lunch, it looked like I'd made an effort.

Or I was up myself and I couldn't take Hollywood out of Prescott, which was totally up myself.

I had a defense.

Mary had not packed a single thing that did not scream "Edgy Elegance!"

In fact, the only non-heeled shoes I currently had access to were the slides I'd packed myself.

But I could have worn those slides with this outfit.

Or I could have not changed at all.

And I did not do either.

The next reason this was not a good idea was that it was not lost on me that picture had made the rounds, and now there we'd be, at a public bar, Duncan and me.

If anyone took another snap, and it was a good possibility they would, it'd be a fan to a flame.

However, I felt it was less of a good idea to ask him to come up to my suite to chat.

No.

After the knee brush at lunch, I knew that was a very, very *bad* idea.

The last reason this was not a good idea was that I'd asked for this meeting with Duncan at all.

We did not need closure.

We'd had closure.

Twenty-eight years of it.

But did that stop me from asking Mary to get me his cell phone number?

No.

What was I doing?

"Genny."

I turned on my stool and looked up at Duncan.

And I didn't miss the casual plaid shirt he'd been wearing with faded jeans at lunch was gone and a nice button down with dark-wash jeans had taken its place.

Oh hell.

We weren't going for closure.

We were both behaving like we were on a date.

"Duncan," I greeted.

He looked to the barkeep, who was coming our way, but he was unable to order.

Our attention was taken by a beautiful, impeccably dressed African American woman who was now at our sides.

Damn.

A fan.

"Ms. Swan, Mr. Holloway, I'm Sienna Sinclair."

Not a fan.

Or maybe still a fan.

But also the owner of the hotel.

"If you'd like to follow me, I think it'll be more comfortable for you to be seated in our brand-new VIP area," she finished.

Her gaze then slid to the side, and I twisted to look over my shoulder to see a rather cozy corner booth in the back, in front of which two members of staff were erecting an attractive, freestanding folding screen.

"If you'll give me your order, Mr. Holloway, I'll have it brought to your table," she said.

That cozy booth looked *cozy*.

But the way they were positioning that screen, someone would have to be very intent on getting a picture of us around it.

And it was much better than speaking with Duncan in my suite.

I grabbed my drink and slid off my stool.

Duncan ordered something that sounded like it was beer.

I expressed my thanks to Ms. Sinclair, who inclined her head before she led the way, and Duncan put his hand light to the small of my back to guide me to the booth.

I did not discourage this due to what it might look like.

But I had no idea how I made it to that booth considering every iota of my attention was on the touch of his hand, no matter how light, so I wasn't sure how I managed to put one foot in front of the other.

Okay, just me asking for this meet was a very, very *bad* idea.

And that idea was getting worse by the second.

I slid in, put my drink on the small table, and Duncan slid in beside me.

Our hips were touching, and if I wanted to avoid that, I'd need to slide some more, which would put me on the floor.

I gritted my teeth.

Sienna Sinclair faded away after wishing us to enjoy our evening, and the staff closed us in with the screen, leaving only a small opening a human might, if they sucked in their tummies, get through.

I turned instantly to Duncan.

"I can't stay long. My cat is upstairs."

He blinked fast and asked, "I'm sorry?"

"My cat. My building has a sanitation problem and I can't return to my condo until it's sorted. So I'm staying here. And I'm close to my cat. I'm an animal lover, as you, well, um...*know*. So my assistant brought her up. She's a low maintenance cat, but she's still in new surroundings, so I don't want her up there alone for long."

"Your building has a sanitation problem?"

"I'm trying not to think of that, but yes, my building. I, uh...live in a condo."

"Right. Gen—"

"It's a really nice one. But not a big one, because the kids are gone."

"Okay. But, you see, Ge—"

"It's fancy though, not a hint of wood around. Lots of marble. Crystal chandeliers. No wood."

He didn't say anything, but he was now watching me very closely with an expression coming over his handsome face that was very, *very* dangerous.

Which meant I kept babbling.

"I've been there seven years. I love it."

"Do you now?" he murmured, his eyes falling to my mouth.

Ohmigod!

“Uh, yes. I have the most amazing view.”

“Mm,” he hummed.

My thighs started quivering.

My mouth kept blabbing.

“You should know that today is not normal. Maybe it’s Prescott. But mostly it’s you.”

That got his eyes returning to mine.

“What’s me?”

“Me being with, uh...*you*. And you being you. Well, me being me too, but you’re also you.”

There was silk in his deep voice, as well as humor, when he agreed, “*I am me.*”

Why could I not stop talking?

I really couldn’t because I kept doing it.

“What I’m saying is, I can go grocery shopping and everything without being recognized. At least, down in Phoenix.”

“Is that right?”

I nodded, maybe fervently, and to stop doing that, I snatched up my drink and took a far-too-large sip.

The lime in the gimlet hit me hard with sour and it took a lot not to make a face.

Drink, bad.

I put it down.

“Excuse me,” we heard from beyond the screen.

“Yeah?” Duncan answered.

A waitress squeezed around.

“Your drink, sir,” she said.

His drink hit the table as did an elegant, cut crystal tall-sided bowl filled with a crisp bit of paper in which was tucked, to almost overflowing, a bevy of seasoned chicharrones.

Yum.

“Would you like another drink, Ms. Swan?” she offered.

Absolutely not.

“No,” I answered. “But thank you.”

“I’ll be around in a bit to check on you,” she said, before she squeezed away.

I took a deep breath.

Duncan took a sip of beer.

I turned to him to get a firm hold on this conversation, which meant having it, and ending it, and walking away.

For good.

I didn't get that first word out.

"What's your cat's name?" he asked.

It came out automatically. "Cookie."

"I thought you were a dog person."

"I am. I travel too much for a dog. And my building doesn't let you have animals over a certain weight. So I've discovered my latent cat person."

"That sucks. The certain weight rule is. Not you being a latent cat person."

"Yes."

He grinned at me and it was not lost on me it was all kinds of playful.

And woefully effective.

"I thought you rich, jet-set celebrities chartered planes and took your animals everywhere."

"Well, I might be a rich, jet-set celebrity, but I'm also a responsible pet owner and I'm not certain dragging a cat, or a dog, all over the globe is good for the cat, or dog. Cookie notwithstanding," I hastened to add. "But only for this trip and only because she doesn't mind car rides...uh, much."

"What you're saying is, you didn't want to be without her so you caved when you know she hated every second of being in the car on the way up here."

Cookie didn't seem worse for the wear.

In fact, she had found a cozy nook in the toss pillows on the bed to curl up in before I left for dinner, the very nook she was stretching out of when I returned.

Though Mary reported she'd been vocal the entire way up, and I didn't think Cookie was sharing her desire to get a better view out the windows.

"Well, *hated* is a strong word."

"Mm-hmm."

I wished he'd quit humming all deep and rumbly like that.

"Listen, Duncan—"

"I have five."

My head ticked. “Sorry? Five?”

“Animals.” He reached for a chicharron. “Not counting the horses. Three dogs. A cat. And a rabbit.”

He’d always loved animals.

All of them.

Even snakes.

So this did not surprise me.

Though I was probably more relieved than was healthy that he did not share he had a snake, since what would it matter to me if he did?

He started counting them down.

“Shasta, my rescue husky. Rocco, Sully’s tripod silver receiver. Bounce, Gage’s rabbit. Tuck, our cat. And my baby, Killer.”

“Your baby?” I whispered.

“A Peekapoo. Pekingese, poodle mix. She weighs about twelve pounds. Could not believe that score at the shelter. Then again, they all were scores from the shelter.”

He crunched into the chicharron.

“I thought you were a vegetarian,” I noted.

“I avoid meat. I limit intake of products produced from animals. For instance, I use almond milk. But I’m not a vegetarian.”

Okay, well that explained that.

“You have a twelve-pound girl dog named Killer?” I asked.

“My son Gage has an interesting sense of humor.”

I could not get caught on thoughts of Duncan having a little dog he referred to as his “baby” or a son he spoke of fondly who had an interesting sense of humor.

What I needed to get caught on was guiding us to whatever closure we needed to achieve.

But curiosity got the better of me.

Because he’d always loved horses and always wanted to own one.

“How many horses do you have?”

“Three.”

“Do you ride a lot?”

“Yes, seein’ as I got three horses to exercise and the boys are at school.”

“Where do you ride them?”

He crunched, chewed, swallowed, and said, “Round my land. I managed to nab ninety acres, though it took me ten years of buying neighbors out.”

“Oh,” I mumbled.

“Most of that butts the National Forest, so we got plenty of space to ride,” he shared.

“That’s great,” I muttered.

And I shouldn’t ask.

I shouldn’t want to know.

It shouldn’t mean anything to me.

But I asked anyway.

Because it meant something to me.

“Your boys are at school?”

He nodded, took a sip of beer, set it aside and reached for another chicharron.

But he didn’t take a bite.

He answered, “Sully’s at Purdue. He’s gonna save the world in ways his old man can’t. He’s studying to be an environmental engineer.”

“Impressive,” I said. And it was. “And Gage?”

“He’s at University of Arizona, and I should have known things were going south when he majored in communications. Mostly, I think he needs to get the wild out of his system before he comes to work for me. They both had jobs at the store throughout high school. But Sully did it because his dad told him he had to. Gage did it because he liked to score chicks who were into hiking, climbing and trail running. But that’s because Gage likes hiking, climbing and trail running. Sully does too, but he’d stop to dig in the dirt. Gage wouldn’t stop until he reached the peak. But after Gage fails out of college, gets sick of being a river rafting guide or some shit like that, and gets serious, he’ll come work for me.”

“You’re sure of that?”

He shrugged, ate his chicharron, and answered, “It doesn’t matter. What matters is, whatever he chooses, he’s happy.”

So...

Duncan was not his father’s son.

Duncan’s dad was a plumber.

And I never sat a meal at their house—and I sat many meals at their house, both as a little kid hanging with her buddies, then as his girlfriend, times two—when Burt Holloway didn't mention in some form how someday Duncan was going to join him as a member of his union.

It was never fun, but the older Duncan got, the nastier the conversations became.

What, you too good to be a plumber, boy?

I like to be outside, Dad, and there isn't a lot of plumbing done outside.

Smart mouth. Always got a smart mouth. So...what? You're gonna be a park ranger, pussy shit like that? Glorified mall cop, hanging around feelin' like a big shot with nothin' to do.

Remembering this one particular conversation, which happened around the time Duncan was looking into what it would take to become a park ranger, and he'd made the mistake of mentioning that to his father, our conversation from lunch that day morphed over it and I wondered.

Because I got to LA, and what happened to me did not happen to hardly anybody.

I got an agent quickly.

A few commercial jobs.

I worked as a substitute teacher and had two roommates.

And I was cast in *Rita's Way* after only two other acting gigs, both as one-line, glorified extras, one on a sitcom, one on a gritty nighttime cop drama.

But then, I was off.

What would Duncan have done if he'd come with me?

I'd never heard of a River Rain store until *Rita's Way* signed off for good and I was starring in feature films.

A chain of stores didn't happen overnight.

And it didn't.

"Hey," Duncan called softly, and I focused on him. "You were a million miles away."

"I was remembering that dinner when your dad confronted you about being a park ranger."

He shook his head, took a sip of beer, but I stared at him with some surprise because his mouth didn't get tight, the skin around his eyes, nothing.

Nothing at all, when before, just the mention of his father could put him in a bad mood that it would take certain talents I'd honed to work out.

“He passed. Heart disease,” he told me. “Five years ago. Mom’s down in Goodyear. She should be up here, where I can keep a closer eye on her. But she has her women and her bowling club and whatever else she does, and she won’t even discuss it. Not lost on me fifty years of marriage to Burt Holloway wasn’t easy. It’s like she’s on perpetual vacation and I worry about her, but I can’t find it in me to take it away from her.”

I’d always liked his mom.

Ruthy Holloway was quiet, sweet, a great cook, a mom who loved her only son (and I had suspicions she kept it at one child deliberately, so Burt couldn’t dig into another one) and a woman who was totally dominated by her husband.

“Goodyear isn’t too far from me. I always liked your mom. I should go visit,” I murmured.

“Baby,” Duncan murmured back.

I snapped to, staring at him.

What was I thinking, telling Duncan I should go see his mom?

The expression on his face now was speaking volumes, and his mouth was opening to make them audible, and I was terrified what I’d do if he did.

“I have three,” I announced.

He looked bemused, which was a far safer look than the one he’d been wearing the instant before.

“Three what?”

“Kids,” I stated.

Again, he was opening his mouth.

But I kept speaking.

“There’s Chloe, my oldest. She’s a stylish, perfectly accessorized, never-ending trail of lit rocket fuel.”

Something else moved over his face, I couldn’t read it, but it didn’t matter.

Yes, again, I kept talking.

“Then there’s Matt. He came barely a year after Chloe. We...we...we...” I nearly pounded a fist on my chest in order to get out words that would indicate what any adult knew, children were the products of having sex, but somehow alluding to Duncan I’d had sex with another man, even if that man had been my husband for twenty-four years, had me regressing to a fourteen year old,

“got pregnant again fast. He’s in his second year of med school. At USC. We’re very proud of him.”

“Genny,” Duncan whispered.

“Then there’s Sasha. Our baby. We took a break after Matt. You have children so you know, they’re a lot of work. Two babies that close together, I couldn’t quit working, but I was very hands-on with my babies, so I was a walking zombie. This means Sasha is three years younger than Matt. She, like Chloe, elected not to go to college, and instead, is a ‘student of the planet.’ Her words. And I kinda wished this meant she was a sci-fi geek, chasing around the country, looking for UFOs. Which likely gives indication that I try not to be judgy, but I think it’s been almost two years since I’ve seen her when she didn’t have fresh flowers woven into her hair and I’m not sure she owns a pair of shoes. Though, she does have a cell phone. And needless to say, I have concerns about all of that. Because she can use her cell for GPS, but she has no direction.”

“Gen, I need you to listen to me.”

No.

No no no no no.

He sounded serious.

Too serious.

I knew he didn’t want to talk about closure.

He wanted to talk about the opposite.

But to get there, we had to talk about something else.

And I didn’t want to talk about Corey. What Corey did to us. Who Corey really was and how vile that person turned out to be.

I didn’t want to be reminded I put my faith in him, and years of life into our friendship, and he’d taken this magnificent man who was sitting beside me, who had a dream and worked hard to realize it, away from me.

I did not get to live his dream with him.

And he did not get to live my dream with me.

Because of Corey.

And maybe all of that would have turned into a disaster.

But it would have been *our* disaster.

Not Corey’s.

So I didn't even want to think about Corey.

I wanted to talk about our kids and his acreage and his little dog called Killer.

"They're twenty-four, twenty-three and twenty, respectively," I blurted.

"Gen—"

"And I think—"

I cut myself off because my phone was ringing.

"A second," I said quietly, pulling it out of my back pocket, and seeing it was Matt.

My son never called.

Texts and emails and person to person, even if that person to person was over Skype.

That was Matt.

I didn't even know the last time I spoke with him on the phone, to such an extent, I was wondering if I'd ever actually spoken to him on the phone.

"I need to take this. It's my son," I told Duncan.

"Absolutely," Duncan replied.

I engaged, put the phone to my ear and asked, "Are you okay?"

"Right, Mom, don't speak and listen to me."

My eyes flew to Duncan and I knew the fear was there because our hips were touching, but then they became tight, the side of my thigh pressed to his, all because he'd wrapped his hand around the back of my neck and pulled me close.

"Matt—" I began.

"Listen, okay?"

"Okay, darling." My voice was wavering.

Duncan's fingers squeezed reassuringly.

"Now, I know you just lost him, but I can't sit on this anymore. Not with you getting your picture taken with one of his friends. And I know you're not going to like hearing this, but it's the truth. Dad felt the same way. And I think the girls did too, they just never said. But there was something not right about Uncle Corey. And I'm not real thrilled you're hanging out with one of his friends."

I fell forward, dropping my forehead to the tiny table, miraculously missing my glass.

And the chicharrones.

Duncan's hand didn't move through this, but his head did, and he whispered urgently in my unoccupied ear, "Baby, hey, hey, hey."

I sat up just as abruptly, did the *Phew!* gesture of fake swipe of forehead, and returned my attention to my son.

My protective son.

Who, even though his father was not entirely out of my life, had cast himself in the role of my protector because that was who his father taught him to be.

"Can you listen to me for a second now?" I asked.

"Yes, but—"

"No, but, Matt. Your dad and I spoke of this and he admitted you both felt that way. So I know. And what you said didn't upset me. Things have come to light where I'm fully aware that Corey had some significant issues, especially in regard to me. I'm fine. I can explain those to you the next time I'm in LA. But I can assure you that Duncan is no longer a friend of Corey's. He hasn't been for a very long time. They haven't seen each other in decades. But we used to be friends, the three of us. And something Corey did drove me to seeing Duncan. So that's what's happening. Okay?"

"What'd Corey do?"

"Can we Skype about this later?"

"Only if you can assure me you're okay."

Now I was seeing Chloe's side of the argument in her lifelong debate that there was a place for little fibs.

"This is a lot, I can't deny it. But I'm fine. Truly. All right?"

"All right, Mom, but seriously. Who is this guy? You were practically making out with him."

"We weren't. It just looked that way. He's an old friend."

"An old friend?"

I gave Duncan big eyes.

His concern fled, his finger trailed my nape, but his hand disappeared.

Though he left his arm draped on the back of the booth.

And that nape touch shot all the way down my spine.

And further.

Great.

“An old boyfriend,” I admitted.

Duncan chuckled and nabbed his beer.

“Are you starting things up again?” Matt asked suspiciously.

“Matthew, my only son, I love and adore you. But can we not talk about this now, or maybe forever, please?”

“Holy shit,” he whispered. “You’re starting things up again.”

“Don’t you have any life-saving technique you should be studying?”

“I am currently incredibly grossed out, so no. I’m going to be looking into finding the nearest isolation chamber so I can lock myself in it and try not to think of my mother dating. But this conversation can be done.”

“It’s always so gratifying when you demonstrate how mature you are,” I teased.

“Cut me some slack, Mom. I’m your only boy and no one will ever be good enough for you. And that includes Dad.”

Uh-oh.

I dropped my head and said gently, “Matt.”

“Nope. Not talking about that either, Mom. We’ll Skype. Soon. Love you.”

“Love you more.”

He hung up.

I put my phone on the table.

Then I turned to Duncan. “I’ve recently learned that my son has never liked Corey. He thought he was a creeper.”

“Sadly, your boy was very right.”

Dammit.

There was nothing for it.

“We should talk about Corey.”

The words were so tight, it was a wonder each didn’t snap the both of us like rubber bands pulled too long.

“We need to talk about something else first, honey.”

“I think—”

“Your daughter Chloe is right now stretched out on the sofa in my great room with a martini she ordered me to make her before I left, because I apparently make very good martinis, and my Amazon password, so she can order whatever she wants to stream.”

I stared at him, unblinking.

“She came to me yesterday after you visited, and I know this won’t come as a surprise to you, but she loves you very much and she wants to see you happy. It’s my understanding you shared with her about you and me and she’s decided what’s going to make you happy is me. So it isn’t coincidence Harvey and I were at El Gato today. And I haven’t been let in on all the varied facets of her diabolical but ultimately loving plan. But I suspect your building is not having a sanitation issue.”

I continued staring at him, unspeaking.

“She made me dinner tonight. Cheese soufflé followed by bouillabaisse and ending in chocolate mousse. All homemade. She told me this was her ‘starter menu.’ If I was lucky, she’d allow me to work my way up. Which blows my mind, considering what she made was the best thing to come out of my kitchen since it was built, and I do not suck as a cook. And neither does Sully.”

That got me talking.

“Your ex-wife wasn’t a good cook?”

He seemed out-and-out astonished by this question.

And his answer was hesitant.

“Dora never lived in that house.”

“You moved into a six-thousand square foot house after you divorced your wife?”

“No, I *built* a six-thousand square foot house after I divorced my wife. I had two sons who had a lot of friends and I hope like fuck they give me a ton of grandchildren.”

I was out of questions.

Duncan said no more.

My mind remained a blank.

His didn’t.

He touched my nape again.

I felt it down my spine again.

Then he asked gently, “Are you pissed at Chloe?”

To which, of course, I burst out laughing.

He waited until I was finished, and when I could focus properly again, I noticed that he seemed like he wanted to smile, but he wasn't sure it was appropriate.

"Can I take it that means you're not ticked at your girl?" he queried.

I shook my head, tscking, before I said, "Duncan, Duncan, Duncan. Although I'm sure in your fresh experiences with Chloe, this all feels rather unseemly. But I can assure you, this is downright tame. Now Chloe running the long con that lasted three years that meant her father and I allowed her to stay in France, not to mention paid for this extended stay. And yes, there was a boy. And yes, he was an *artist*. And yes, there are paintings of my naked, then nineteen-year-old daughter somewhere in France. And yes, this was not the only thing she got up to when she was over there, because she dumped that boy, and found other things to turn her mind to that made us pine for that boy. And yes, there was a period of time when I thought I might have to secretly sedate her father by slipping drugs into his beverages. So no, I'm not angry at my daughter for doing what my daughter does and being who she is. As long as you aren't angry at her for dragging you into it."

"I'm sitting here with you, your eyes are shining like they used to, so fuck no, Genny. I'm not angry at her. And just to say, she's looks a little like you, but she's not one thing like you. But you should be warned, she's got me wrapped around her finger to the point she took my Tesla to the grocery store today and she has my Amazon password."

Oh God.

He liked my girl.

A lot.

"Duncan," I whispered.

His fingers were back around my neck and his face was again close, like at lunch.

And it was solemn in a way that both frightened and excited me.

"I want to explain to you what was fucking me up so much it made me believe Corey and let you go. And I want to get to know who you are now, Genny. Because I miss you like fuck. I have for twenty-eight goddamn years. And I wanna see if we can find something together again. I know it won't be what we had before. I also know, down to my bones, that if it's with you, it'll be amazing."

“I’m reeling that I read Corey wrong for so long and in doing so he made me lose so much,” I admitted.

“Well, not that I wanna be in that club, but since we’re the only two members, I’m probably the only one who can help you with that.”

“There’s also Sam,” I pointed out.

“You wanna reach out to her?”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure it’ll make her feel any better, finding out Corey married her while in love with me and divorced her because he was in love with me, but he never cheated on her with me. She’s avoided me like the plague over the years. But even if Corey wasn’t very close with his son, I was. He was a lost little boy and Corey practically ignored him during their visits. I found the schedule and made sure I was around. We formed a bond. We’re still very close. And honestly, Tom’s more a father to him than Corey ever was. But bottom line of that, Hale is also a member of our shitty little club.”

“I do not find this surprising. Corey was seriously fucked up.”

“Yes,” I agreed.

“Come out and meet my animals tomorrow.”

“Duncan.”

It was shaky.

“At least come say hello to your daughter.”

That made me crack a smile.

My smile fled when he pulled my face closer toward his and I thought he was going to kiss me.

And in that second, I wanted him to kiss me.

I wanted that very badly.

But he didn’t.

I felt the swab of his thick beard across my cheek and his lips were at my ear.

“Please, Genny. It’s quiet and there are no distractions and no cameras and you can have whatever reaction you want, including leaving. If that’s what you decide, I’ll let you go, and I won’t bother you again. I’ll hate it, but if that’s what you need, I’ll stand by it and that’s a promise.”

“They have delicious croissants here and amazing coffee and I like slow mornings. Can I come around ten?”

His forehead landed with a bang on my shoulder.

I shut my eyes tight and fought my chest heaving.

He wanted this chance.

He wanted it so very badly.

I allowed myself to press my jaw into his hair for just a moment before I took it away.

He lifted his head and looked into my eyes.

“You need me to pick you up?”

I shook my head. “Mary brought my car up today.”

He nodded.

“Duncan?”

“Baby, until you decide you can’t keep Cookie waiting a second longer, my ass is right here and not going anywhere. So...what?”

God.

God.

He really wanted the chance to get beyond our shit and get to know me again.

Me.

Genny.

I’d never be Imogen Swan to Duncan.

I’d always just be...

Me.

“Thanks for making my daughter a martini. I would say I don’t know where she got that bossiness, but you’ve met my mom.”

“Yeah,” he said quietly. “I was thinkin’ something was familiar.”

“They were thick as thieves. Chloe was in mourning for over a year when she died. I had to get her counseling.”

“Fuck, baby. How’d she go?”

“Dad died, and she threw a clot. It wasn’t even a year after. She always got what she wanted, and she missed him so much. So I suspect she told her body to get with the program, it complied,

making it quick and painless, so at least I'm thankful for that. And it got Chloe home from France, though I would have obviously preferred a different impetus."

That was indeed her impetus.

That and her father and I divorcing.

But that could wait for later.

Maybe.

"I always loved that dame," he muttered, letting me go and moving away.

But not far away.

"Mom *was* a dame, wasn't she?" I asked.

"I would say last of her breed, if I hadn't met your daughter."

I shot him a smile.

He watched me do it for a while.

And then he shot one back at me.

Chapter Eight

The Omelet

Chloe

She checked the clock on the microwave when she heard him coming.

And she was ready with a bright smile aimed his way when he strolled into the great room, headed her way, wearing pajama pants and a tee that was snug at his broad chest.

Yes, it'd be cool when her mom got to wake up to that.

The messy hair especially.

"*Bonjour!*" she cried.

His eyes were moving around the kitchen, taking in the various animals, three of whom were clamoring for his attention, those canine, one of whom was sitting on the counter by where Chloe was, that one feline, and one that was bouncing around, that was leporidine.

What they were not doing was clamoring for food, since Chloe had already fed them.

He also checked out the coffeepot and the various bowls Chloe had on the counter.

"It's six o'clock in the morning," he stated.

“Yes,” she agreed.

“I thought you young people slept until eleven,” he remarked, moving to the coffee at the same time giving his dogs some rubdowns.

“I’ll sleep when I’m dead and not before,” she replied.

Duncan pulled down a mug and noted, “We try not to let Tuck up on the counters.”

“I regret to inform you of the fact that Tuck has claimed me, and as his minion, I do as he says, and he wants up on the counter to observe my work and pass judgement. In his service, I cannot deny him.”

Duncan was shaking his head, grinning and pouring coffee.

But he said no more on the issue of her new darling, Tuck.

She turned and winked at Tuck.

The svelte tuxedo cat with his upside-down triangle face and wicked eyes who currently owned her heart blinked at her languorously.

“I’m making omelets to order,” she shared. “Your choices are cheese, chives, mushrooms, bits of turkey sausage patties and salsa.”

“All of it,” Duncan ordered.

“*À votre service,*” she declared and turned to the skillet.

“Honey, you can calm down,” he said in that deeper, richer gentle voice of his. “Your mom and I had a good talk last night and she’s coming over today at ten to do more of it.”

It seemed every muscle in her body released.

She made a mental note to take a bath in Epsom salts later.

For then, she just murmured, “Good.” She pulled it together, swirling heated oil in the pan, and finished, “Though, I guessed that since you were home way past curfew.”

He chuckled.

She wanted to start crying.

She pulled it together again and continued her work.

After a bit, he spoke.

“It’s like this with us, Chloe. Genny and me. We’re connected. But there’s a lot to go over and we’re both very different people now. And I’m telling you this because I don’t want you to get hurt along this process should things take a nosedive.”

And wasn’t that just the killer?

That she'd hid it, had her back to him, and he'd sensed it.

"My friends call me Coco," she informed him.

"And my friends call me Bowie," he informed her right back.

She turned to him.

He was sitting at the island and Killer was in his lap.

Hot guy and little dog.

Man, she needed this to work.

"Why are you called Bowie?" she asked.

Coffee mug lifted to his mouth, he tipped his head at the range, and said, "Finish the omelets and I'll tell you. You need any help?"

She shook her head.

"You makin' one for you?"

She faked being utterly aghast.

"Food passing my lips before eight in the morning? That's positively barbaric."

He quirked a grin at her. "I see you're your mother's daughter in one way. She said she liked slow mornings. And back in the day, she was the same. Hated getting up early. Lived for the weekends when she could take her time."

"I suspect Mom hasn't changed much," she stated leadingly.

"I'm sensing you're right," he muttered.

So she wouldn't ruin it, she returned to the omelet.

She finished it up, plated it, put it in front of him with the fork, knife and napkin she'd already gotten out, then topped up both their mugs before she climbed up next to him.

Duncan had dropped Killer to the floor in preparation for eating.

Tuck jumped from the counter to the island and she cooed at him.

He gave her outstretched hand a sniff, but was more interested in sitting, swishing his tail, and watching Duncan eat.

For a moment, Duncan regarded the cat in his position that was verboten until Chloe arrived, before he sighed.

"All right, Bowie, tell me about being Bowie," she urged.

"I'm tellin' you this story 'cause you should know this story and what it says about me and what it says about the way I feel about your mom."

Her eyes grew wide. “Did she give you the nickname Bowie?”

He swallowed the bite he’d put in after he’d said that, shook his head and replied, “My dad gave it to me. The first time he took me hunting.”

She was shocked.

She’d researched this man to within an inch of his life.

And although he was not a resolute opponent of that, he’d had a fair few things to say about hunters who did not follow fish, wildlife and game rules, and a fair few more things to say about poachers.

Especially the fat cat rich ones who hired locals to drive animals from land that was designated protected game reserve to land that was not in order to shoot them.

Duncan Holloway had *lots* to say on *that* matter.

“Hunting?” she asked.

“I didn’t want to go. Pitched one helluva fit. And he...was...*pissed*. He had a temper, but I kid you not, I thought he’d beat the snot outta me. He was that pissed. It terrified me.”

“Did he beat you?” she asked quietly.

He looked her in the eye in a way she knew what he said next was important.

“Never once. Never laid a hand on me.”

“Oh,” she mumbled, although glad, unsure, since the man didn’t beat his son, why it seemed that important.

“But I thought he was gonna do it, so I went hunting with him. And he rode my ass in the car, and he rode my ass in the woods, and he didn’t let up until he had to be quiet so he wouldn’t spook the deer. I was twelve and a goddamn mess. He’d taught me how to shoot. I had the rifle. And I was scared as shit of that thing because I knew the power it wielded and I was shakin’ so bad, I thought, once I got my finger near the trigger, I’d hurt him or me. But fear can also give you focus. Because when we saw that doe, and he told me she was mine, I downed her in a shot.”

Chloe stared at his profile as he said this to his omelet, and even in profile, his pain was so obvious, so palatable, she felt it with him.

He was fifty-four.

Forty-two years he’d carried that pain.

Apparently unabated.

“He made me gut her where she lay. Handed me his bowie knife and made me gut her. I didn’t get sick. Didn’t even feel nauseous. I did what I was told with his hand on my shoulder, squeezin’ so hard, I thought his thumb would break my clavicle. And he did this tellin’ me from then on, my name was Bowie, and he’d never been so proud of me in his life.”

He ate more omelet.

Chloe didn’t say a word.

When he’d swallowed, he told his plate, “A father never so proud of his son in a moment of death he forced his son to create, a son who had no desire to do that. That was the only time I made my father proud. But I didn’t make him proud. He *made* me make him proud.”

“Duncan,” Chloe said softly.

He turned his eyes to her.

“I never went hunting with him again. He grounded my ass at least two dozen times for what he called disrespect because I flat refused to do it.”

“I’m glad,” she whispered.

“It was about control. It took me a long time to realize it, well past losing Genny. Men like him don’t make *men*. They make ignorant, mindless automatons who go on to create more of the same if the cycle isn’t broken. I’m not saying at twelve years old I should have manned up and told my father to go fuck himself. I’m saying he was proud of me because he thought making me kill that deer, he was going to mold me in his image. And that was the meaning of his life. He did not create a child to nurture him and set him free on this world to find happiness and do good. He created a child in order to live longer, because it was all about him, not one thing to do with me.”

“You’re so right,” she agreed.

“But that’s beside the point.”

“Okay.”

“The point I need to make is, I did what I did to your mother, and the regret I feel for that is fierce. But you need to know, the thing I regret most in my life is that I had a choice that day. A possible beating for me, or the life of that deer. And I picked killing that deer. He’d never laid a hand on me, Chloe, and I still picked that deer. And every time he’d lose it and I’d think, ‘now’s the time, he’s gonna whale on me,’ and he didn’t, I remembered that deer. I remembered I took her vitality to save my own ass. And to this day, I prefer to be called Bowie to remind me never to be that person again.”

“I understand that,” she said.

“Make no mistake, I wish like hell I’d done things differently with your mom.”

“I understand that too.”

“But if I had one thing in my life I was allowed to go back and change, I would not have killed that deer. It says nothing about how I feel about your mom or the pain I caused her. It says something about the man my father was trying to force me to be that I had to overcome before I could really be with her. But the truth of it is, mostly, it’s about that deer.”

She nodded. “And that’s understood too. And it doesn’t make me feel badly toward you. In fact, I get it. I’ve never killed anything. But if I did, I probably would wish that too.”

“Okay, honey,” he said in his lovely gentle tone. “Now I need to understand why it means so much to you, me being with your mom.”

Sneak attack.

Yes.

She was pulling nothing over on Bowie Holloway.

“I want her happy.”

“It’s more than that. You’re sharp as a knife, and you’re lethally loving. But you do not strike me as a woman who focuses her formidable energy on a whim.”

“Dad and her are never going to get back together,” she blurted.

“Okay,” he said.

He was going to say more, but she spoke fast.

“I’ll let her explain why.”

“I’d appreciate that.”

“She needs someone strong to protect her.”

He shot straight on his stool and practically barked, “Why?”

Yes.

She was right.

Oh, hell yes, she was.

Shewasrightrightright.

It was him.

“She doesn’t have a stalker or anything,” she assured quickly. “She’s just…” she shook her head in short shakes, “She’s just Imogen Swan.”

“Your mom is strong and capable.”

“It isn’t about her.”

“What’s it about?”

She rolled her shoulders. “It’s about me.”

“What about you?”

“I just need to know she’s looked after.”

It dawned on him, what she wasn’t saying, and the man she was coming to know, she should have known it would.

“Divorce sucks,” he murmured.

“Yes, it does,” she said bitterly.

“She’s going to be okay, with or without me.”

“I’d rather her be okay with you.”

It took him a second, his hazel eyes concerned and warm on her.

And then he said, “Me too.”

Chloe relaxed.

Then she declared, “No offense, Bowie, but your dad’s a dick.”

“He’s dead.”

“No offense, Bowie, but I’m kinda glad.”

He grinned at her, shaking his head, and replied, “None taken, Coco.”

“Though, well done you for breaking the cycle.”

He kept grinning and shaking his head, but he said nothing.

“I’ll vamoose after Mom shows so you two can have some privacy.”

“That’d be appreciated.”

“But be forewarned, I’m not leaving because this is the best vacation I’ve ever had.”

He burst out laughing.

She watched.

Then she reached out and forced Tuck to endure the indignity of enjoying some chin scratches.

After that, she climbed off her stool to do some tidying.

Chapter Nine

The Tour

Duncan

“Aren’t you nervous?”

Chloe was standing at his side on the porch, both of them watching the black Cayenne roll up the drive.

Since breakfast, she’d morphed from pretty girl in pajama bottoms, cami and Sully’s purloined flannel shirt to fashionista in jeans, slouchy sweater belted at the waist, and shoes he knew—and did not get why women did not find it funny and stop doing it—they called booties.

The heels again were high.

He was learning not to worry about it.

In fact, at this point, he’d probably be more concerned if she wore flats.

“With age, honey, you learn a lot of shit. One of the things you learn is that, in this world, there is absolutely nothing you can control, except your own actions and reactions.”

He looked down at her noting, not for the first time, she was visibly nervous.

And one of many things she made clear about her personality, Chloe Pierce was not a nervous person.

Maybe she was thinking her mom was going to be ticked at her.

Mostly, he suspected, it was wanting what was to come to work.

“Don’t get me wrong,” he continued. “I want with all I am to carry on the good work Gen and me started last night. But I got one job in this and all I can do is do it right. I fully intend to do that. What comes of that is beyond my control and the only thing I can do is react when it happens in a way that’s best for your mom.”

“You know...” she hesitated and then, “I shouldn’t say it.”

He turned fully to her.

And he got down to it.

For him.

And for her.

Because whatever was going to happen was imminently going to happen.

And this had to be said.

“Whatever goes down with your mom, Chloe, you and me, we have what we have, and I want you to know, it’s means something to me. If things don’t work out with Genny, I get I’ll likely lose you. And you’re an extraordinary young woman. So that will pain me. But I’ll understand, and we’ll have had our time. And I already know it’s an honor that you gave it to me. But while we’re having it, I don’t want you to feel you can’t say something to me.”

She stared up at him, expression open and sweet, and yeah.

Someone was in for a helluva ride with Chloe Pierce.

But when that ride was over, life would be really fucking good.

“You remind me of my dad,” she blurted.

It had not been lost on him, in coming home last night from Genny the way Genny had been at the bar, getting his laptop, and doing what he’d not once allowed himself to do: a deep dive into her life—that there were definite physical, and it would seem if he could believe what he read, other similarities between him and Tom Pierce.

Duncan was unusual because he didn’t really have a type. He enjoyed women. Height. Weight. Race. None of that mattered. He was attracted to a variety of things.

Which was evidenced by the fact Gen was tall, slender and blonde, Dora was just under average height, curvy and brunette and Betsy was tall, voluptuous and mixed race.

But they were all funny. They were all loyal. And they were all motivated.

But it was clear Genny had a type.

Something that didn’t bother him, and not only because Chloe had openly, and not unwittingly, but perhaps not understanding how crucial it was, shared that Gen and her ex would never get back together.

Tom Pierce, as far as he could tell, was halfway to sainthood.

The public didn’t know something, though.

And neither did Duncan.

Considering the fact that family still seemed very tight, he just hoped, if Genny gave that to him, he didn’t lose his shit when he found out.

Onward from that, he’d discovered that neither of them had dated since the divorce.

It was just over a year old, but even so, they were both vital people, it was high time to move on.

Until Chloe had shared what she'd shared that morning, Duncan had found this concerning. Because it might be they couldn't move on because they were still hung up on each other.

Now, he just saw it as something else made clear at the bar.

Genny was out of practice with this shit.

Which was why, last night, sitting next to a man she wanted, she was cute, nervous and a babbling mess.

"I find that a compliment," he told Genny's daughter.

"It was meant as one," she replied. "And newsflash, Bowie, I love my mom loads. But I'm not the type of gal, and she isn't either, that would let anything stand in the way of something that means something. And it means something, you and me being *amies*. So my mission today is to find some boots so we can go riding tomorrow. And I'm leaving them up here because I have no use for riding boots in Phoenix. And because we're going to go riding again."

"Your wish is my command," he replied.

"As it should be," she stated.

Christ, he liked this kid.

He grinned at her.

She shot him a sassy smile then turned to the drive and cried, "*Ma mère chérie!*" and flung herself down the steps.

His body automatically jolted.

Nope.

He was still worried about her in those heels.

"My dastardly, nefarious daughter!" Genny, who was out of her car and rounding the hood, cried back.

But her face said she didn't mean it.

And Duncan started chuckling.

"You know you love me," Chloe stated, throwing her arms around her mom.

"She makes it hard. I best mother of the year every year with all her varied tests, but I do it," Genny called up to Duncan, and he noted she was holding her daughter close.

Duncan watched, but he did it aware there were things he refused to see.

No.

Feel.

He'd unpack that later.

Maybe with Genny.

More likely with Harvey.

They broke apart only for Chloe to seize Genny's hand and start dragging.

"Come!" she shouted. "You must have *le grand tour*."

"Lead the way, my darling," Genny said unnecessarily, since her daughter was pulling her up the steps.

Duncan watched and noted their outfits weren't much different.

Gen's sweater was crewneck and fitted. She had a little scarf tied around her neck. And the heel height on her booties wasn't stratospheric.

Still not Prescott.

But at this point, he couldn't imagine either woman in anything less.

Chloe tugged her mother to a stop in front of him.

"Hello, Duncan," Genny greeted.

"Genny."

She looked nervous again and unsure what to do.

So he caught her by the side of the neck, pulled her in and up, and kissed her cheek.

The woman was blushing when he let her go.

"*Maman, vraiment?*" Chloe murmured teasingly.

"Shut up," Genny mumbled.

Duncan made note look up the word "*vraiment*."

"Tour!" Chloe exclaimed. "Then I'm vanishing so you old people can do boring things like chat over coffee. Come, Mummy. Come, Bowie."

And off Chloe went, again dragging her mother with her.

But Genny looked over her shoulder and mouthed, "Bowie?"

She knew.

He was steadfastly "Duncan" to outsiders.

He was "Bowie" to those he let in.

He shrugged.

She disappeared inside his house.

He followed but stopped a few steps in, even though Chloe was pulling Gen to the great room at the back of the house.

He then looked around.

He'd designed this place, came once a week to watch it go up and lived there for five years, but it was like he was seeing it for the first time.

The entry was very large, open, and this feeling was increased by the upstairs gallery that ran the entire space. There were seating areas up there, one recessed in an alcove. The walls covered in shelves that held books, things Duncan had picked up while traveling, framed pictures of the boys or their terrible, but cute and hilarious, artwork from when they were little and trophies his sons had earned.

The back of the house was a great room that had two-story floor to roof windows and a view of the lake curving around the back of the property, the forest, and the mountains.

Off to the right, the open plan kitchen with a walk-in pantry, access to the four-car garage and wide doorway to the dining room. And to the left, hidden beyond the wall where the large stone fireplace was, was utility and laundry as well as a powder room.

The rest of the house, upper and lower floors, had two halls leading off each side of the entry (down) and gallery (up).

Downstairs there was his office. A den. The dining room. A room that held pretty much nothing but an antique pool and poker table, because Duncan and his buds liked to play poker and pool. A couple of guest baths, because there was a lot of space, and when you needed one, you didn't want to have to walk miles. And a game/media/TV room, because he didn't want his boys hogging the television with their game play, nor was he a fan of seeing them on their asses for hours, so since they dug that on occasion, he gave them space where he didn't have to look at it.

Upstairs were all bedrooms, each with their own en suite bathroom, and the master had a balcony and a pretty damn spectacular view of the lake, forest and mountains.

It was furnished in comfortable, sturdy furniture and decorated in family, west, old west and southwest with some mission and Native American thrown in.

It was masculine.

Already felt lived in.

And it was entirely overkill.

He felt a pang in his side at holding back the need to bend double laughing.

Sure, in his current, smug self-actualized state, he could admit this was a realization of a dream.

But it was also a massive, six-thousand-square-foot fuck you to his dead dad.

And last, it was a house Imogen Swan would feel comfortable in.

Because no matter the sturdiness of the furniture, it was top of the line, looked great and cost a whack.

And the west, old west, southwest and Native American stuff was mostly art, carvings, statues, weavings, antiques, and it had all cost a small fortune.

She wasn't even a dream, the idea of Genny coming back into his life. Until his assistant got a call from her assistant a few days ago, not even a possibility.

But he'd built this for her.

For Genny.

For the woman she was today and the man he'd always wanted to be for her.

And he could not deny that.

"You look amused," Genny noted, coming back into the entry.

"I am."

"Is it because my daughter, who does not live here, has commandeered guide duties and is giving me a tour of your home?" she asked.

"No," he answered.

She tipped her head to the side in curiosity.

Chloe ignored this exchange and pulled her to the stairs.

"I won't bore you with the rest of down here. It's all man stuff, outside the dining room, which you've seen. And the den, which has no purpose, since the entirety of the house is set up for men to do indoor manly things, and the den is no different. Therefore, that would be the room a woman could requisition and cover in floral wallpaper and chintz furniture. We'll save that for last. Now, we'll go to my bedroom. Which, if you don't poke yourself on the sharp things, *is divine.*"

He didn't miss Genny glanced at him several times as she went up the stairs.

But he waited until she and Chloe disappeared down the hall before he went to his office, grabbed his laptop, took it to the kitchen, refreshed his coffee, and opened it up.

The room he'd put Chloe in was the room he'd designed for when his mom came to visit.

Ruthy Holloway loved her boys, but she also loved to read and have quiet times, and it wasn't lost on Duncan she savored these after living in a house with a man who claimed every inch of space as his own and demanded every second of attention for the same.

Duncan wouldn't describe the room as "divine," but for his mom, he'd made sure it was damned comfortable and designed to be relatively self-contained.

It included a larger walk-in closet than the other bedrooms had (save the master, which had two). It had a lounge area. It was the only room outside the master with a balcony, though it was much smaller. And it had a closed-away niche that had cabinets, a counter that held a coffeemaker and a wine-rack, and a small built-in fridge, all of this offering snacks, beverages, with not a small selection of wine.

It was a cool room.

But he sensed that was their current destination not because it was a cool room, but because mother and daughter needed some time and he was down with giving it to them.

He was not wrong.

Twenty minutes later, he was standing at the island, replying to an email when they reappeared.

"May I liberate the hounds, warden?" Chloe asked.

He'd put the dogs in the utility so they wouldn't overwhelm Genny.

"Have at it," he invited.

Gen wandered his way.

Chloe went toward the utility room.

"My daughter has made a mess of your guest room," Genny shared.

Duncan shrugged.

"I'm glad you feel that way, because Tuck has nested in a cashmere sweater in a way I think he might be most annoyed if he was forced to give it up and Bounce has made a hutch of her suitcase," she remarked.

Duncan grinned.

The cacophony began, heralding the imminent arrival of "the hounds" which reminded him.

"Baby, Rocco's got some strength. Missing his front leg, he's developed muscle in a way other dogs don't. It can be surprising. Be aware. Yeah?"

She nodded quickly, turned, and then he lost her.

Because she squatted so low, he could only see the top of her head.

“Oh, my goodness. Oh, my darlings. Look at you precious beings,” she cooed.

Shasta barked her greeting.

Killer scooted and whirled around.

And as suspected, Rocco tackled her flat on her ass.

She let out a cry and started giggling.

Duncan moved positions to get a better view.

They were all over her.

“You’re not going to have any makeup left, Mother, if you keep letting them kiss you like that,” Chloe warned.

Gen made not one move to stop them from licking her. “If I need to, I can touch up using your things.”

“You are forbidden to get dog saliva residue in my Chanel cosmetics.”

“I’ll buy you more.”

“Well, okay then,” Chloe huffed.

Christ.

He loved these two.

He loved them.

He didn’t question it; he just knew it.

With only half an hour in their combined presence, he knew to his gut and bones, Genny, the mother, and Chloe, her daughter had his love until the day he died.

And he suddenly wished he had daughters and wondered what Sasha was like.

But he refused to dwell on that.

“Well?” Chloe demanded.

Of him.

“Sorry?” he asked her.

She pointed at her mom. “Are you not going to rescue her from canine carnage, the canines perpetrating the carnage being yours?”

Duncan didn’t get a shot to answer.

Genny did.

“Stop being dramatic.”

“For the last time, that’s never going to happen!” Chloe announced on an outraged cry. “Now, I’m leaving. I can witness this no longer.”

On that, she stomped to the island, nabbed her bag, then stomped toward the door to the garage, smacking her leg and calling, “Come here. Come to Auntie Chloe. Come say goodbye. I’m going to be gone for a while, and you’re going to miss me because I’m pretty sure Daddy doesn’t give you full turkey sausage patties as treats.”

Jesus.

She was right.

On two counts.

One, he did not do that.

And two, heading toward the door to the garage, so the dogs knew she was departing, they defected the woman who was a human-size dog toy on the floor for the woman who gave them turkey sausage as treats.

Duncan went to Genny and helped her up.

“Ta ta, *mon ami et ma jolie maman*. I’ll text before I head back. Be good,” Chloe called.

Then she was gone.

The dogs stared at the door in confusion.

“Is my makeup a mess?”

Duncan looked from his dogs to his Genny.

There was a smudge of black at the corner of her left eye, but otherwise, she’d come out unscathed.

“Not bad, though I don’t know how important it is to you, so the powder room is through there.”

He pointed across the room.

“Be back,” she murmured, hustling that way.

The dogs chased after her.

“Stop!” he ordered. “Enough!”

They skidded, turned and raced to him.

And when they arrived at him, *he* nearly went down.

Gage was petitioning for another one.

Duncan's youngest had some asinine argument about how having five pets upset the balance of the universe because the number needed to be even. He was hoping for a cat, but Sully, who'd bought into this shit, was pushing for another dog.

Duncan's response was, "When you flunk out of U of A, you can get another animal because you'll be around to feed them and take care of them as well as the horses, chickens, and anything else I make you do to be all over your ass for flunking out of college."

That ended the discussion.

But right then, he gave orders for them to cool it, which Shasta and Rocco did, but Killer totally ignored him, and he ignored his baby girl doing that.

He then heard a noise coming from the garage and was still smiling when Genny came out of the bathroom.

"Now what's amusing you?" she asked on her way over.

"Your daughter took my car."

She stopped dead in the middle of the room, arched far back with her hands clenched at her chest, and called to God, "Please, *please* let there be a partner out there who can handle the handful she is or make her a woman who is perfectly fine in her own company *for eternity*. Please."

"Babe?" he called.

She looked his way.

"That sedation you considered for your ex?"

She nodded.

"It wasn't because she's a handful. It was because *she's a handful*. He knows that. She's the reason shit like duels was invented. You should be praying for the guys, or gals, or whatever she's into. Because there's probably a pack of them she's already laid waste to in her wake. They're the ones who need your prayers."

"Now I think *I* need sedation," she said, finishing making her way to him.

"Sorry, I only got coffee."

She grinned and stopped at the island.

The dogs fanned out all around her, hoping she'd collapse on the floor and play.

Instead, she looked to his laptop and a hint of worry shadowed her face.

"Do you need to work?"

There was no denying it.

All that was happening, he was getting behind.

Gen in his house for the first time, there because she was ready to talk things through, no way in fuck he was working.

“No.”

She nodded, biting her lip.

She started to say something, but he asked, “You wanna meet the horses?”

“I want to meet the horses and see the chickens, but Bowie, maybe we should talk.”

He closed his laptop, kept his hand on it, rested his weight in his other hand on the counter, and queried, “Something new on your mind?”

But she was staring at his laptop.

“Genny, I don’t need to work,” he assured.

“You did that,” she told his hand.

“Sorry?”

Her eyes came to his. “Even back then when things weren’t...” she lifted a hand a circled it, “*heavy*, like they are now. If something was on my mind, you dropped everything. And listened.”

“Genny,” he said softly.

She drew in breath and let it out, saying, “I’ve had my coffee. I try to keep it at two cups, only in the morning. But I can hang if you want to make another cup and maybe we can go on the back porch and chat?”

He was a coffee fiend. Always had been. Drank it all day. Caffeine didn’t affect him, or his sleep.

She knew that, but even if she didn’t remember, it didn’t matter.

It was time.

And he’d pushed for this.

But he was fucking dreading it.

He refreshed his cup. Led the way to the back porch.

Genny came with him.

She settled in an Adirondack chair that was angled to the lake.

He settled in standing and leaning against a roof post, facing her.

She didn’t look at his view.

Her gaze was glued to him.

It was time to do this.

Then face the consequences.

“I’ll start,” he said.

“Please do,” she replied quietly.

“I never felt good enough for you.”

Pain slashed through her features and it took all he had to stay where he was.

But she whispered, “I know.”

“It wasn’t you.”

“I know.”

“It was my dad.”

She nodded.

“And Corey played us both.”

She nodded again.

“I let him because that was where my head was at. Yesterday, I realized, there was a part of me that nagged day in and day out since it happened that I knew to my soul you didn’t step out on me. But I jumped on that excuse to let you go because I had to because I needed to set you free for you. But also, for me, because I had something to prove.”

She rolled her head on her shoulders. Pressed her lips together.

But said nothing.

“To Dad and to myself.”

She finally spoke.

Softly.

And it was a statement.

Not a question.

“But not me.”

“Not you,” he confirmed.

She got up and he had no idea what she’d do after he confessed that.

Confessed the rotten truth that it wasn’t really Corey being a slimeball.

It was Duncan.

And in his head, her knowing that without doubt, even more than she had to know it before, he thought was worse.

She was too classy to just take off.

But with whatever goodbye she gave him, he had to stand there and take it.

And then let her walk into his house, get her bag, only to walk out of it, get in her car and leave.

He felt sick to his stomach.

But for her, he could not move.

So he didn't.

She stood for long moments, studying him.

Then she looked to the lake.

To his dogs who were pressing against the windows with their noses.

And back to Duncan.

She then walked to him and lifted her hands.

She didn't shove him into the post in fury.

She set them on his chest and pressed.

He held his breath.

Up.

And she pressed against his shoulders.

Up.

And she curled them around the sides of his neck.

Up.

And she cupped his jaw.

She watched her hands as they did this.

He watched her.

Not breathing.

Then she took her hands from his face, slid her arms around his middle, and fitted herself to his front, resting her cheek to his chest.

He let his breath go and closed eyes that were suddenly stinging.

"I couldn't have helped," she whispered to his shirt.

"No," he grunted.

“You had to take that journey yourself.”

“Yeah.”

“Corey still played you.”

“Yes.”

She let out a little sigh and melted deeper into him.

Good Christ.

Christ.

Genny.

He wrapped an arm around her, twisted his neck, and rested his jaw on her head.

“But you know I always believed in you.”

He shut his eyes tighter and felt the wet slide over the bridge of his nose.

“Yeah, baby. I knew I always had you.”

“Then as long as that’s the case, let’s figure out what’s next.”

Fuck.

Christ.

Fuck.

He had to open his eyes to put his mug on the railing, something he did and quick.

Then he curled his other arm around her shoulders and squeezed her tight.

She squeezed him back.

His voice was hoarse when he started, “I wasted—”

“Stop it.”

“We lost—”

“Stop it, Bowie.”

He shut up.

“It would have happened, you know, somewhere along the line,” she said.

Yeah.

He knew.

“It could have been my career taking off as quickly as it did. It could have been you not liking LA, because I’m not sure you’ve been there, but it’s not one thing like here.”

A startled chuckle burst from his chest and he kept holding her tight.

“I’ve been there, Gen, and I’m not a fan.”

“I bet not,” she muttered.

They were silent.

She spoke first.

“It would have been something.”

“Yeah.”

“We weren’t ready.”

“You were. But I wasn’t.”

She tipped her head back. “You let me go and I let you let me go, Bowie. One could argue it isn’t the place of a woman accused of something like that when she didn’t do it to chase after her man. But you knew me better and I knew you did. And I didn’t chase after my man.”

“I’m not real comfortable with you takin’ any of the blame for this, baby,” he informed her.

“There are a variety of incidences where men and women fuck up and do hurtful things for no reason at all. Things that are avoidable, and if they do them, they’re unforgiveable. This is not one of those cases. Trust me,” she gave him a careful smile “your fuckup was really, really *huge*. And I have no crystal ball to see what would have become of us if you didn’t believe Corey. But something you said yesterday has stuck with me. We were too young for something that big. It was going to overwhelm us eventually. So, you know, wresting my rose-colored glasses from the gnarled, twisted, but deathly strong fingers of the hands of time and perching them back on my nose, what you did probably saved us so we could have whatever we’re going to have now.”

“Wresting your rose-colored glasses from the hands of time?” he teased.

She gave him a shake with her arms.

He got serious and said, “I’ll take that view through those glasses, Genny. And we’ll take it from here.”

“Good,” she stated firmly.

Christ, he needed to kiss her.

“But this does not let Corey off the hook,” she declared.

Obviously, he did not kiss her.

“Baby—”

“If you’re going to petition for my forgiveness of him, forget it, Bowie.”

“No way in fuck I’d ever do that.”

She stared up at him.

“And that’s not totally about what he did to me and you. It’s about what he kept doing to you all these years. Knowin’ the lie he told and how it affected you and bein’ close enough to you, your kids call him Uncle Corey. Which, by the way, makes me wanna throw something every time I hear Chloe say it.”

Motherly concern washed into her face and she asked, “Do you talk about him a lot?”

“No. Mostly she bosses me while alternately feeding me and hiding the fact she’s spoiling my animals so this house will never be the same if she’s not in it, which I know is her goal. Chloe Pierce will never leave a place the same as it was before she arrived there. It’s a singular gift. And Tuck is gonna hate me forever when I make it clear the counters are again off-limits.”

She jostled him happily and set her chin on his chest, her eyes shining.

She was proud of her girl, as terrorizing as she was.

And he loved that.

“Gage is gonna have a massive crush on her,” he muttered.

“How old is he?”

“Nineteen going on eleven.”

She started giggling.

“And your older boy? Sullivan? How old is he?” she asked.

“He’s twenty-one, and those hands of time you wrested your glasses from?”

“Hmm?”

“Those were his.”

She giggled harder at that, so much, he felt it against his body.

Now was a better time to kiss her.

And he was going to do that.

God, Christ, tasting Genny again.

He couldn’t fucking wait.

He started to drop his head.

Her laughing eyes grew wider then got serious right quick.

She was coming up on her toes...

“Well, hell.”

They both froze.

“*Harvey!* I told you!”

Genny leaned to the side to look beyond him.

Duncan didn't have to look.

But he did anyway, holding her close and twisting his head to look over his shoulder.

Harvey and Beth were standing beyond the railing at the back corner of the porch.

"You didn't answer your doorbell," Harvey accused Duncan's way.

"Yeah, because he's necking with his girl on his back porch, you big dork!" Beth snapped, smacking her husband's arm and it looked like she did it hard.

"Woman! How was I supposed to know? Yesterday, she'd barely look at him."

"Omigod!" Beth turned and homed in on Genny. "He lives with four women and he *still* has no clue."

"I know about the three-day shampoo regimen," Harvey clipped.

"Well bravo for you," she shot back.

"You two wanna stop yellin' at each other long enough for me to make you both a cup of coffee, and Beth, I don't know, maybe before that, introduce you to Genny?" Duncan asked.

"We absolutely, one hundred percent, and I could not stress this more, do not want a cup of coffee," Beth decreed. "No offense, Genny."

"I could use some joe," Harvey said.

Before Beth's head could explode, Duncan threw out a compromise.

"How 'bout I fill a couple travel mugs for you."

"We're leaving," Beth decreed. And to Genny, "Genny, so nice to not-quite but still meet you. I wish I could tell you we weren't these lunatics, but we totally are. Do with that what you will. If you take Bowie from us, we'll understand. God granted us more time with him than we deserved anyway."

"Speak for yourself, wife," Harvey bit out. And to Genny, "I am not a lunatic. You saw yourself yesterday, doll. I'm your average, everyday best friend to a man whose shitty life circumstances tore from the arms of the love of his life and he needed my special guidance to get them back. Therefore, I'm taking total responsibility for this."

Harvey finished, jabbing his finger toward Duncan and Genny.

It didn't last long upraised.

Beth grabbed his wrist, yanked it down and started tugging it.

“You’ll come over for dinner. Soon, a couple of days, I’ll make something in the air fryer,”
Beth called as she moved, hauling Harvey with her.

“You and that air fryer,” Harvey groused.

“You didn’t complain about that air fryer when I was pulling homemade jalapeño poppers out
of it. You were too busy shoving them in your gob.”

They heard this even though Beth and Harvey had disappeared from sight.

“You were wrong.”

At these words, Duncan looked down at Genny.

“She’s scary,” she decreed.

He burst out laughing.

She gave him a squeeze while he was doing it.

And even though he looked down at her and saw her smiling up at him happily, he stopped
doing it.

Bent his head.

And took her mouth.

Genny gave him instant access.

So he took it.

She tasted warm and smooth and decadent.

Different and all the same.

But as ever, intoxicating.

And addicting.

He angled his head for more. She pulled her arms from around him to wind them around his
neck and pushed up on her toes to give it.

She pressed deep.

He pulled her deeper.

But when his cock started stirring, he ended it, kissing her jaw, the downy skin in front of her
ear, then resting his cheek against the side of her head and just holding her close.

“Okay, so, um...it seems we have no problems getting the hang of that again,” she mumbled.

He smiled at his stables. “Nope.”

“Are you going to introduce me to your horses?”

“Yup.”

“And your chickens?”

“Yeah.”

“Your dogs are about to break through the glass.”

“We’ll bring them with.”

“Just so you know, I checked, and you were correct. My building has not had a sanitation emergency.”

“I figured.”

“Bowie?”

“Right here.”

“Sam phoned Mary. She wants to sit down and talk.”

Fuck.

Much More to Come!

Love, Kit