

"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 ringing 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.”