

1

"Why are we chopping down our own tree again?" Deacon tried stamping some warmth back into his feet but all he did was jar his knees. "Jesus, I think I broke my nipples off. It's that damned cold."

He wasn't sure where he was. Or rather where Lang drove them. All he knew he was bundled up that morning like he was going to climb Mount Everest and possibly arm-wrestle a Yeti. They'd driven for what felt like for hours and somehow ended up in what looked like a bit of Sherwood Forest tucked into the folds of a California hillside. The bit of snow on the ground promised a chilly morning, despite the clear sky and bright sun and that promise was delivered as soon as Deacon got out of Lang's new Rover.

Deacon was pretty sure he was going to have to shake his balls back down once they got back to Half Moon Bay because they'd retreated from the crisp wind.

"Because it's a family tradition," Lang repeated patiently for what Deacon probably guessed for the hundredth time. "Or at least it was one when I lived with my grandmother. Just be glad we're only doing one tree. Grandmother used to put up six...sometimes seven."

"Why the hell would you need seven damned Christmas trees?" he muttered, working through the rows of trees behind Lang as his husband moved slowly through the field. "And what the heck would you put on them?"

"We've got a *lot* of ornaments. My great-grandfather had an import business, remember? The attic is full of stuff. I've spent weeks up there as a kid and I don't think I've opened up every trunk." Lang's eyes grew misty, his face softened with the brush of fond memories. "Grandmother just liked Christmas trees. And food. For her, Christmas was about food and family."

"And trees." Deacon sidestepped a suspicious brown mound on the ground. "Tell me you didn't have presents under all the trees or we're going to have to have a talk with Princess Zig and expectations."

"Only the big tree had presents under it. The one in the living room." Lang stopped at a fragrant, tall evergreen, its needles a rich blue-grey. "It's got to fill the front window. I like spruces. What do you like?"

"Babe, where I'm from, the trees are plastic and lopsided because they were dug out of a dumpster." He hated the flash of pity in Lang's glance and Deacon bit his lip, wishing he could take back his words. "It wasn't that bad. We had Christmases. Just not... seven tree kinds."

"To be fair, love, no one needs seven Christmas trees." His husband reached for him, sliding a slightly chilled hand around Deacon's waist. "We just need the one and I think I just found it."

The tree Lang stood in front of had to be at least eight feet tall and about as wide as Deacon's arms stretched out. It looked...expensive, something he'd see at a shopping mall or in front of a church where people arranged Nativity scenes nearby and drank spiced apple cider out of pewter mugs. It was the kind of tree that had a presence, strong enough to bear generations of ornaments and too regal for anything as crass as fake aluminum garland.

Lang looked at it like he'd just fallen in love.

"We just need to chop it down now and then they'll come and put it in that net sleeve thing they use." Lang eyed the ax, a dubious gleam in his eye. "Okay, I've never chopped down a tree in my life. You?"

"Sweetheart, until a few months ago, I'd never built an actual fire in a fireplace and I've just learned how to split a log. Kind of. Mostly," Deacon reminded him. "Didn't the guy down the hill say they'd chop it down for an extra twenty or is the bringing-the-tree-down a part of the whole tradition your grandmother started business?"

"My grandmother never chopped a tree down in her life either. Hell, she barely gardened. Mostly I think she just liked wearing big straw hats with veils on them and puttering about with white gloves on," he frowned, scratching his cheek. "Come to think of it, the last few times we came to get the trees, I held them up while Angel hacked at the bottoms until they landed on me. Gran just pointed out the ones she wanted then headed back to sit in the car with the heaters going full blast."

"Yeah, right." Deacon nodded. "Want to stay here and ward off any poachers while I go get somebody to chop this thing down? Or do you want us to take a whack at it."

A burst of cold air struck them and Lang shivered despite Deacon taking the brunt of it. Pressing his lips together, Lang removed his steamed up glasses and gave Deacon a slow, owlish blink. The temperature seemed to drop around them as Deacon's heartbeat skipped a little when Lang unconsciously leaned into him, seeking out Deacon's heat.

"Here, hold onto this." Lang handed Deacon the ax. "I've got a twenty in my wallet and the Rover's got a damned good heater."

2

"Babe, I love you," Deacon grunted. "But this thing is really heavy."

"You're good. Let me just tighten the screws in." Lang twisted the knobs of the ornate metal tree stand, edging the massive stops into the bark of their spruce. "Then we can make sure it's straight too."

The stand was huge, a complicated thing of screws and flat spacers he'd stared at for a good five minutes before Deacon came by and sorted it out in thirty seconds. He worried it wouldn't be strong enough to hold up the enormous spruce but to be fair, he worried about a lot of things. This was their first Christmas as a family, a single working unit of temperaments and personalities...and something Lang never imagined he'd have in his lifetime.

He was also trying to not get distracted by Deacon's bare feet and ankles not more than a few feet away, poking out from under the spruce's netted branches. It was stupid to be turned on by toes but there he was, staring at his husband's feet of all things when he should have been working to steady the tree.

"Any time you're ready to finish that up, sweetheart. The tree and I will be right here waiting." Deacon's light teasing held a golden warmth. There was never any edge to his words, nothing to cut into Lang to make him bleed.

"Sorry, got distracted," Lang confessed, turning one of the opposite screws he'd been working on to keep the tension even.

"That's okay. I'm really good. I kind of like this whole watching you work on something while you're hunched over." Deacon's voice went husky, slick with promises and heat. "I like how your ass looks in those sweats."

A sear crept through Lang's cheeks, flushing him red and he flicked at Deacon's toes with his fingers. "Stop that."

"What? Zig's over at Angel's making cookies and..." Deacon paused when the sound of two young bickering voices bleed through from outside. "Never mind. The monsters have descended."

The front door slammed open and a tangle of noise and trouble stampeded in.

Zig's smile held little of the brittle hardness it had when Lang first met her in his bookstore. Instead, she beamed, confident and secure enough to launch herself at Deacon at a full run. There wasn't any question he'd catch her. He was the kind of man who anyone could fling themselves at in the hopes of being saved and Deacon would without hesitating, embrace them in midflight.

Unfortunately, grabbing Zig meant letting go of the tree.

The tree lurched forward and Lang made a desperate grab for it, snagging his fingers in its netted covering. With three of the four screws in, the spruce bobbed and danced in its stand, threatening to topple over. Yelping in alarm, Lang called out and a pair of hands grappled the tree from him.

"I've got it," Angel reassured him, his forearms barely straining with the effort of keeping the tree upright. "Guess you weren't done?"

"Not quite." Lang peered around the tree at Deacon and a mortified Zig. "Are we done killing me?"

"Sorry," Zig muttered as Deacon put her down. "Just got excited. Roman and I get to be angels in the school play together. Angel said he'll make us wings."

"Appropriate I suppose. To get your wings from an older angel," Lang drawled.

"Here, let me get that, Ange." Deacon moved in to hold the tree but Angel shook his head.

"Nah, I've got it but there's stuff in the car if you want to bring it in. Some muffins and cookies the kids made. Can't tell you they're edible. Put icing on like they were spackling adobe onto a house." Angel was tall, a dirty blonde with sharp grey eyes Lang swore saw everything around him and probably one of the most together people he'd ever known. He was also a link to Lang's grandmother and a veteran of the Christmas tree battles, giving Deacon a wicked grin. "It's kind of nice to be the one holding the tree up. Normally it was me fighting with the damned stands."

"Go on. It's like old times. Except I'm the one down here," Lang waved his husband off. "Make sure they don't eat themselves sick. You can stay for dinner if you want, Ange. You and Roman."

"I don't know if I should," Angel murmured softly. "Especially since your brother's trying to shut me and my bakery down."

3

"Wait, let me get this straight," Deacon growled at Lang while they picked through an ocean of boxed up ornaments. "Your brother the dick is suing Angel?"

"Don't call West a dick. I just got Zig to stop saying it." Lang rolled his eyes at Deacon's huff of exasperation. "He's not suing Angel, he's trying to get Angel to sell him the bakery so he can develop the property around it. Not something I agree with."

"You going to give West some shit about it? Because if you're not..." The cutting look he got from Lang was worthy of West. "Look, I love you but your brother? He's kind of an asshole."

"West has... issues." Lang sniffed.

"He's an uptight prick who just happens to be hot because he's got your face. That's about the best thing going for him." He teased a smile out of Lang with a slow, simmering kiss. "Okay, so maybe he's a ruthless fuck but he's your brother. I get it. But trying to drive Angel Daniels out? The guy's working his ass off to make a living and West's trying to bury him. Dick move, babe."

"Less about West and more about what we want on the tree." Lang held up a wooden thing painted in garish reds and greens. "What do you think about this?"

"I think it needs to be burned before it lurches upstairs and kills us all in our sleep?" Deacon offered. "What the hell is it? Please don't tell me you made that in shop class or something and I've just insulted you."

“Not mine. My mother. It’s supposed to be Father Christmas. I think.” He studied the cobbled together blocks, pulling at his lower lip. “Or maybe it was the other one. Crap. I don’t remember. God, I’m going to have to take a picture of it and ask her.”

“Do you really have to?” Deacon shifted on the couch, edging closer to his husband. “Do you want to?”

Taking Lang’s hand, he ran his thumb over the gold band, the twin to the one he wore on his own ring finger. It warmed under his touch, not like Lang’s family. They’d not spent a lot of time with the Harrises. Oddly enough, it was Lang’s cold-tempered twin brother who’d visited frequently, often ringing his brother up for a quick chat or sending along small presents for their family after a long business trip. For all the shit Deacon gave West, he knew he could count on Lang’s twin brother to be there if they needed him.

“Not really. I guess...I’m trying to shove a lot of Christmas into too small of a space? I don’t know if that makes sense, Deke,” Lang confessed. “I think I want to make everything perfect. Maybe too perfect? For Zig. For you. Maybe even for me.”

Deacon pulled Lang against him, looping his arm around his husband’s lithe body. Kissing the back of Lang’s head, he murmured, “Is this where I tell you how family and love is all we need for Christmas?”

“Yes, this is exactly where you say that,” Lang chuckled.

“Well, I can’t. Because Zig’s a kid and for her, Christmas is all about the shiny and she’s a bit of a hoarder.” Deacon joined Lang’s chuckle with one of his own. “Yeah, she needs us to love her and she knows she’s our kid but when it’s all said and done, it’s about toys, food and—”

“Books,” Lang finished. “All of the books.”

“Every book,” he agreed. “And honey, seriously, no matter what she’s given or not given, none of this shit—the tree, the food, the books, any of it—it really is about me, you and Zig. Now, let’s find the prettiest ornaments we can and get this damned thing decorated so we can go to bed.”

“Maybe not all the pretty ones.” Bending forward, Lang pulled the wooden monstrosity out of its spot in the box then smoothed the white cotton thatch sticking out of its chin. “Maybe a couple of the ugly ones too. Just because not everything that’s important is pretty but they are all beautiful.”

4

The clay they’d made of flour wasn’t cooperating and Zig’d reached the end of her patience with it. Angel wasn’t sure what she was making. When she’d first started laying down the pieces, he’d imagined it was a unicorn but then it grew wheels or wings, he couldn’t be certain. Regardless, the salty dough was drying out too quickly and if he didn’t step in to help, she’d be left with a lumpy mess instead of an ornament to take home.

Half Moon Bay’s afternoon youth art class was a two hour exercise in biting his tongue and making sure no one set themselves on fire. And he was just one of the volunteers.

He’d enrolled his brother Roman into the classes to keep the kid busy and the boy’d latched onto it like a duck to water. Rome’s best friend, Zig, joined a few weeks later and Angel’d been bringing their art teacher muffins ever since as an ongoing apology.

“Hey, Your Zigness, you need some help?” Angel peered over her shoulder. Being closer didn’t help. He still had no idea what she was making.

“Nope. Just doing my thing.” She looked up at him through her lashes, a too adult glance for her child-face. “Why?”

"No side-eye from you." Angel grinned, thinking of the trouble Deacon and Lang were going to have once Zig hit high school. "Just asking, kiddo. In case you needed something."

They understood one another, he and Zig. To be fair, the three of them shared more life experiences than he liked. Roman and Zig after a brief battle of wills culminating in a semi-fist fight and the long dreaded wait outside the principal's office firmed up a friendship that honestly terrified Angel on a very deep primal level. Since she'd entered their lives more than a year ago, Roman was quicker to communicate, sometimes rambling on about everything he'd done or seen for an hour after he came home from school. It was also a hell of a lot easier to parent with Lang and Deacon backing him up. They were all feeling their way around how to do things and what would work for one sometimes worked for the other kid. Not always but often enough for Angel to be willing to give anything a go.

"Do you think this sucks?" Zig poked at her lumpy creation. "And don't be all it's perfect how it is because life's not perfect cr...stuff."

"Good catch on the swear word there." He dragged a stool up to the art table. "Can I ask something and you won't get offended?"

"Yeah. Sure."

"I'm not really sure what I'm looking at," Angel sat down, edging into Roman. His eleven-year-old brother didn't notice but then Rome barely noticed anything when he was nose-deep in anything. "Is it supposed to be a motorcycle?"

"It started off as a dog but then I changed it to a robot." She wrinkled her nose, snorting in disgust. "So kind of a robot dog? I want to give it to Uncle West. I don't think a lot of people like him. He needs a pet or something."

Hearing West's name tore his calm into tatters. It would have been less painful if Zig'd taken a chain saw to his guts.

West Harris was the reason Angel steadfastly avoided Lang Harris. It'd been difficult at first seeing West's twin at their grandmother's house, especially since Angel frequently did odd jobs and cooking for her but he'd managed to keep contact down. There'd been a few times when avoiding Lang was impossible and despite the twins' very different personalities, there were sometimes flashes of West in Lang's expressions and body language.

His heart broke all over again the first time he'd seen Lang chew on his lower lip, worrying at the plump flesh while he worked something out. Angel didn't know what hurt more, seeing West in Lang's face or realizing Lang did nothing for him and any attraction he'd buried deep inside of him belonged to West and only West.

"I'm sure he's got lots of friends, Z," he weakly reassured her. "How about if you just stick to the dog part?"

"Because he's shit at taking care of people. Even Dad says so." Zig pinched at one end of the doughy lump. "This dog's going to good as he gets. And it's not even real."

5

"What the living hell are those?" Justin pursed his mouth in disgust. "And what's that smell? It's like a candle shop threw up in here."

For a best friend, the lanky redhead wasn't the most supportive of people but Angel adored the proto-Viking anyway. He was good in a pinch and adored Roman nearly as much as Angel did. In a lot of ways Justin was as much a brother to him as the one Angel's father dumped on his door, especially when it came to voicing his opinions as loudly and emphatically as he could.

"These are gingerbread snowflakes and the smell is called spices. I just haven't decorated them yet so don't be a dick." He carefully pulled out another cookie sheet from the bakery's ancient rotating oven. "And they're hot so don't

touch them. I'm trying to keep up with the Christmas rush. Sold out of everything I made yesterday but I'm kind of scared to make more. Suppose everyone who wanted cookies got theirs already."

"Ange, pretty sure you could serve them baked cow shit and tell them its meringue and they'll buy it." Justin hitched himself up onto the sink counter, ignoring Angel's hissed warning. "Please, there's no food being made over here. You just keep your Slytherin expressions over there. I've got gossip."

"You've always got gossip. You're a stylist." The salted butter was nearly softened by the looks of it and if he hurried, he could get the first batch of shortbread made and in the oven before Rome got home. "You going to work today? Or are you just passing through? I could use a hand bagging these when they're cool."

"I won't even punch in to do it. Just buy me dinner." Justin swung his long legs, his heels striking the counter's steel post. "Aren't you even curious about the gossip?"

"Will it help me sell more cookies?"

"All work and no play makes Angel cranky." Justin's booming laughter filled the Pizza Shack Bakery's kitchen. "It might. It's about the asshole trying to force you to sell the parking lot to him."

"That asshole is my landlord and I kind of work for him a little bit, remember?" Angel reminded him. "He owns the motel I'm the super for? You know, the guy you complain to because you broke your window trying to kill a spider?"

"A motel which is attached to the parking lot you own. Seriously, Ange, and don't take this wrong but the old lady should have given you the whole thing instead of this shack and a parking lot." His legs stilled and Justin's expression sobered. "Sorry, I know you liked her. She was an awesome lady and yeah, she helped you get this place going but she knew her grandson was an asshole. She should have known he'd try to fuck you over eventually."

"So far, none of this is going to help me sell cookies," he pointed out. "Look, I'm not selling. The dickwad he's got in charge of the development project is just going to have to wait until I'm on my feet before I even think about selling the lot. We don't need another fifty condos in Half Moon...okay, maybe we do... I don't know but right now, I need to stay put for Roman so all of that crap is just noise."

"He's gay."

"Who? The dickwad running the project?" Angel's brain scrambled to picture the autocratic asshole who'd been stomping through his life ever since someone at Harris Investments decided the motel needed tearing down for new condos. Problem was, they needed the land Lang's grandmother deeded to Angel to complete the project and he had no intention of selling. "I don't think he's gay."

"Not him. Lang's brother. West." Justin grinned smugly. "So I was thinking maybe one of us can go talk to him. Reach out. Hell, even Lang might—"

"I know he's gay. He's my ex." Angel shut Justin down with a shake of his head. "Mostly my ex. We were kids. I talked to you about this. It went bad. Really bad and I don't think the guy I hooked up with that summer is even inside of West anymore."

"Shit, *he's* the Harris you were talking about?" His friend's playful banter softened and Justin hopped off of the counter. "I always thought it was Lang. You said you had it bad back then so I thought... well, you hooked up with the human one."

"Yeah, Lang does nothing for me." The butter was definitely ready and Angel began unwrapping the blocks then plopping them into a bowl to be cut into the dry ingredients. "I like him and everything but he doesn't tickle my buttocks."

"Besides, he's Deacon's." Justin's sigh was a thoughtful, mournful wheeze. "God that man's fucking hot. So nothing at all with Lang? I mean they're identical twins, right?"

"Yeah but... nope, not even a blip." Angel grinned. "Kind of like you and me. We're just better off friends."

"So here's the big question, maybe Mister I-Own-Everything Harris is still carrying a torch for you and this whole shut down the motel thing is kind of his way of lashing out?" Justin began washing his hands in the sink, frothing suds up between his fingers. "Maybe talking to him would be good. You guys can sit down, reminisce, then you can talk some sense into him, so you can explain to him why Rome needs to stay in one place for a while...why he needs a home."

"Justin, as much as I love you, you're cracked in the head," Angel snorted, reaching for the flour he'd left on the work table. "West Harris probably doesn't even remember I'm alive. So no, no reaching out. No trying *anything*. You don't argue sentiment with someone who doesn't have a heart and there isn't enough roast beast in all of Whoville to get me to even try."

6

"Somewhere, there's a dinosaur missing its leg," Zig droned mournfully, her chin resting on the kitchen counter. She sat on one of the million bar stools ringed the granite-topped island, slumped over and watching Deacon painstakingly pick his way through the recipe Lang left out for them to follow. "It's hobbling off somewhere. Trying to get to its family and—"

"Zig baby, I love you but you've got to stop with the dino thing. It's beef. This came from a cow. So quit with the limping lizard thing," Deacon muttered at her. Pushing his glasses up the length of his nose, he read off the next item of the ingredient list. "It says three cloves of garlic. Does that sound right? Just three?"

"I can't even stay up past nine. What do I know?" His daughter's shrug was sarcastic. It made no sense but Deacon could feel his daughter's tiny shoulders throwing her resentment at him in protest of her established bedtimes.

He was *not* looking forward to high school.

"Look, kiddo, Ten's stretching it on the weekend with you and nine's on school nights. You know that. I know that. I can give you a million reasons why you can't stay up past ten but it pretty much comes down to because I said so." Deacon stared her down, meeting her disgruntled gaze with as much authority as he could muster. "You're a mess if you don't get enough sleep and I'm not going to spend my mornings fighting with you to get out of bed. So that's the rule until you can wake up on your own and get yourself out of the house for school."

"Rome can stay up—"

"Rome's full of shit." Deacon cut her off. "We all talk, Z. Me, Angel and Lang. If Rome's telling you something different than nine, he's yanking your chain. Bedtime's solid. The garlic isn't. Smash out three cloves of garlic and chop them up. We can see what that looks like."

"Fine. But three sounds kind of wimpy." She reached for the cloves with a sullen look on her face but it quickly disappeared when she broke the garlic cloves open using her hand and the flat of a chopping knife. "We don't suck at cooking, right? I mean, we're going to have to eat this."

"We try not to suck. Can't promise more than that, kid." Deacon nodded towards her hands. "Watch your fingers. We can probably stretch it to five but let's not get too crazy. Remember what happened last time?"

"It was red!"

"It was cayenne pepper. Not paprika. You can read, Z. Now I'm stuck with West thinking I tried to poison him." He chuckled. "Now hurry it up with the garlic. That's the last bit I need then we throw this in the oven and pray."

"The house smells good." Lang snuggled up against Deacon, sliding his chilled hands under his husband's shirt and over his stomach. Grinning at Deacon's surprised yelp, he held on, refusing to let Deacon wiggle away. The kitchen was warm from the oven and Lang's stomach rumbled at the delicious aromas in the air. Deacon made another attempt at getting away but Lang tightened his grip. "Stop that. I'm trying to get warm."

"I'm trying to coax my butt to unclench. Did you shove your hands into ice before you came in? Let me turn around, dork. It'll be easier to get you warm if I can hold you."

Deacon never failed to take Lang's breath away. It was more than the hard length of his muscular body pressing Lang back into the kitchen counter or the power in his arms as they wrapped Lang into a fierce, protective hug. There was something beyond the shy dimple in his cheek or the dark scruff covering his strong jaw that simply touched a part of Lang's heart. He'd never felt more at home than when he was in Deacon's embrace, cradled and intertwined with a man who'd taught him how to love, laugh and live as fully as he could.

He also smelled incredibly good when Lang buried his nose into Deacon's neck.

"Shit, even your nose is cold. What the hell?" Deacon shivered. "Weather bad out there?"

"A bit of hail. I was in the driveway when it started coming down. Surprised you didn't hear it." Lang lifted his head. "But it's pretty quiet in here."

"Kitchen's kind of soundproofed. Which is a great thing or the neighbours would have called CPS on us when Zig started tossing a fit about her bedtime." Deacon kissed the frown lines forming on Lang's forehead. "Don't worry about it. We had a talk. It's all good."

"By talk you mean what exactly?"

"Pretty much went, no. And again, no." A timer went off and Deacon looked over his shoulder at the oven. "That's supposed to turn off by itself. I don't trust it. Meat's got to sit in the oven for two hours while it cools down."

"We need a remote control oven. I don't want to let you go but fine," Lang grumbled, releasing Deacon. "Thanks for cooking. I wasn't expecting to cover the store today but Marcia's mom's being sick really screwed things up for her."

"Not a problem. Gave me and Zig some bonding time. And it meant she couldn't moon over Angel and Roman not coming for dinner tonight." He'd offered a place at the table for the Daniels but Angel declined, murmuring an apology too raw around the edges for Lang to ignore but he couldn't press for more as much as he'd wanted to. "I told him it was going to be small. Just us, West and probably Marzo."

"If Marzo's smart, he'd toss West out and head back to SF for a quiet meal with sane people." Deacon lifted a pot and poked at what was inside with a fork. "I have no idea how to check if potatoes are done. Fork goes through. Is that good enough?"

"That's fine. I'll mash them. I'd hoped to get West to sit and talk with Angel. Maybe work out the motel thing if they could meet face to face."

"Can't see that, babe." Dumping the potatoes into a colander, Deacon shook his head. "West is just going to tell you it's nothing personal but sometimes, I think half the shit he does isn't just business. It's like he's trying to outdo your father as world's biggest asshole."

"Oh no, Dad had that locked in by the time I was ten. I just worry about him...well, both of them. Angel's stretched too thin and West—"

"West is colder than your hands were." Deacon finished.

"I don't want that for my brother." Lang sighed, kissing Deacon's shoulder then retrieving the butter from the counter. "I want him to be happy. I want him to have what we have."

"Well, babe..." Deacon cracked a wry smile. "The only way that's happening is if your brother grows a heart because honestly? I think you got all of it when you two were dividing up your pieces."

7

The ocean was a choppy, icy silver crumple stretching from Half Moon Bay's sheer cliffs to the thin dark thread of clouds laying claim to the horizon. A cold wind, scented with salt and seaweed, rushed up over the sands, its harsh kiss scraping the last bit of warmth from West Harris' cheeks. With the sun clinging to the sky, the beach below should have had at least a few of the local diehards making good use of the remaining light despite the chill in the air.

But it was Christmas Eve and Half Moon had already rolled up her shores for the coming stretch of holidays.

"You're going to be late, boss." For a large man, Marzo should have made a racket stepping across the gravel and broken shells lining the cliff's edge but he was a sneak at heart, silently approaching West from behind. West was used to his bodyguard-driver-slash-friend's stealthy ways but he'd barely caught his start of surprise when Marzo's voice boomed in his ear. "And don't look at me like that. You hate being late."

"I'm looking at you like that because I hate being called boss." He gave the ocean one last look, drinking in its chaotic darkness. Up until a few weeks ago, West would have said his life was going exactly as he'd planned it. So the uneasiness eating through his thoughts perplexed him. "Why do we do this, Marzo? What's the point of shoving ourselves around a table to share a meal with people we either see all the time or hardly at all?"

"Really? You've got to ask that? Sheesh, you're more screwed up than I thought, West." His friend... one of his few friends... loomed over him, a stupid grin pulled over his broad face. West waited, letting Marzo stew in his own thoughts. "You know, I didn't know your dad but I've got to say, he didn't do you or your brother any favours. You need what Lang's got... a good guy and a nice family to come home to."

"Can you really see me with an auto mechanic?" He lifted an eyebrow, daring Marzo to challenge him.

"Maybe that's what you need then. Someone who's had to worry if they've got enough eggs to feed everyone that morning." As usual, the other man quickly rose to the attack and West kept a smile from stretching over his face. "And don't go all Cheshire cat on me. I'm serious. Your biggest problem is that the only thing you've had to work for are relationships and you suck at them."

"Then why do you work for me?" The conversation went serious as Marzo sighed heavily.

"Because for all the shit-ass things you are, deep down inside you're an okay guy. You just make some shitty decisions and then act all high and mighty when everything goes to crap around you. Sure, you can make a buck like it was as easy as breathing but do you have anyone you really want to spend all that money on?"

"You don't spend money, Marzo. You make it work for you," West corrected. "It's a stepping stone to bigger and better accomplishments."

"Really? Because after knowing you?" His friend snorted. "It's less of a staircase and more of a wall you've built to keep people out."

It was odd standing in his grandmother's living room and not seeing her holding court in the massive red wingchair by the room's river rock fireplace. The chair was still there but instead of an imperious looking grand dragon of a

woman directing her grandsons on what they should do with their lives, a different kind of dragon sat cross-legged on the plump cushions, reading a thick book to a pair of disgruntled looking cats.

Okay, West studied his niece, so the cats are the same and if he took everything he knew about his grandmother and Zig, the dragons were as well.

“Um... Lang went out to grab some peas,” Deacon said from the doorway. “We kind of had an incident. Should be back soon. Where’s Marzo?”

“He went to one of his sister’s place... or maybe his cousin’s. I can’t remember.” He tried to piece together the conversation he’d had with Marzo before they pulled up to the house. “Truthfully, he’s got a huge family. I think they just all find the nearest stadium, throw down a few hundred picnic tables and eat until they pass out. He said he’d pick me up tomorrow.”

His carry-on sat in the hallway behind Deacon and West blinked, realizing he didn’t even know where he’d be sleeping that night despite having practically grown up there. He tried explaining away the pang in his chest as heartburn or even a virus. Anything other than regret his grandmother handed Lang the keys to everything important in her life without giving West a second thought.

“She liked him better than you, asshole,” he muttered to himself. “*You* reminded her of Dad and wasn’t he her biggest regret.”

“Let me take this up. Lang said to tell you you’re in the blue room.” Deacon’s expression flickered between confusion and resignation for a second. “Don’t understand why he calls it that. Room’s painted something I’d call celery.”

“It used to be blue. Well have blue wallpaper. Grandma hated it so we took it down one summer.” She’d let him choose the colour for the walls, assuring him he’d always have a place—that room—in her home if he needed it. “Lang had the one down the hall. *That* was purple before we got to it.”

“Yeah, he’s still...we’re in that one.” His brother’s husband hefted the suitcase up before West could stop him.

“Don’t worry about the bag. I’ll take it up,” he said softly. “You don’t have to wait on me.”

“I’m not. Heading upstairs anyway. Hell, you know this place better than I do probably and just to keep things straight, you’re not a guest. To me, you’re a part of Lang that broke off and drifted away for a bit so don’t think you’re getting out of dishes or anything.” Deacon screwed his mouth up into a grimace. “Okay, maybe not putting you to work but you can keep the kid entertained and out of my hair. She’s got opinions about everything, including what goes into dinner.”

“Considering her favourite food is canned peas with mayonnaise. I’d not trust her culinary suggestions.” West drawled. “I shall go do my due diligence and entertain the niece.”

“Thanks. And for the record...” Deacon paused at the foot of the stairs. “We’re glad you’re here. It’ll be nice to have you this week. Lang’s really looking forward to it.”

The cats didn’t even look up when West entered the room but Zig broke into a wide smile, scrambling carefully out of the chair to launch herself at her uncle. He endured the hug, squeezing her briefly then letting her go to study her very serious face.

“What’s the matter? Did the Wicked Witch of the West forget to send you a flying monkey for Christmas?” He rubbed at a bit of something on her cheek. “And who taught you how to eat? There’s crumbs all over your face.”

“Bah, I had some of those puffy mints. They’ve got like chalk on them or something.” Zig tugged on his hand. “Come here. I’m finishing up the book. You can listen to the last chapter.”

"What are you reading?" West sat down in the chair opposite of her, shaking his head at Zig's scowl. "Don't make that face. You look like Deacon and you don't want to go through high school with that kind of ugly on you. Now, book....reading...what?"

"The Princess Bride." She picked up the book after settling down again between the slumbering cats. "It's about true love. And well, stabbing people."

"Neither of which I know anything about," he confessed. "And probably never will if I'm lucky."

"It sucks when no one loves you. I know." Zig studied him, her gaze peeling back layers of his emotional armour until West felt like he lay bared soul before her then she murmured, "And you should get a boyfriend. Maybe you'll be happier because right now, you kind of suck."