



Pool Hall Green
By Sara Bell

*To my grandfather who not only helped raise me, but made me the coolest kid in town.
Everyone should have a professional pool player in the family.*

Chapter One

"Oh my God."

I held back a grin and continued on with my spiel. "To be honest, I wasn't sure we'd be able to do it. Trees and Corvettes do not a good combination make, but--" I was cut off as a hundred and twenty pounds of grateful female hit my chest.

"You fixed it. You fixed it. You fixed it."

"Enough, already." Max came to peel his sister off my chest. He held Trixie gently against his side in deference to her still-healing wounds. "A car's a car. Sisters aren't so replaceable." Max -- gigantic, six and a half-foot Max -- shuddered like an oak about to crash to the forest floor. He glared down his nose at Trixie. "One more race -- I swear to God, Trix, one more -- and I'll sell that piece of junk for spare parts."

"K." Trixie looked penitent in the way only an eighteen-year-old kid could. She kissed Max on the cheek, gave me as tight a hug as she could manage with her left arm in a cast, and limped her way out of the garage.

"You know she'll have that thing back out on Quinn Road as soon as her arm heals." I grabbed the cover from the floor and re-shrouded the sleek-once-again, '71 T-top. "This is too much machine for her, man. Too much temptation."

Max's sigh was nothing new, but this was an old argument. He'd raised Trixie since she was eleven, right after their mom died of breast cancer. In all the time he and I had been partners in Street Rat Custom Rides, Max had never mentioned his father and I'd never asked.

Some things were private.

"I know what you're saying." Max helped me finish covering the 'Vette, then followed me from the garage into our shared office. "But she's my baby sister, you know? Damned hard to say no to family."

I went to my desk and fired up my computer, pretending great interest in a stack of purchase orders while I waited for the machine to warm up.

Yeah, I knew all about family, and the less I thought about some of them, the better.

I considered myself a glass-is-half-full kind of guy. I had all kinds of reasons to be optimistic. I owned my house free and clear. I got to work with my best friend, and the two of us were pulling down good money doing work we loved. And even though I wasn't exactly dating, I got laid often enough I had no complaints. At the ripe age of thirty-four, I was dangerously close to being content.

Maybe that's why it shook me so bad when Monday came and my day went from awful straight to hell and her happy hand-basket all before lunch.

I got up at four like I always did and hit the shower. Halfway through covering myself with suds and shampoo, I heard a loud pop and the lights went out. I finished as fast as I could, fumbled my way out of the stall amidst thoughts of how fucked-up I'd be if I planted my foot wrong and took a header through the solid glass shower wall that up until now I'd thought was so smart. Then I banged my knee hard against the toilet for all my slow-going troubles. Took me a good ten minutes to dry off and dress, snag a flashlight, and hunt down my cell phone. It took another twenty after that to get the power company out to the house to get to the bottom of the outage.

The french-fried squirrel shriveled beneath the power pole where the house's main transformer hung said it all. I thanked the utility guys and went in to hook myself up with some major caffeine. I started an extra-strength pot of coffee, cursing all of squirrel-kind I'd had to wait this long. Not that I'm a squirrel hater in general, but since I'd bought this place, the furry bastards had invaded my attic, chewed through my phone lines -- twice -- and given me the surprise of my life when one intrepid individual slipped unseen through my open car window, hitched a ride halfway to work with me, only to pop up on top of my headrest at the busiest intersection in town and then proceeded to do his impression of the River Dance on my head.

The good news is rabies shots don't hurt nearly as bad as I'd heard they would.

A glance at my watch told me I'd better skip breakfast if I wanted to beat the crew to the shop, so I grabbed the biggest travel mug I had, slopped half the pot into it, and jetted out the door only to walk into the garage and realize my shiny red Viper had herself a flat front tire.

I said a word the nuns at Sacred Heart School would've washed my mouth out with Dial for, took a tongue-scalding swig from my mug, and then went to fetch my jack. I was so dirty when I finished changing the damned tire I had to take another shower.

By the time I finally made it to work, my hair was still wet and my mood was shot to hell. Max took one look at me and started to grin. "Rough night?"

I flipped him off, then flipped him off again when he laughed at me.

The rest of the morning followed the same fucked-up pattern. Rafe, foreman over the paint shop, called in sick and the idiots who worked under him seemed to be incapable of reading a work order. Why else would they paint a car Pepto Pink when the customer ordered Candy Apple Red? I was just giving myself credit for handling the situation without losing my temper -- or

firing anybody -- when a bomb went off in one of the mechanic's bays. How I kept from pissing my pants, I couldn't say.

Turns out there's a right way and a wrong way to install a fuel injector. Do it wrong and *BANG!*

"On the bright side," Max said once we were back in the office, "no one was hurt."

"There is that." I wasn't sure I hadn't had a minor heart attack. It couldn't be good that I could feel my pulse beating behind my teeth. I collapsed into my chair, grateful to have something solid beneath me. "If we're really lucky, we can still salvage the motor."

"Least it happened in the right place." If I was glass-is-half-full, Max was glass-is-running-over. He lifted a hairy arm to look at his watch. "What's say we knock off early and I buy you lunch? You look like you could use it. We'll eat a good meal, then we'll deal with the car."

"Only if I get to pick the place," I said, but I was already out of the chair. "None of your vegan, tofu bullshit today."

"I hear you."

We almost made it. We were halfway through the open garage when Ellen, our bookkeeper/assistant/runner-of-the-place hollered us back.

"Drew, you've got a phone call."

"Can you take a message? We're on our way out."

"Already tried, hon." Ellen's smile was apologetic but firm. "The caller says it's an emergency and she won't talk to anyone but you."

If my heartbeat had been shocky before, it was racing like a 409 Chevy big block now. There were only two females I knew who'd call me with an emergency. One was my Aunt Quinn, but it couldn't be her because a) she wouldn't scare the shit out of me like this and b) Ellen knew her voice. That left my mother, and if she was stepping off her high horse long enough to call me, then it really must be an emergency. As one unit, Max and I went back to the office.

I didn't sit. I hovered over the phone like a hungry eagle: alert, tense, ready to dip and dive. Regardless, my hands never failed me. They were smooth and steady when I picked up the receiver and pushed the button.

"This is Drew Harris. How can I help you?"

"Andrew? It's... it's Mom." I wondered if she felt the need to tell me who she was because she was nervous or because she hadn't bothered talking to me in almost three years. "Are you... is this an okay time to talk?"

It was never a good time to talk to those people, but I forced myself to be polite. "Max and I were about to knock off for lunch, but I've got a minute."

Max sank into his chair with a thumbs up for my effort -- he knew all about my mommy issues -- but I ignored him. It was taking all my effort to hear her out and not slam the phone down. I was giving myself points for being so evolved when my mother said, "Vic's in trouble again."

I took a measured breath. "Same trouble he was in last time?"

Mom's answer was a feeble, "Yes, but--"

"How much do y'all want from me this time?" So much for evolved, but there's a fine line between being an optimist and a realist. While I believe that life in general is what you make of it, I also know sometimes you have to cut your losses and walk away.

I'd been trying to cut my losses where my parents were concerned for the last eighteen years.

"Honey, I swear it's not like that." My mother's too-precious drawl hitched. "We need you, Andrew." She always called me that. Always Andrew. Never Drew like my real friends and family did. It was like she couldn't cross the nickname wall with me. Funny. She never had any trouble calling my younger brother, Victor, Vic.

"How much is Vic on the hook for this time?" My brother was a poker player. A bad one.

"Two-fifty, but if you'll just listen--"

"Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars?" I almost dropped the phone. I looked at Max, who'd gone white-faced and round-eyed. The business was doing well, but we'd just poured a healthy chunk of last year's profits into expanding the garage and updating some of our equipment. Besides, Mom and I had talked about this before.

"I told you and Vic -- hell, I'm pretty sure I even told Dad -- the last time I bailed Vic out I wasn't going to do it again." That was almost three years ago, when Mom and Dad talked me into pulling their house out of foreclosure after they took out a sixty-five thousand dollar home equity loan to keep some shark from taking his markers out of Vic's ass.

"You could try having some compassion," my mother said on a sniff. "Vic has a sickness."

"Please." I turned my back so Max wouldn't see the contempt on my face, but I'm sure it was still in my voice. "Cancer is a sickness, Mom. Diabetes, lupus, schizophrenia: those are sicknesses. Vic is selfish and he's weak. The longer you and Dad make excuses for him, the longer he's going to stay that way."

"Don't you think that's hypocritical coming from you?" My mother's voice was filled with what my aunt would've called righteous indignation. "You wouldn't be where you are today without a certain gambling--"

"The difference between what I did and what Vic's doing is I had a skill and I used it. No gamble involved. Vic sucks at poker. He's either too stupid to see it or too stubborn to admit it." I closed my eyes and leaned as far back in my chair as the phone cord would allow, not even sure why I was having this argument with her. She certainly hadn't minded my "dirty" money when it saved her house. And I hadn't exactly heard her complaining all those years ago when Dad lost his job at Reynolds and my ill-gotten loot was the only thing keeping the whole damn family afloat.

Amazing how quickly they forget.

I opened my eyes and scrubbed my hand over my face. "I'm sorry, Mom." I'm not sure if I was, but it seemed like the right thing to say. "Even if I wanted to help Vic, I don't have two hundred and fifty grand." *Looks like your favorite's gonna learn to sink or swim on his own.* I was about to hang up when I heard my mother say, "Andrew, wait."

"I already told you, I don't have--"

"Would you shut up and listen?" My mother rarely yelled. She was more the shame-and-humiliate-you-softly type. I sat still and waited. After a tense minute she said, "Your father and I have already put the house and both businesses into hock for this. We've got most of the money, but this guy your brother owes doesn't want it."

After he lost his job at Reynolds, my dad opened his own fabrication shop. He didn't make a fortune, but he did okay outsourcing maintenance work for local plants. My mom had been a hairdresser for the last thirty years, ten as the owner of her own shop. That they'd jeopardized not only their livelihoods but their home (yet again) for Vic didn't surprise me.

That the guy Vic owed didn't want it did.

"Who is this guy, anyway?"

"His name's Evan Stacie." Mom paused, like she was waiting for me to say something. When I didn't, she said, "He owns a floating casino in Mississippi."

"Where in Mississippi?"

"How should I know?" Her voice rose again, like the details weren't important. "He also owns a property company here, in Florence. He called us there, to his office, told us since we didn't have all the money, he wants a different deal." Mom started crying.

I felt Max walk in behind me -- was slightly reassured by his hand on my shoulder -- but most of my focus was on my sobbing mother. No matter how bad the relationship, no guy remains immune to the sound of his mother's tears.

"Mom, quit crying and tell me what this guy wants. I can't fix it unless I know--"

"You," Mom said on a long, quavering sigh. "Evan Stacie's going to send your brother to jail for non-payment of a gambling debt, fraud -- you name it -- unless you agree to meet with him."

Chapter Two

"I hope you told her to kiss your happy white ass," my Aunt Quinn said over dinner that night.

Max choked on his chicken casserole; Trixie giggled behind her napkin, and my Uncle Arthur nodded like telling my own mother to kiss my ass was the best idea he'd ever heard.

I laid my fork on my plate. "You know I didn't."

Aunt Quinn gave me the "look." She and Uncle Arthur didn't have any kids (unless you counted me, which they did). For someone who'd never actually given birth, the woman had that you-are-in-so-much-trouble-mister look down to a science.

"Tell me you aren't thinking of going over there to deal with this latest episode of *White Trash Island*?"

Since I couldn't tell her that, I let Aunt Quinn's question fall into the ether. Not that she was about to give up. She pushed back her chair -- one of the same faux gothic dining room chairs she'd been using since she and Arthur married in 1972 -- and tossed her napkin on the table.

"If y'all will excuse me..." Aunt Quinn left the table with queenly grace, but not before giving me a hefty dose of the stink eye.

Max shot me a quick glance, then said, "Hey, Trix... how's about going into the kitchen and helping me slice up that pie we brought?"

Trixie looked down at her casted arm and then back up at her brother as if to say, *Who do you think you're fooling?* but she followed Max, anyway.

My Uncle Arthur isn't a man of many words. He doesn't do flowery speeches and fatherly pep talks ala Bill Cosby. He loves and accepts me in a quieter way. A way I desperately needed when my folks decided it was "better for all of us" if I didn't live with them anymore.

"Why?" Arthur asked from beneath bushy gray brows that would've made Burt from *Sesame Street* jealous.

"Mom says I'm the only one who can do this." I'd told them the whole story over dinner, but I knew Arthur was looking for something more specific. "If I don't go and they lose everything..."

Arthur sipped his water, having long ago given up anything harder in deference to the breathing problems that'd prompted him and Quinn to trade sticky southern humidity for the dry heat of the Arizona desert. Not for the first time, I was damn glad I'd gone with them.

"If they lose everything," Arthur said, "it's on them."

I knew that. "Still."

Arthur nodded. "But you still have to try." He winked. "You get that from me. Lancelot complex. Runs in the family."

Since Quinn was my mother's sister and Arthur and I shared about as much blood as I shared with the guy at the 7-Eleven who sells me my Slurpees, I winked back.

"You won't be satisfied unless you go, I don't guess." Arthur didn't wait for me to answer, just said, "You take care of business. I'll square things with your aunt." And then, like I was seventeen again and borrowing the Buick, he reached for his wallet. "You need some money to take to Alabama with you?"

I coughed into my hand. "No, sir. I'm good."

Arthur smiled. "Well all right, then." He scented the air like Ralphy, an old beagle I'd had when I was a kid. "Didn't somebody say something about pie?"

Max wanted to fly to 'Bama with me, but my answer was a firm, "Hell, no." I gave him a line about him keeping the business going until I got back, but the truth was I never knew what I was walking into where my family was concerned. Mom and Dad weren't above lying to get what they wanted, and God knew I couldn't trust Vic.

In my experience, addicts lied just for the hell of it.

Florence, Alabama, is a nice town. Not people-packed, like Huntsville, not blink-and-you'll-miss-it like Rogersville. Medium-sized. Looking back, Florence had probably been a good place to grow up, but I'd been so consumed with hiding who I was -- the parts of myself I knew my parents wouldn't approve of (and there were many) -- I'd been a miserable kid, all twisted in knots and torn up inside. Some of my shit Mom and Dad found out on their own, but my biggest secret, that I was (*gasp!*) queer, I told them myself when I was sixteen. I can't remember now why I thought it was such a good idea. Maybe it had to do with the fact that I was fucking Steven Parsnell and figured I'd out myself before I got caught. Hell, maybe I just got tired of living with that ax over my head. Whatever. The news went pretty much like I expected. My parents sat stone-faced while I told them, and a week later they "suggested" I move in with Aunt Quinn and Uncle Arthur. Mom said she was afraid maybe I'd influence my then fourteen-year-old brother in a negative way. Didn't stop them from taking my money after Dad got laid off, mind you (or stop

my stupid ass from giving it to them). Just stopped me from living in the house where I'd lived most of my life.

Aunt Quinn hasn't spoken to my mother since.

Steering my rental car through the streets of downtown Florence was an autopilot job. Businesses came and went, but downtown never changed. Most people in my position probably would've headed straight to their folks' house and confronted the problem head on, but I'd learned a long time ago never to walk blind into one of my brother's disasters. I'd also learned that the best place in town -- any town -- to get information is a pool hall.

Florence has had a lot of pool halls over the last hundred years. Old timers still talk about the glory days of places like Recreation Pool Hall and Past Time Billiards, but nowadays if you're looking for pure shooting action and a few hours' worth of bullshitting with your buddies, you go to Sweetwater Billiards. You want a couple of friendly games, a few beers, and a chance to pick up chicks, you go to The Smokehouse over on Tennessee Street. And if you're a thirteen-year-old kid looking to get away from the parents who ignore you and the kids at school who torment you, you go down to ol' Ollie Richter's place and hope he'll take pity on you, let you hang out every day and make a total pest of yourself.

That's what I did, and I've owed Ollie for it ever since.

Richter's has a restaurant up front, but don't be fooled: it's a real, old-fashioned pool hall. Ollie's old men regulars run dominos out the back room and keep a snooker game going on the front table. A cloud of smoke used to hang in the air like English fog, but thanks to new city ordinances, all that's left behind now is a yellow stain on the tin ceiling. The place smells of hamburger grease, chalk dust, and my childhood.

The best part of Richter's was standing behind the counter cleaning the soda fountain when I pushed open the door and walked in.

"Sweet Baby Jesus." Ollie slopped Coke syrup on the stained marble counter. He didn't bother wiping it up before he came bounding around the maze of stools to pull me into a bone crunching hug. "Look what the holy fucking wind blew in." He pulled back to look at me. "They ain't feeding you in Arizona?" He frowned, the scar across the bridge of his nose seeming more prominent now. "You're down to what, one-fifty?"

"One-sixty, but who counts?" I pulled him in for another back slapper. Ollie smelled like the menthols he hid in the bathroom and chain smoked, the bourbon he'd probably had with his lunch, and all the good things I remembered about my life in Florence. I pulled back with a grin. "Of course, I wouldn't say no to a slaw burger."

"Damned right you won't." Ollie patted my cheek. "Double crispy fries." He pointed to the empty end of the counter. "Grab a stool. I'll get Steph started on your food, and then you're gonna tell me what you're doing here."

I straddled a red-vinyl stool that was probably older than my father, grinning like an idiot when Ollie came back around to my side of the counter with an open glass-bottle of Dr. Pepper in one hand and a straw in the other.

He set the drink in front of me and took the stool next to mine. "I think that Arizona sun's agreeing with you, boy." Ollie almost always called me that. *Boy*. Took me a year to realize it was a term of endearment and not something he called me because he couldn't remember my name. He pushed a couple of meaty fingers against my bicep. "I didn't know better I'd swear you'd muscled up some since last I saw you." Ollie hitched his head at the teenager behind the counter who rolled her eyes and slid him an extra-large mug of steaming coffee. He took a sip without bracing himself, then turned to me and said, "Been two years since last time you was home, ain't it?"

"Almost three." I unwrapped my straw and dropped it into the bottle. I wasn't thirsty, but it gave me something to do with my hands.

Ollie smiled, showing a blinding set of dentures. His store-boughts, he called them. "When you get to be my age, time don't mean what it used to."

He had to be around seventy, but I'd never be able to think of Ollie as old. He was one of Florence's ageless fixtures. Never changing, always there. "You're not old," I said, like it was my part of the script.

Ollie cocked his head to the side. "Much as my ego could use the stroke, boy, you didn't come sixteen-hundred miles to blow smoke up an old man's ass."

It didn't surprise me that Ollie knew how far it was from Florence to my new neck of the woods. He liked to play the country rube, but he was a smart one. He used the good ol' boy image to put people off their guard.

Said it made them more likely to open their wallets that way.

"Last time you was here," Ollie said as a pretty girl I assumed was Steph brought me the best looking plate of food I'd seen since I moved out West, "was to save Vic's sorry ass."

I poured ketchup on my fries. "Same story, different day."

"Can't say I'm surprised." Ollie killed another unholy gulp of coffee. "Seem to remember telling you last time you bailed him out you'd be back sooner rather than later." He pulled the blue Richter's cap off his head and scratched his bald scalp. "How much is Vic on the hook for this time?"

I told him, to which Ollie said, "Fuck." Since I didn't have anything to say that summed it up better than that, I went after my food like a man who hadn't had anything to eat since breakfast seven hours ago. If given the choice between a slaw burger and sex, I'd have to stop and think about it, and believe me, I really like sex.

"Tell me your parents don't expect you to pony up that kind of cash." He said the word *parents* about the same way he'd said *fuck*, like it was almost too dirty to pass his lips but what the hell. Ollie hated my parents -- especially my father -- with a passion he usually reserved for pool cheats and the IRS.

Not that he didn't have a reason. Ollie was one of the first people I'd told I was gay. Not because I wanted to, mind you. Back then if I'd had to pick between being torn apart by rabid gerbils and having Ollie -- my only safe haven from my folks besides Aunt Quinn and Uncle Arthur -- find out I was one of the same kind of queers all those old guys lounging in the chairs against the wall told jokes about day after day, I'd probably have taken my chances with the gerbils. Ollie, though, he'd found out the hard way when some road hustler threw a pass at sixteen-year-old me that I'd been dumb enough to catch. Up 'til then I'd never even kissed a guy (this was a couple of months before my wild affair with Steven), but hormones and horniness are a bad combination. That's the only reason I can give for following that guy into the back alley behind Richter's that night. Ollie came along as I was trying to put on the brakes, about the same time the road man decided no wasn't an answer he was willing to take.

Ollie beat that guy so bad the SOB's probably still feeling it.

As soon as the road guy'd limped off to lick his wounds, Ollie'd done two things I've never forgotten. The first was he gave me a scalding lecture on avoiding *Color of Money* wannabes who were looking for an easy piece of ass anywhere they could get it. The second was he pulled me into a tight hug, using the same bear-paw hands he'd just used to beat the shit out of my attacker to soothe and comfort a blubbering, messed up kid who was scared enough to puke. Ollie told me that night that, gay or straight, whatever price I hung on myself was what people were gonna think I was worth. If I billed myself too cheap, he'd told me, well, then that was on me. Personally, Ollie'd said straight to my strawberry-red face, he thought I was worth a hell of a lot more than a back-alley fuck from some guy who wouldn't remember my name three months from now.

Funny how a self-proclaimed hillbilly from the backside of St. Joe Tennessee reached out to me with blind acceptance when my own parents could barely stand to look me in the eye after I told them I was bent.

Thinking about my folks brought me back to Ollie's question. "I'm not sure what they want just yet." I pulled a napkin from a chrome dispenser and wiped my mouth. "I came here hoping you could tell me what you know about a guy named Evan Stacie."

I'd kept my voice low, but Ollie looked behind us anyway, down the long length of the building to where his seven Brunswick tables made up a stately row. I'd come during a lull. Too late for the lunch crowd, not quite time for the off-from-workers, and way too early for the dinner bunch. Only two tables were in play: a couple of college kids were playing eight ball all the way in the back and two pretty serious looking guys I vaguely recognized were scowling through a one-pocket match. Steph had disappeared into the kitchen, and the girl behind the counter was on the other end of the building, working the floor over with a dust mop.

Ollie turned back to me, his voice low. "Stacie, huh? He the guy Vic owes?"

"So my mother says." I popped a fry in my mouth. Ollie made the best fries this side of the Mississippi, but talking about my brother and his troubles sucked the taste right out of it. "What can you tell me about him?"

"Stacie? Not much." Ollie patted his shirt pocket, and I could tell he was jonesing for a cigarette. "Owns a casino in Tunica. Inherited it, I think." In the pool hall, inherited wealth didn't count. "Took a chunk of his windfall and made gold in property investments here in the Tennessee Valley a few years back. Has an office a couple of blocks over." Apparently, that wealth counted.

I took a swig of my Coke. Didn't matter that I was drinking Dr. Pepper. In the south, any carbonated beverage is called a Coke. You can be drinking a crystal clear 7-up, and it's still classified as a Coke. I'd been living in Arizona for a week when some guy offered me a pop.

I thought he was looking to hit me.

"You've given me more information than my mother," I said. Not much, but more than I'd had when I walked in. "What I can't figure is why Stacie would let a guy like Vic run up a two-hundred and fifty G tab to start with." I pushed my plate away, whether because I was full enough or my appetite had evaporated, I couldn't say. "I know Vic's an easy mark -- he's always sucked at poker -- but this guy had to know a guy like Vic couldn't pay that kinda tab."

"It ain't just poker anymore." Ollie picked at a chip on the handle of his mug. "Word around town is Vic'll bet on anything. He's in here 'bout three nights a week."

I wanted to put my head down on the counter and close my eyes. The only thing Vic sucked worse at than poker was pool. "What's his game?"

Ollie snorted. "Fancies himself a nine ball player. Tells everybody who'll listen his brother is Choir Boy Harris."

The name left me cold. "Nobody calls me that anymore."

"You don't call yourself that anymore, boy." Ollie clapped his hand on my shoulder. "'Round here you're as much a legend as you always were. Vic knows that. Knows it and hates it. That kinda hate gets a man in more trouble than he can get himself out of." He squinted at the dying sun coming through the glass double doors and stood with a curse. "Speaking of trouble..."

I swiveled my stool just in time to see a tall man with salt and pepper hair and a thick, sour frown storm Ollie's like the place was under siege. No matter how many times I saw that face -- no matter how many times I told myself I was a grown man and this guy's opinion of me no longer counted for shit -- I still had to give myself a mental smack-down to keep from blabbering like an idiot.

Once I was in control, I said the only thing I could think of. "Hi, Dad."

Chapter Three

"Andrew." Unlike my mother, my father'd called me Drew once upon a time. Back in the PG (pre-gay) days. Now I was Andrew, somebody he dealt with because he had to. Like business associates or third cousins twice removed you exchanged Christmas cards with but rarely saw.

"Vic's not here, Harris." Ollie gave me another pat and then walked back behind the counter. Most people would've thought he was going behind the counter to either to take my father's order or to finish cleaning the soda fountain, but I knew better.

Under the counter was where Ollie kept Leon, his three-fifty-seven.

I'm not sure if my father had already met Leon or not, but he backed up a step. "Vic didn't come home last night," he said in a milder voice, though the fire didn't go out of his eyes. "His mother and I are worried."

Once upon a time Vic had been married with two kids. Didn't surprise me much to hear he was back living with the folks.

"Mine's not the only pool hall in this town, Harris." Ollie kept one hand under the counter, leaving me no doubt he was giving Leon a rubdown. "When you've searched 'em all, check every bar between here and Huntsville what's got a table in it." Ollie smiled then, the nasty smile he usually reserved for sore losers.

My father and I don't look much alike. I'm a blue-eyed brunet like my mother. Once upon a time, Dad had blond hair, and when his eyes aren't shooting go-to-hell daggers, they're a muddy brown. About the only thing Dad and I have in common -- besides the tall and lanky gene -- was this crazy-ass left-side jaw tick we both got when we were pissed.

My father's face was doing the Macarena, but he seemed to know better than to go off on Ollie. "Vic likes it here, and I think we both know why." I got a sideways glance before Dad looked at Ollie again. "If you see him--"

"I'll tell Vic exactly where to go," Ollie said like he couldn't wait.

My father took a slow breath that did absolutely nothing to calm his angry face seizure and then said to me, "Are you planning on coming by the house?"

By the house. Not home, like he would've said to Vic, but *by the house.* It was said casually, but I'd been in the habit of overanalyzing everything my parents said for too long to stop now. Besides, if my father wanted me to understand that their place would never be my home again, I'd picked that message up as soon as they'd put it down.

"I'll come by when I'm done." I turned my back on my father, my part of the conversation done. For all that bravado, I didn't breathe again until I heard the door open as my father stomped out.

"Now there's something I never thought I'd live long enough to see. You dismissing your old man like that... bet it chapped his ass to hell and back around again." Ollie crowed like an asthmatic rooster. "All that Arizona sun must've grown you some bigger balls, boy."

"Yeah, well, let's hope I don't get those nice shiny balls handed to me on a plate." Ollie probably thought I was joking, but with my family, I could never tell.

I left Ollie's not long after my dad did. I knew the longer I put off going to my parent's place, the more excuses I'd find not to go. Ollie made me promise to come in as soon as I knew what was what and give him a rundown. It was a promise I'd be happy to keep.

I had a feeling I was going to need somebody to talk to when this unholy mess came out in the wash.

My parents live not far from downtown, in an atomic fifties rancher that's seen more than one remodel over the years. Three bedrooms, two baths, a den that used to be a garage. May not look like much to some, but to my parents who'd worked most of their adult lives to pay it off, it meant sanctuary, independence, and security.

All of which they were willing to flush, once again, for Vic.

I parked my rented Malibu in my parent's drive. When I got out, I didn't go to the kitchen door I'd used exclusively as a kid. I went around to the front door. The front door was for company. For insurance salesmen, Jehovah's Witnesses, and all other manner of visitors. Not sure how my parent's would classify me, I rang the bell.

"Andrew." My mother opened the door almost immediately, meaning she'd probably seen me pull into the drive. She'd cut her hair since the last time I'd seen her, and she fussed with it as she ushered me inside. "Come in." She glanced around the living room, where the good furniture was, and offered me a seat in an antique rocker I hadn't been allowed to touch as a kid. "You must be thirsty. Can I get you a cup of coffee? An iced tea, maybe?"

Nobody was allowed to eat or drink in the living room, not even Father Irving, my mom's priest. Vic must be in deeper shit than I thought.

I shook my head. "No, thank you. I--"

"Andrew just ate," my father said. He stepped in behind my mother, their ten-inch height difference particularly startling in the late afternoon sun coming through the living room's picture window. "He was at Richter's when I went looking for Vic." Dad gave her waist a squeeze, then claimed a careful perch on the edge of a camel-back sofa I'd been told a thousand times belonged

to my great-great-great-great-grandmother and had once been sat on by Ulysses S. Grant. "I suppose Richter gave you an earful about your brother."

"He didn't tell me anything that wasn't true or you wouldn't have been hunting Vic down in a pool hall, now would you?" This man wasn't going to intimidate me, not when the fucker'd called me down here for my help (okay, so technically my mother was the one who'd called, but still). "How long's Vic fancied himself a nine ball player?"

My father folded his long, calloused fingers over his knee. "That's not your concern."

"I see." I wasn't going to play that game. Not this time. I pushed out of the rocker, my movements steady and smooth. "In that case, tell Vic I said good luck." I headed for the door. "Hope everything works out for y'all."

"No, wait!" My mother made a grab for my arm, at the same time pleading, "Randall, tell him he can't go!"

"Forget it, Sylvie. It wasn't my idea to call the little cock--" He stopped when I started laughing.

"If you think calling me a cocksucker is an insult," I said with a wink, "you should know that among my circle, it's considered something of a compliment."

I'd never seen someone have a stroke before, but I figured my father was close.

"Stop it, both of you, please." My mother's eyes were wet, but that didn't mean much. She'd always been able to conjure a few good tears on command. "Randall, go in the den and let me talk to my son."

Impressive. She'd called me her son without flinching. Even more impressive, my father left the room without an argument.

Hand still on my arm, my mother led me to the same sofa Dad had just vacated. She sat down beside me, still latched onto my arm like she was afraid I would bolt. It was the most my mother had touched me in years.

"You want to tell me what the hell's going on here before I go back to Arizona and change my phone number?"

My mother hesitated, her eyes going to the over-sized wooden crucifix hanging on the opposite wall. My parents were from Jersey and had come to the south after my dad got a job at the Reynolds plant. Vic and I'd been raised Catholic in an area lousy with Baptists, Church of Christs, and Methodists. I wasn't a practicing Catholic anymore -- I prefer to think of myself as a believer and leave it there -- but I remembered enough Catholic guilt I could tell by the way my pious mother was eyeing that cross she was thinking about lying to me.

"Clock's ticking." I slid my arm out of her grip. "You have ten seconds to tell me everything I need to know or I'm out of here and I won't be back."

My mother sighed, the only sign of her surrender. "What's to tell? You know Vic's been gambling for years. This isn't new."

"When did he and Misty split?" Divorce was right up there with homosexuality in my mother's Catholic lexicon of no-no's, but she'd always hated Vic's wife, so her opinion on this one could go either way.

"Last year. Misty left him, got full custody of the kids." Mom pushed her hand through her hair, which looked thinner now that we were sitting in the light. "Vic... he got into some trouble with the law and I guess Misty finally had enough."

"You gonna make me ask you what kind of trouble that was?" I'd once rebuilt a motor by myself, from the bare-block up, just to prove I could. I swear that took less time than having one conversation with these people.

"Your dad and I, we loaned Vic the money to start a tree service with a friend of his." Mom smiled, but it was her parish fundraising committee smile, the one that didn't go all the way to her eyes. "You remember Theo Gross, don't you?"

I did. The Theo Gross I'd known was a total pothead. This wasn't going to be good.

"They called themselves The Branch Brothers," my mother said. "Cute, huh?"

I thought the name alone was enough to get them arrested.

Mom settled in on herself, looking older now than she had when I'd come in. "Things were good for a while. The two of them had a decent business. I know you don't believe it, but Vic's a hard worker when he wants to be. They'd just expanded from trimming and cutting to landscaping and planting when Vic got into a bit of a tight."

"A tight" is southern for a jam. In Vic's case, being in a tight usually meant he'd sat down for a game of seven-card stud with a lousy hand and no money. I looked my mother in the eye. "The police don't arrest you for getting into a tight, Mom."

She broke eye contact. "They do if you change the amount of a client's check from two-hundred fifty dollars to twenty-five hundred dollars." Mom picked at a thread on the seam of her pants. "The police pinned it all on Vic, but with him and Theo being partners... the tree service suffered." She sniffed, like Vic was somehow the injured party. "The two of them no longer speak."

"I imagine not." Maybe Theo's brain wasn't as weed-fogged as I remembered. "So this Evan Stacie guy, what's he want from me?"

Mom looked at me, then. "I honestly don't know any more than I told you on the phone." She rose on stiff legs and went to the kitchen. When she came back, she had a folded piece of paper in her hand, which she passed to me in the same stiff way. Obviously, she was insulted that I'd dare insinuate she knew more than she was letting on.

So freakin' be it.

"These are the numbers I have for Evan Stacie. Home and cell." When I looked at her with what I'm sure was an incredulous expression, she lifted her nose. "Vic gave them to me so you'd have them when you got here."

"Uh-huh." I stood up so I could shove the paper in my pocket. Arguing with my mother is pointless and exhausting. My Aunt Quinn has a saying, one that always comes to mind when I think of my parents and their particular points of view. *Never get into a puking contest with a buzzard.* "I'll see you later," I said with that analogy zinging through my brain.

"You aren't going to stay here?" my mother said in a burst of fake hospitality. "Your old room's the computer room now, but there's a sleeper sofa I could make up for you if you'd like." Her tone suggested it would take smelling salts and hard liquor to revive the old girl if I actually said yes.

I was almost tempted to take her up on it just to see her and my old man squirm, but it wasn't worth making myself miserable. "No thanks. I'll stay at a hotel."

Her relief must've made her charitable because she said, "You need me to help you find one? Oh, I know." She smiled, a real one this time that scared the bejeezus out of me. "Nita Weeks at church has just opened a bed and breakfast a block or so from the UNA campus." She lowered her voice the way she always did when she wanted to talk about somebody without looking like she was talking about somebody. "Nita's in a bad way financially, thanks to that husband of hers. Crack head. Just about drained them dry from what I hear, but Nita isn't giving up on the poor lost soul, bless her heart."

"Bless her heart" is something I heard often in my childhood, especially when the women in my mother's weekly canasta group were speaking of some woman they didn't particularly like. They'd talk about the lady like she was a dog -- disparage her husband, her kids, her intelligence, even make fun of the size of her breasts -- then make it seem like all was said out of concern by following up these vicious slanders with a sweetly spoken, "bless her heart."

In the Deep South, "bless her heart," is often a substitute for "that dumb bitch."

"I've already booked a room at the Marriot, but thanks." I was to the door now, sweet freedom only a thin piece of wood and a screen door away. "But if you see Mrs. Weeks, you tell her I said hi and that I wish her good luck with her B&B." With friends like my mother and the Canasta Crew, Mrs. Weeks was gonna need all the luck she could handle.

It was after eight by the time I'd gotten myself checked in at the Marriot and settled into my room. I ordered a soup-and-sandwich supper (no matter how many times Max and I traveled for business, I was still a little kid when it came to room service), and while I was waiting for my food, I fished the paper my mother'd given me out of my pocket. I recognized two things right off the bat: my brother's messy chicken scratch and the fact that Evan Stacie really wanted me to call him. He'd left three numbers for himself: work, home, cell.

I whipped out my phone and went for the cell first, figuring any self-respecting blackmailer would have his cell on him at all times. It rang exactly one and half times before an excited voice on the other end said, "Please tell me this is Andrew Harris."

"How did you--" I was pretty sure caller I.D. didn't work cell phone to cell phone.

"Caller unknown' and your brother said you were coming, so I put two and two together and made four. Are you in Florence?"

He said it so fast I had to think it through twice before I got everything he'd said. "Yes, but look, I need to--"

"Know what I want. Of course you do. Where are you staying? The Marriot?"

Okay. Now I was really creeped out. Unless my mother had told Vic and Vic had told this guy... "You couldn't possibly know--"

"It's the nicest hotel in Florence and that's where I'd stay if I were you. I'll be there in fifteen minutes. What room are you in?"

"Two fifteen." I answered automatically. I imagined talking to a hummingbird would be less frantic. I was still wondering if I'd done the right thing when I realized I was holding a dead phone to my ear.

I didn't taste one bite of my soup or my sandwich. Couldn't even tell you what kind either of them were. I ate because it was time to eat again, and because I hoped it would kill fifteen nerve wracking minutes.

A knock sounded on my suite's door exactly fourteen minutes and thirty-five seconds after the phone call.

Maybe I watch too much TV, but I had a solid picture in my mind of what a blackmailer would look like. He would be a big, seasoned, scarred-up guy with a crooked nose. At least fifty or sixty years old, because no one younger than that would've grown the stones to try a stunt like this on a guy like me (I don't have self-esteem issues). By the time I was at the door, swinging it open, I expected to see one of Tony Soprano's men standing there, ready to whack me.

The guy on the opposite side of the threshold wasn't big. He wasn't scarred, and he sure as hell wasn't seasoned. I stood in numb, open-mouthed shock as I tried to process the fact that I was being blackmailed by Doogie Howser.

Chapter Four

This was a joke. Had to be. I leaned on the door, waiting for my Aunt Quinn, Uncle Arthur, Max and Trixie to jump out from down the hall and tell me I was on camera. When nobody did, I said, "Evan Stacie?"

The kid -- he couldn't have been more than nineteen -- grinned at me. Out popped honest-to-God dimples. "I won't even ask who you were expecting." He walked into my suite without an invitation and made himself comfortable on my loveseat. "I don't need an introduction to you." Clear blue eyes twinkled at me with equal parts mischief and admiration. "When Vic told me his brother was Choir Boy Harris, I could've pissed my pants."

This had to be the strangest start to a blackmail conversation ever begun. I took one more look down the hall just to make sure I wasn't the object of some half-assed prank before I closed the door and faced my opponent down. Stacie might have the upper hand, but as far as I was concerned, he was just one more hustler.

Hustlers I ate for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

"Does your mama know you're out this late, kid?" I went to the mini bar and fixed myself a scotch and soda.

"Does my mama..." In the mirror above the bar, I saw Stacie blink in confusion for one flickering minute before his grin returned. "Oh. The baby face. I promise, I'm older than I look." He pointed to the glass I was generously applying scotch to. "Not that you asked, but I'll take a drink myself."

"Sure thing." I opened the mini fridge. "You've got a choice between water, Coke, and Yoo Hoo. Anything harder and I'll need to see your license."

I'd been hoping to get a rise out of him. Instead the little shit pulled out his wallet. "See? Twenty-five next month." He ran his fingers through hair so blond I checked the color listed on his ID to see if it was real. "I'll have what you're having, please."

A polite extortionist. Who would've thought?

I handed Stacie back his wallet and fixed him a scotch and soda, not quite as heavy on the scotch as mine. I walked it back over to him, passed it over, and then took a seat in the chair closest to the loveseat. I wanted to be close enough to size up my opponent.

"So you're a pool fan, huh?" I sipped my scotch. "Not many people know me as Choir Boy. Not anymore."

"Maybe not in Arizona, but around here you're still a legend." Stacie's face was aglow with admiration. It was easy for a minute to forget he had my family by the short hairs. "Vic, he worships you."

"Right." I set my glass on a side table, the fine single malt I'd bought when I came into town suddenly not to my taste. "My brother thinks so much of me he's dragged me into another of his unholy cluster fucks. For all I know, he's in on this with you."

"No. I promise you..." God help me, but Stacie honestly sounded sorry. "It's not like that. If you'll just let me explain--"

"I wish you would." I'd learned years ago never to let anger enter the game, whether you were down two sets or twenty, but where my family was concerned it was damned near impossible to remember all the rules. "I don't even know why I'm here." I narrowed my eyes. "I'll tell you like I told my mother: if it's money you want, Vic can go to--"

"Money?" Stacie looked nonplussed. "Vic didn't tell you?" He cursed under his breath. "No, of course he didn't." He set his own glass aside and wiped his hands on his jeans. "Look, I'm sorry for the way this went down, you walking into this blind. If you'll give me a minute, I'll explain."

I crossed my arms. "I'm listening."

"I own the controlling interest in a Tunica casino. Inherited it from my dad." A look of sadness washed Stacie's face, making him look older. "I'd never paid much attention to the gambling side of the business. I was too busy building up my real estate stake." The goofy grin returned. "The Tennessee Valley real estate market's one of the few in the country that hasn't seen plummeting property values during the recession. Even our foreclosure rate's not as high as most other parts of the country. I've--"

"Fascinating as that is," I said, "do you think you could get back to how you met Vic?"

"Sorry." Stacie's cheeks went pink. "I have this tendency to info dump every now and then." He cleared his throat. "The casino was my dad's baby." The sad look returned, but this time it was tempered with a bitter-sweet smile. "The old coot had a heart attack right beside the blackjack table. Exactly how he would've wanted to go if you'd asked him, I imagine." He shook his head. "Not really my scene, casinos, but with my dad gone, I figured I needed to know what it was I owned such a big piece of."

Young but smart. I had to admire that whether I wanted to or not. "I'm guessing you met Vic while you were down in Tunica, inspecting your property."

"Yeah." Stacie tapped his fingers on his knee, an odd, rhythmic dance. "Our casino manager caught Vic paying for chips with a stolen credit card."

I closed my eyes. *Shit, Vic.*

"The owner of the card -- an ex-girlfriend of Vic's from what he told me later -- reported the card stolen after she couldn't find it, but she declined to press charges."

I opened my eyes to give Stacie the full range of my go-to-Hell glare. "And you what, thought it would be a good idea to strike up a conversation with a would-be-felon?"

"It wasn't like that. Look, I was in the control room when Vic got collared. There's something about him. I don't know... something that makes you feel sorry for the guy." Stacie shrugged. "After the girlfriend decided not to press charges, I took the poor guy out for a beer."

Unbelievable. If I stole a credit card, I'd get ten years in the state pen. Vic got beer and sympathy.

"I'm guessing that's when Vic told you about his brother, the pool player." I wasn't sure how pool and I figured into this, but from Stacie's earlier enthusiasm, I was pretty sure my prowess with a stick was the reason I was here.

"Not at first. Vic told me he was from Florence. When I said I was, too, we got to talking, and that's when he told me pool was his real game."

I rolled my eyes. "My brother couldn't shoot pool if you jacked him up six feet and slid Minnesota Fats underneath him."

Stacie laughed, the sound mellow and husky, whether from the scotch or just because, I couldn't say. "So I found out when I challenged him to friendly game. While we were playing, he told me his brother was Florence's own Choir Boy."

I'd earned the name Choir Boy back when I was in high school. It was erroneous -- I'd been an altar boy for a brief period, but never a part of the choir -- but if you hang out in a pool hall for any length of time, you're gonna get a nickname. I figure as nicknames go, I could've gotten much worse. Dickhair McWinters, Pud Haggard, and One-Ball Willis, three of Ollie's regulars, always made me proud to be called nothing more than Choir Boy.

"Not that it isn't flattering to know you've heard of me, but I stopped answering to Choir Boy a long time ago." I stretched out my cramped legs -- stress and the cross-country plane ride starting to catch up with me. "I don't play pool anymore."

"Maybe not for money, but you do play. Every Tuesday and Thursday night you're part of a league that meets at Sleepy's Pub." He sounded almost bored now. "Not surprisingly, your team has come in first the last four years running."

"You've had me investigated?" At this point I wasn't exactly shocked

Stacie gave me another shrug. "As I'm sure you've figured out by now, I need a pool player. I'll do anything to see that I get what I need." The cold calculation with which he said it was so out of place for a guy who looked and talked like a frat boy, I was taken aback.

"Including allowing my brother to rack up two-hundred and fifty grand in debt at your casino on my parent's dime to insure my cooperation." Pissed as I was, it was hard not to admire his Machiavellian tactics.

The dirty little son-of-a-bitch was good.

"I told Vic I'll absolve the debt and I meant it," Stacie said. "And it's not like he wouldn't have run up that much in debt somewhere else given the chance. At least with me, you know Vic has half a chance on crawling his way out of the hole." The little prick set his jaw. "I'll wipe the slate clean and settle up with your folks as soon as you fulfill your end of the bargain."

The part I was still waiting to hear. "Which is?"

"I want you to play in a tournament for me."

I learned a long time ago that nothing's as simple as it sounds. Nobody was going to go to the trouble Stacie'd gone to over a simple pool tournament.

I leaned forward in my chair. "And?"

"I have it on good authority a certain mutual acquaintance of ours is going to be the one to beat at this particular tournament." Stacie didn't look like a kid anymore. He looked every bit the kind of man who'd extort another into going along with his plan. All he needed was a black hat, a handlebar mustache and an evil laugh and he'd be the perfect storybook villain ready to tie me to the railroad tracks. He picked his drink back up and took a swig. "I believe you know Jude Simpkins."

"Mother fucking son-of-a-bitch."

Stacie's college-boy facade was back in place. "Him or me?"

"Either one works." It wasn't that I couldn't beat Jude. The douche bag never could beat me, no matter how good he thought he was. I just didn't want to get close enough to the slimy piece of shit to play him.

"So there's no love lost between you and Simpkins. Vic told me the same thing, but I'm glad to hear it from you." Stacie stretched like a sleepy cat. He was taller than I'd first taken him for, and skinny as a twig. "Simpkins has everything he owns tied up in this tournament. Word on the street is he's betting it all -- and I do mean all -- on himself. If and when you beat him, he'll be completely and totally ruined." Stacie spoke as if seeing Jude Simpkins lying in a thousand bloody financial pieces would be better for him than a trip to Disneyworld, Bush Gardens, and Knots Berry Farm rolled into one.

Not that I'd mind tearing a few strips off the guy's hide myself. "You've done your homework," I said carefully. "You obviously know why I hate Simpkins." During the brief six months I'd dated

Jude fifteen years ago -- I don't know why I thought hooking up with a guy whose only goal in life was to become Fast Eddie Felson from *The Hustler's* clone -- the asshole had cheated on me, lied to me six ways from Sunday, and conspired with the guy who was backing me at the time to swindle me out of about twenty thousand dollars. "What about you? Why do you want him so bad?"

For the first time, Stacie's open face was closed for business. "You beat Simpkins, Vic's markers are cancelled and your family gets back on its feet. That's all you need to know."

Again, it was a little too simple. "And if I lose?"

"Didn't you hear? Choir Boy Harris doesn't lose." Stacie killed the rest of his scotch with a laugh. "I wouldn't suggest you start now." He came to his feet. "Tournament's in three weeks, at a friend's casino. Invitation only, if you get me."

I got him. Big time backers and side betters involved in this one. I'd played more than one of these kinds of tournaments in my day, but never for these stakes. "I don't get it," I said. "If you and Simpkins hate each other so much, why would he play a tournament you're backing?"

"Simpkins doesn't know I'm involved in this." Stacie handed me his empty glass. "Poor dumb dick's about to get a nasty surprise." He passed me a card. "You can find me at that address," he said. "I'll give you forty-eight hours to make up your mind."

He didn't wait for my response, which was good since I had fuck-all to say.

"You want me to mail you your what?"

"Not mail. Jesus." The thought of my precious Schon languishing in a hot mail truck gave me heart palpitations. I could picture the Irish linen wrap shriveling and the Ivory cracking. "My stick," I said on a shudder. "I need you to overnight it to me. Fed Ex. Mark it fragile."

Max and I had been friends long enough that he didn't pelt me with questions. Once I told him exactly where in the house I kept my stick, he agreed to use his spare key and see the job done. He let me off the hook with nothing more than an "Are you sure you're okay?" to which I replied, "Fine."

Lies between friends often go uncalled.

I wasn't sure I was going to play Stacie's game yet, but just in case, I wanted my stick. Before I made any real decisions, I had to talk to Vic. First I had to find him. As soon as I hung up with Max, I called my mother.

"Vic come home last night?" I asked in lieu of greeting

"No. I..." She sighed, like she was so tired she could hardly stand to keep going. "Did you talk to Vic's, um... friend?"

"I wouldn't call Evan Stacie a friend to anyone in this family, but yeah, I did." I picked at the eggs and toast I'd ordered just after I got up. "I'm not making any decisions until I talk to Vic." I had the suspicion my mother could find him before my father did. "If you know where he might be, it would sure speed the process."

"I... there's a couple of places..." Just like I thought. Mom knew Vic's secrets and didn't want to rat him out.

I grabbed a pen and paper. "I want names and addresses." Took some doing, but ten minutes later I had a working list of places to go brother hunting. My mother was none too happy with me, but that was nothing new.

I spent the better part of the day trying to track Vic down. I know most people wouldn't have bothered -- would have called me an enabler for even thinking about getting him out of yet another jam -- but I had a plan, one I'd been turning over ever since I'd talked to Stacie the night before. If Vic wanted my help, it was going to come with a price. He and Stacie could either agree to that price or Stacie could suck it and Vic could face the music for the first time in his life.

It was well past four in the afternoon by the time I pulled my rental car into the parking lot of a place in Muscle Shoals called The Catnip. From the sign -- a pair of stocking-clad legs crossed at the ankles -- it wasn't hard for me to figure the place for a strip joint. I guessed they must've had either some really pretty girls or some desperate clients because it wasn't even supper time proper and the lot was packed.

I was struck blind as I stepped from the sunny lot into the dark building. Took me a full minute for my eyes to adjust. Took me another minute to realize most of the attention in the bar was focused not on the stacked red-head slithering up and down the pole in the center of the room, but on the two guys squared off at the bar table closest to the DJ's booth.

One of those guys -- the guy who looked most in danger of getting his ass kicked -- happened to be my brother.

"What's going on?" I whispered to one of the spectators.

"These two been playing the last eighteen hours straight." My new friend pointed to the guy opposite Vic, a big bastard who probably bench-pressed pit bulls for fun. "Clancy there, he owns the place. He kept her open all night, wanted to give that guy Vic a chance to win his money back."

Sure he did. I knew that game. Keep a fish hooked, let him keep losing and losing until there was no way he'd ever get caught up. Then you offered a double or nothing bet, hope the sucker was as stupid as you'd taken him for.

"Everything was okay," the guy next to me said, "until Clancy pulled up and Vic told him he didn't have no money."

That would do it. "How much is Vic down?"

"Nine grand," the guy said with fiendish delight. I couldn't really fault him for that. Vic was a walking ten-car pile-up. You knew you weren't supposed to look but you couldn't help but stare at the spectacle. The problem was, I didn't have nine grand on me. I had maybe two hundred cash, and I had a feeling this guy wasn't gonna take a check.

Vic still hadn't noticed me. I eased up to the table in time to hear Clancy threaten to paint the green felt Vic's Blood Red.

"Nice," I said as I sidled up beside my brother. "When you're done, whop him one for me."

"Drew," Vic said with a mix of irritation and relief. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for your sorry ass," I said. Under my breath, I added, "What, you thought I came for the T&A?" I turned back to Clancy. "How much does he owe you?" Playing dumb is often a good defense.

"Nine, and now the fucker's crying he can't pay. If little Vicky wants to cry, I can give him a reason." As he said it, I noticed Clancy had no real neck, just a huge tree-trunk of muscle holding his head to the biggest body I'd ever seen.

If we lived through this, I was going to kick Vic's ass myself.

"I've got a better option," I said with the confidence of somebody who'd talked himself out of more than one ass kicking beside a pool table. "How's about I give you a chance to double your money?"

"Eighteen grand." Clancy laughed, the sound like broken glass scraping concrete. "This dumbass can't even pay me the nine he owes me." He aimed his cue at Vic. "Not to mention he sucks."

"You cheated, you no neck--"

"Will you shut your fucking mouth and let me save your ass?" I hissed at Vic. To Clancy I said, "You won't be playing Vic this time. This time it'll be you and me. You win, you walk away with eighteen. I win, I walk away even."

Clancy cocked his head. "Let's say I take you up on it -- and I'm not saying I am -- but who says you've got any more cash to cover the bet than numbnuts, here."

"I've got it." I pulled out my phone, cued up the Net and pulled up my bank's homepage. Took me a minute but I got the balance up in a way that Clancy could see without exposing all my

account info. I waved the phone in his face so he could see I had a heck of a lot more than eighteen grand in savings. "You'll have to escort me to the bank if I lose, but then, I don't plan on losing."

I'd been playing this game long enough to know the money, coupled with picking at a guy like Clancy's vanity, would compel him to play me. Not to mention he had to if he wanted to save face in front of his people. The game was all set when some loud mouth on the sidelines stage whispered, "Holy shit! That's Choir Boy Harris."

I fought back a dozen curses. Both Ollie and Evan had told me folks around here still knew who I was. I should've listened. I watched Clancy, wondering if this new piece of information was going to have me going to the bank to fetch nine G's.

"Choir Boy Harris, huh." The girl on stage stopped dancing, and though it was probably my imagination, it seemed to me the whole place got quiet. "You that big shot pool hustler brother Vic's always talking about?" Clancy was asking, but I could tell he already knew the answer.

"A, I'm not a hustler and B, Vic talks too much." I took the cue, a cheap-ass sneaky Pete, from Vic's hand and chalked it. "We gonna chat or we gonna play?" I stepped back and held my breath.

"Better hope you're as good as Vic thinks you are." Clancy grinned, which was as scary to me as Clancy not grinning. "Nobody around here beats me. Ever."

Now I wanted to beat the fucker on principal. "Whatever you say. Nine ball, one set, race to seven sound good to you?"

"Vic and I were doing race to nine, but seven works." Clancy pulled a quarter from his pocket. "Flip you for the break."

I called tails and won the break. Clancy racked and Vic found himself a stool on which to sulk. I wasn't even going to speculate on why Vic was pissed, seeing as how it was his ass I was currently pulling out of a sling. Besides, I had bigger things to worry about.

Evan Stacie had just walked in and had taken a seat at the bar. Since I'm not a huge believer in coincidence, I had to believe one of two things. Either someone had called him and told him I was about to play -- quite the stretch considering I'd only just decided to play five minutes ago myself -- or the little brat was following me.

Option number two it was.

There wasn't anything I could do about Stacie at the moment so I tuned him out along with the gyrating beat of the music, the cloying stench of cigarette smoke (restaurants were one thing, but an Alabama bar wasn't an Alabama bar without enough second hand smoke to poison a small country), and the cheerful side betting of the peanut gallery. Right now Clancy and I were the only two people alive.

I hate bar tables. Too fucking short. Give me a smooth four by eight or a four-and-a-half by nine any day. I hated them, but I'd learned long ago how to use English to compensate for the size of the table. I made the one and four on the break and gave myself great shape to make the two. From there I got into the zone and ran the first three racks.

On rack number four, I scratched on the break and Clancy got his chance. He made the first seven balls, but he didn't leave himself a shot on the eight. He thought he'd settle the difference by hooking me so I wouldn't have a shot, either.

I bounced the cue off two rails, sunk the eight, hit the third rail, and gave myself a straight-in corner pocket shot on the nine. From there I ran racks five and six and put myself on the hill.

"You're going to give me a chance to win some of my money back, right?" Clancy said as I broke the final rack.

"I haven't won yet." I watched the nine teeter at the edge of the pocket and then drop like a stone. "Now I've won," I said without a trace of arrogance. I don't get arrogant about pool. Arrogance gets you killed. I turned to Clancy with what I hoped was a friendly smile. "Look, man, the way I see it, neither of us has really lost anything. We're even."

"Bull fucking shit." Clancy was smiling, but he was mad enough to chew leather. "I was up nine grand until you walked in here, and after milking your dumbass brother for the last eighteen hours, I deserve a fighting chance."

"You agreed to the terms," I said, but I was mad now, too, even though my smile was as wide as Clancy's. I could talk about my brother all I wanted to -- and God knows I'd called him a hell of a lot worse than a dumbass -- but I was blood and blood has a right to criticize blood. Clancy was nothing to me or Vic. He could damn well keep his opinions to himself.

"If I was gonna give you a chance to get back even," I said casually, like I hadn't already decided to clean this guy's clock, "it would be a new game. New terms, just me and you."

Clancy tried to appear just as casual, but he was practically drooling. "Sure, sure. What were you thinking?"

"What were you playing Vic?"

"Two hundred a set."

Which meant Clancy had dumped a few games just to make Vic think he had a fighting chance. I chalked Vic's shitty cue, thinking how much I was gonna enjoy bringing Clancy to his knees for pulling a dirty trick like that on an addict like Vic.

"I'll play you two a set," I said evenly, "but I'm not talking hundreds." I picked up the cue ball, rolled it over the back of my hand, and caught it. "Two thousand a set, race to five, and I'm in."

I'd never heard a mutual gasp before, but one sounded from the cheap seats. Over the static I heard Clancy swallow. "You shittin' me?"

"Two things I don't joke about: sex and money." I set the ball back on the felt. "Two grand. That's my deal. You in or are you out?"

Half the bar leaned up to hear Clancy's answer. I noticed Evan seemed particularly interested. After a slow, simmering breath, Clancy said, "I'm in, but since these are new stakes, we flip for the break again."

Clancy won the flip, but that was all the luck the pool gods offered him from then on out. I would've felt sorry for the poor bastard if I hadn't been having such a good time beating his ass. After seven sets, Clancy owed me fourteen large and I was ready to quit. I started taking apart Vic's cue.

"You can't quit me now," Clancy said like I'd just suggested he do the chicken dance naked on stage. "Not when I owe you this much cash."

"Oh, you mean like you were gonna quit Vic at nine G's?" Granted, quitting Vic had been a good thing. No telling how much he would've lost if Clancy hadn't pulled up. I located Vic's case on an empty table and put the stick away. "I'm done, man. We played a fair game. Can't ask for more than that."

Clancy's face was the same color as those awful beets one of my mother's church friends used to make pickles out of each summer, but he finally backed down with, "No, I don't guess you can." He jabbed a beefy thumb at me. "I'm taking all the money we put into the table in quarters outta what I owe you, though."

I wasn't stupid enough to argue. I also wasn't surprised when Clancy disappeared into a back room and came out again with thirteen thousand and nine-hundred dollars in cash.

"I took off a little extra for what Vic owed me in quarters, too." Clancy was pretty cheerful for a guy handing over a chunk of change that size. "Didn't think you'd mind."

"Your place, your rules." I shook his hand. "Thanks, man." From the corner of my eye, I saw Vic walking toward us.

"Anytime you want to give me a chance to earn some of that back, you know where to find me." Clancy turned on Vic fast as a snake. "You, now, you're not welcome here anymore. Man who can't back his bets has no place in my bar."

Vic started to open his mouth, and damn my luck, I was too far away to shut him up. Evan wasn't, thank God.

"Come on, Vic," he said with a firm hand on Vic's shoulder. "Let's you, me, and your brother grab us some supper." Evan winked. "We'll make Money Bags over there pay."

I watched in amazement as Vic obeyed Evan without so much as a dirty look, following like a puppy on a leash.

I grabbed Vic's case, tipped my imaginary hat to Clancy, and got the hell out of Dodge.

Chapter Five

Evan hadn't been kidding about supper, which suited me fine since I needed to talk to them both, anyway. I ended up following them in my rental car to a family-style steak house off the main drag. Carrying so much cash in my pockets wasn't doing much for my mental health at the moment. I kept glancing in the rearview mirror to make sure no one from Clancy's had followed me in hopes of helping themselves to my winnings.

This is why most road men don't travel alone.

The restaurant was busy but not bursting. A friendly hostess in a blue jacket showed us to a table near the back. As soon as we ordered our drinks, I looked down at my blue fingers with a grimace.

Nothing like the taste of chalk to ruin even the best steak.

"I'll be right back," I said. I showed them my hands. "Gotta wash up."

"Mine could use a scrub." Vic pushed back from the table, matching me step for step. And just like that, I was seven again, taking my little brother to the bathroom.

I wasn't a complete moron, my penchant for letting my family walk all over me notwithstanding. I knew Vic wanted something from me besides a shared hand washing, but I wasn't gonna drag it out of him. I lathered my hands and waited.

Vic was nothing if not predictable. As soon as I reached for a paper towel, he took his place at the sink and said, "So what's my cut?"

My Aunt Quinn used to say of Vic, "That poor boy's got more nerve than good sense." No shit.

"Your cut," I said through locked teeth, "was walking out of The Catnip with your ears still attached to your thick-ass skull." I had visions of cracking that skull into the cinder-block bathroom wall a couple of times to see if Vic's head was as hard as I took it for.

"You owe me at least seven," he said on a whine. Vic's a perfect mix of mom and dad looks wise. He's got mom's dark hair, dad's brown eyes, and he topped out at a medium height and build that says he got a pretty good stirring of both their DNA. That whine of his, though, it was pure Mom. Made me want to strangle him. Instead, I tossed my paper towel at the trash can and walked out of the bathroom.

Vic bitched all the way back to our table. "You wouldn't have gotten that game if it weren't for me." He dodged a server with an armload of food and started in again. "Hell, you took my fucking game away from me." We'd reached the table just as he came to that brilliant conclusion.

As I seated myself, Vic said, "That's right. You stole my action. That means the whole fourteen grand is mine."

I don't know how to describe Evan's expression. Shock and horror with a dash of down-home amazement, maybe? Gone was the friendly vibe between him and his buddy Vic.

"You can't be serious." It was a little bit flattering, how appalled Evan sounded on my behalf.

"The hell I can't." But Vic didn't sound so sure now. I think maybe he'd been counting on Evan to back him up. But Evan hadn't, and Vic was getting nervous.

Good.

"Oh, he's serious. Only took him five minutes to go from wanting half to deciding he wanted the whole thing." I stopped talking when our server came to take our orders. Three steaks and baked potatoes later, she was gone and I had the floor again. "Here's the deal." I looked Vic dead in the face so there was no mistake who I was talking to and what I wanted.

"Every time you get in trouble," I said, "you expect somebody else to bail you out. I don't think you even care who does it anymore as long as you aren't on the hook for anything you do."

Vic looked down at his hands. "You make me sound like some kind of dangerous criminal. I've skirted the law a few times, sure, but--"

"What you are," I interrupted, "is a compulsive gambler. Every crime you've committed as far as I can tell has been to support your habit."

The label didn't sit well with Vic. "I'm not some fucking junkie."

"What would you call a man who's lost everything he's ever had on a series of sucker's bets?" I picked up my tea glass, but didn't drink from it. "When's the last time you saw your kids?"

Vic looked at Evan. I wondered if my brother was ashamed or if he was just hoping Evan had the answer. "Since when do you care about my kids?" Vic said to the tablecloth. "You've never met them."

It was true. I didn't even know if Vic's kids were boys or girls. The only reason I knew he had two was my mom had let it slip last time I'd bailed Vic out. "That wasn't my choice. I think you know that. Mom and Dad would have a shit fit if I went anywhere near their grandchildren." I set my glass back down. "I've never had any reason to think you felt any different."

Vic started to say something, but I held up my hand. "I'm not going to argue with you. If you want my help, you're gonna listen to me now." I widened my scope to include Evan in the conversation. "I'll play your stupid tournament, but before you get too excited," I said on Evan's jaw-cracking grin, "I have some conditions of my own. Nonnegotiable." The last part was mostly for Vic.

Evan nodded. "I'm listening."

"Vic?"

He shrugged, which I took as answer enough.

"I told you the last time I got you out of a jam I wouldn't do it again and here I am, rushing to your rescue." I sighed, the situation hitting me hard. "I'm not doing either of us any favors by not making you stand on your own, so I'm gonna lay this out for you, plain and clear." I kicked his leg under the table, forcing him to look at my face. "If you ever gamble yourself into a corner again, whether you owe fifteen dollars or fifteen million -- if it's Mom and Dad's money you've used or if you've robbed a bank -- don't call me for help. I won't answer."

He didn't take it well, but then, I didn't expect him to. "Aren't you Mr. High and Mighty? Funny how you can stand in judgment on me when you just won fourteen thousand dollars in *my* nine ball game."

"Vic... you know there's a difference." Evan's voice was soft but it carried, even over the other diners.

It was the wrong thing to say. Vic banged his hands on the table like a child. "Right, because Drew is so much better than me."

"That, and I don't bet money I can't afford to lose." This time when I picked up my glass, I took a long, gulping drink. The tea was okay, but I wished I'd ordered beer instead. I had a feeling I was going to need a little liquid courage for what came next. "I also know when to walk away from a game I can't possibly win. You, Vic, you'll bet on anything. Right now, if a cockroach crawled across this table and someone put ten grand on which direction the bug was gonna go, you'd have to have yourself a piece of that action. You wouldn't be able to say no."

"You really think you know it all, huh, Drew?" Vic was breathing in thick, uneven rasps. "Got your own business, a new life away from this place. Guess that makes you an expert on everything now."

"Hardly, but here's what I know without a doubt." I set my glass aside again and put my hands in my lap so Vic wouldn't see my clenched fists. "You're an addict. That's not going to change without some heavy duty intervention." Here it came. "Which is why I won't agree to this deal unless you go into a residential program for gambling addicts."

Vic laughed. He kept laughing -- probably sure I didn't mean it -- until he saw I wasn't laughing along with him.

Evan wasn't laughing either. "I take it you've found a place."

I nodded. "I did a little research last night after you left." And to think I'd almost left my laptop back home. "There's a place in Florida, Riverbank Recovery." I looked at Vic, who'd gone as white as the tablecloth. "I'll fly down there with you."

"The fuck you will."

"The treatment lasts four weeks, but most people who don't have underlying mental health issues get better in three." I'd practically memorized the website. I'd also called them first thing this morning and made Vic a tentative reservation, but he didn't need to know that. "If you don't agree to fly down there with me tomorrow and sign yourself in -- or if you sign yourself out before the tournament -- I'll pull out and Evan's free to collect his money from your hide."

Evan blanched. Vic crossed his arms and made a pug-dog face. "So unless I want Mom and Dad to lose all they've got, I don't have a fucking choice."

"You got it."

Vic pushed back from the table so hard he knocked his glass over, iced tea making a sodden mess of the tabletop. "Some brother you are. Some son."

"Mom and Dad have exactly the relationship with me they asked for," I said evenly. "As for being a good brother, I'm sure as hell trying to be."

"Right." Vic stood up. "I'll be in the car," he said to Evan. Then he walked away.

"You're doing the right thing." Evan helped clear the table as our server rushed over with a towel and a fresh tablecloth.

"Yeah, Vic sure thinks so." Once the mess was clean and we were both seated again, I said, "Now it's your turn to hear something you aren't going to like."

"I'm listening."

"Whether or not I win this tournament of yours, I want you to cancel the debt against my folks." I wiped my hand over my face, not even hungry now, just wanting to go back to my hotel so I could crash. "I want that in writing or there's no deal."

"And if Vic backs out of rehab?" Evan asked after he'd thought it over for a minute.

I looked toward the exit. "Then he'll deserve what he gets."

Evan agreed to my terms, as I'd figured he would. He'd protested a couple of times -- something about how I was too good to lose to the likes of Jude Simpkins -- but the truth is everybody loses

sometimes, not matter how good they are. Pool is two parts skill and one part old-fashioned luck. Sometimes the luck pushes the skill out of the way.

After dinner I drove back to the hotel and checked my winnings into the safe. It wasn't even nine o'clock and I was ready to go to bed. I was about to do that very thing when my room phone rang.

"I'll do it," Vic said in a defeated, un-Vic-like way. "Just tell me when you want to leave."

I sat on the edge of the bed. "You told Mom and Dad?"

"Yeah." Vic sighed. "They think it's a good idea as long as they don't have to pay for it."

Amazing. They'll pay two hundred thousand in Vic's gambling debts but God forbid they should chip in for his recovery. "Don't worry about it. Tonight's winnings should cover it."

"Okay. I... when do you want to leave?"

"If I can get us on a plane, tomorrow. I'll call you with the details."

"Right." Vic hung up without saying goodbye, but for once I didn't hold it against him.

My father didn't speak to me when I came to pick Vic up the next day, but my mother followed us out to the car.

"You're doing the right thing," she told him. Then she hugged him tight, like she couldn't bear to let him go. "I know you can beat this, honey," she said as she pulled back.

Vic kissed the top of her head and got in the car.

I started to walk around to the driver's side, but my mother stopped me. "Thank you for this. It means a lot."

"Yeah." It wasn't a hug, but for my mother and me it was quite the emotional exchange.

The Huntsville airport was a madhouse. Vic and I were at the check-in desk when a voice beside me said, "I hope you don't mind, but I had your tickets upgraded to first class. I hate coach."

Evan. At this point, I'd have been surprised if he hadn't shown up. "Alabama has anti-stalking laws you know."

He grinned, and curse my hide for finding it appealing. "My detective happens to be top-notch. No way would he get arrested for something as blasé as stalking." Evan nudged my shoulder like we were football buddies or something. "Man has a right to keep an eye on his investment."

Besides," he hitched his head ever so slightly to where Vic was hunkered down in a seat a few feet away from us, "I thought maybe you could use the moral support."

I don't know what it said about me that I needed the emotional support of my blackmailer, but the prick was right.

No need to tell him so. "Fine," I said, "but you're paying for the upgrade."

"Actually," he cleared his throat, "I'm, ah... I thought I'd pay for the whole thing. The tickets, Vic's rehab, your hotel stay while you're here: all your expenses, pretty much."

Well, I hadn't seen that one coming. "Why?"

"I don't know." Evan laughed. "Call it a latent pang of conscience if you want to."

"You're a piss-poor blackmailer," I said as we picked up our tickets.

Evan elbowed my ribs. "Yeah, but admit it: it makes you like me more."

Since it did, I didn't comment.

Riverbank Recovery was a nice place. Immaculate grounds, great facilities, new building. We got the full tour, got to meet the doctors and therapists who'd be working on Vic's treatment plan. We even got to see the room Vic would be sharing with another patient.

It was harder leaving Vic than I thought it would be.

"They said you couldn't have any phone calls for the first forty-eight hours." We were standing in the common room, and I had the same weird feeling in my throat I got when Vic and I were little kids and I dropped him off at his classroom door on his first day of kindergarten. My little brother with the crooked shoelaces. "You've got my cell number, though, so you can call me when the forty eight hours are up. I bought you a couple of rolls of quarters for the phone. They'll keep them up front for you."

"Yeah. They told me." God, he looked so lost.

"There's a visitor's day every Sunday. You can't have any visitors your first week but your second week I'll be here. If you want, I can fly Mom and Dad down and--"

"Don't do that." Vic shook his head. "The last thing we need is for you and Dad to get into a fight at forty thousand feet." He hesitated. "I would like to see you, though."

"I'll be here." I pulled some bills out of my pocket and pressed them into Vic's hand. "For the vending machine."

"Thanks." He pointed to where Evan was waiting. "You should probably go."

"Yeah." No matter how mad I was at Vic for the situation he'd put me in, it took everything I had to turn around and leave him in the care of total strangers. Once we were outside, Evan said, "You look like you could use a drink."

"You driving?"

Evan nodded.

"Then I'm drinking," I said. "Let's go."

Evan took me to a gay bar. Didn't take me two seconds to figure it out between the men dancing together and the bartender in drag.

"Is this for my benefit or are you trying to tell me something?" I bellied up to the bar and ordered a tequila sunrise. I'd thought about doing shots, but getting drunk -- as alluring as it was -- wasn't gonna fix my problems, and it sure wasn't gonna help Vic.

"What, you don't have gaydar?" Evan ordered a Coke in keeping with his role as designated driver.

I snorted. "I wish. Would've saved me more than one ass-kicking along the way." We took our drinks to a table just off the dance floor. "You still haven't answered my question."

"I'm gay," Evan said after he'd waited for so long I was sure he wasn't going to answer. "I'm not in the closet, but I don't hang a rainbow flag from my front porch, either. Some of the folks I deal with in real estate wouldn't be near as enthusiastic about doing business with me if I was in their faces about it."

"You don't have to explain it to me. I lived in Florence long enough to know how it works."

"Is that why you left?" Evan was watching me like he really cared about the answer.

"What, your investigator didn't tell you?"

"It's not like that. I promise it's not." Despite the darkness of the club, I could see Evan's face color. "You make it sound like I'm this great mastermind who set out to ruin you and your family. I'm not trying to fuck over you or Vic."

Crazy as it was to listen to a guy who'd done all that Evan had, I halfway believed him. "You really like Vic, don't you?"

"Yeah I do. He reminds me of somebody." Evan swallowed. "Somebody I cared a lot about."

Uh-oh. "You know Vic's straight, right?"

Evan laughed. "No offense to Vic, but he's not my type." The laughter faded. "He reminds me of my friend Cade. The two of us were brothers once."

That made about as much sense as a bull with boobs. "He used to be your brother?"

"His dad was married to my mother for about fifteen minutes," Evan said. "My mother's a lovely woman, but the whole domestic thing isn't her scene. She's currently on husband number six."

"Ouch."

"Yeah, and Cade's dad has had about that many wives. Cade and I, though... we clicked from the minute our folks started dating."

I smiled, thinking about how close Vic and I had been as kids. "How old were you?"

"Cade was seventeen and I was twelve." Evan swirled his finger over the rim of his empty glass. "I'd been raised an only child, and I worshiped him. Thought he was a hero. He became an even bigger hero to me when our parents got their divorce and Cade announced he was keeping me." His smile, soft and sweet with remembrance, chipped away at some of my lingering doubts about him. "Cade came and got me every weekend like clockwork, almost like he'd won custody of me in the divorce. How many teenagers do you know who'd do give up their weekends to spend time with a dorky twelve-year-old kid?"

"Sounds like a great guy." I was really liking this Cade, but the way Evan had referred to him in the past tense told me Cade's story wasn't gonna have a happy ending. "What happened to him?"

"Jude Simpkins." This time when Evan said Simpkins' name, it sounded like a curse. "The two of them met at a bar a lot like this one while Cade was in town visiting me." He shook his head. "Gay brothers. Sounds like a cliché, huh?"

I shook my head. "I was actually thinking about how lucky you were to have someone on your side when you came out."

"Yeah." He struggled for a minute. "Yeah, I was. Cade was the best. He had a great life until Simpkins came along."

I don't know what possessed me. I'm not a touchy-feely kind of guy, but Evan's pain was palpable. I reached out to squeeze his hand.

He grabbed my fingers and didn't let go as he continued the story. "Cade came from money. Trust fund baby," he said with fondness. "Inherited even more when his grandfather died. All that money, hard for a vulture like Jude Simpkins to pass by."

"I'll bet." The Jude Simpkins I'd known had been an opportunistic snake who was always looking to fuck his way up the next rung of the ladder. It fit.

"Cade fell hard for Simpkins, no matter how much I and everybody else he knew tried to warn him what a weasel the guy was." Evan let go of my hand to push his hair away from his face. "Simpkins was good. I'll give him that much. He played the devoted boyfriend for a year before the accident."

My stomach lurched. "Accident?"

"Cade and Simpkins had been out partying. They were with Simpkins' friends, from what Cade told me later." Evan focused at a spot on the dance floor, like maybe looking at me right then would've been too hard. "They'd both been drinking, but Simpkins was the one driving. He crossed the median on I65 and met the business end of a semi."

"Jesus."

"Simpkins, believe it or not, walked away with a broken collar bone and a handful of bruises." Evan was suddenly fascinated by his hands. "Cade wasn't that lucky. He lost both his legs and his left arm."

A waking nightmare. "It's a wonder he survived at all."

"I kept telling him that," Evan said. "That and a slew of stupid shit I thought would push him to fight. His dad and I, we brought in therapists, looked into the newest, most innovative prosthetics." He shook himself. "We were so dedicated to project 'Rehabilitate Cade,' we missed it."

"Missed what?"

He sighed, all the air leaking out of him. "Cade giving up, I guess. He might not have if it hadn't been for Simpkins."

I had a feeling I knew what was coming. "Simpkins turned out not to be the prince Cade thought he'd landed."

"Not quite." Evan's voice was tight. "Three weeks after Cade's accident -- while Cade was still in the fucking hospital -- Simpkins told Cade they were finished. Told Cade he needed a real man, not an armless, legless shell. Told Cade he already had a new guy lined up to take Cade's place, one who was richer and could walk on his own two feet." Evan blinked hard. "The day Cade came home from the hospital, he waited until his private nurse and I were both asleep and then downed a bottle of pain killers." He swiped at his eyes. "I'm the one who found him, after it was too damned late."

Even after everything that had passed between me and my brother, I couldn't imagine the pain of finding Vic's dead body, or the self-blame I'd feel, knowing he'd died on my watch. "How long ago did this happen?"

"Two years, three months, one week, and four days ago, but who counts right?" Evan's laugh was weak. "I started planning my revenge the day we buried Cade. At first I figured I'd buy a gun, just go over to Simpkins place and blow his brains out." Evan gave another sad laugh. "Guess I sound like a homicidal freak."

"If somebody did that to my brother, I can't say I wouldn't have similar thoughts."

"The more I planned it out, the more I realized the best way to make a guy like Simpkins pay is to hit him where he lives," Evan said. "Simpkins wants beauty, power, money: take that away and the son-of-a-bitch is nothing. I want Simpkins to feel what my brother felt, like he has nothing left to live for."

On some basic level, I understood where Evan was coming from, could even forgive him for dragging me and my family into his unholy scheme. But I'd seen enough in my lifetime to teach me that the kind of payback Evan was talking about usually took as much out of the guy seeking it as it did the object of retribution.

"And when you've destroyed Simpkins," I said carefully, "what then?"

"I'm not sure what you mean." But by the way Evan wouldn't make eye contact with me, I was pretty sure he did. He got up. "I'm getting another Coke. You want a refill?"

"Sure." I watched him walk back to the bar. I admit I was admiring the view his tight ass made in those jeans he was wearing when somebody tapped on my shoulder.

"Want to dance?"

The guy doing the asking was a looker, and from the way he was dressed -- a pair of painted on jeans and a shirt so form-fitting I wasn't sure how he was able to draw a full breath -- he was on the prowl. But a dance was a dance, and I figured what the hell? Might lighten my mood.

My dance partner -- Jake, I think he said his name was -- and I were getting into a pretty good rhythm when the music changed from dance club techno to something slow and sweet. The two of us just kind of went with it, or we would have if a predatory Evan hadn't cut right in.

"Excuse me," he said with an I'll-kill-you-with-my-bare-hands smile for Jake, "but I think that's my date you're grinding all over." Evan didn't wait for Jake's reply, just took me by the arm, led me to another area of the floor, and started dancing with me.

"In what universe am I your date?" I said over the music. I gave Jake an apologetic shrug, but I'm not sure he could see it in the darkened club.

"You ever heard the phrase 'dance with the one who brought you?'" Evan was going to have permanent lines etched into his forehead if he kept scowling like that.

"Hello? Guy you're blackmailing here." But I didn't stop dancing with him, even as I hurled the accusation.

"I told you why I did that." Evan dragged me close enough to feel his body heat. I liked it, being so close to him, and that really pissed me off.

"Did it ever occur to you just to ask me to play in your tournament?" I pushed away from him, not caring that we were causing a scene.

"No." He followed me back to the table. "It was pure luck running into Vic like I did, brother of the one guy Jude Simpkins has never beat. I couldn't run the risk of you saying no. I..." Evan's eyes were wide and pleading. "Can't you see how important this is? Wouldn't you do it for your brother?"

I scrubbed my hand over my face. "Obviously I'm willing to go the extra mile to help Vic or I wouldn't be here, but I'd like to think I'd stop short of moving people around like they're fucking chess pieces." My jaw was starting to twitch.

Evan drew in a ragged breath. "Yeah, well maybe the rest of us aren't as noble as you are."

I headed for the door, having nothing left to say.

We stayed overnight in an out of the way motel and headed for the airport at the crack of dawn. Evan and I barely spoke on the plane ride home, which bothered me more than I wanted to analyze. It wasn't until we were back at the airport in Huntsville, about to climb into Evan's car, that the silence finally got to be more than I could stand.

"Look, can we call a truce? Please?"

"I know the situation I've put you in, Drew. I wouldn't blame you if you hated my guts." Evan got behind the wheel. "Doesn't mean I wouldn't do this all over again to get my way. Cade deserves justice."

I didn't argue with him, just climbed into the car and settled in for what had to be the longest ride of my life. Evan dropped me off at my hotel with a mumbled goodbye. I barely looked at him, glad for the distance.

I walked into the lobby restless, uncomfortable in my own skin, and unsure what to do with myself. All that disappeared when the concierge approached me to let me know I had a package at the front desk.

My stick.

I'd won that stick when I was eighteen off a guy from Akron who'd lost all his money and had nothing left to leverage but the stick. It was one of my prized possessions. Hell, I didn't even break with it (kept an old Joss in my case for that). I'd had that Schon for so long, I felt off balance playing with anything else. Case in hand, I had the perfect cure for restlessness.

Richter's was busy, the ceiling fans overhead going ninety to nothing in a bid to cool the place down in deference to all the extra bodies crammed into the space. All seven tables were in play, so I grabbed a Coke and a stool to wait my turn. Ollie shot me a wave, then went back to his game, a house game called golf that four people played on the snooker table. I was watching the action when a voice behind me said, "You still up for that truce?"

I smiled in spite of myself. "Back to the stalking, huh?"

"No stalking involved this time." Evan sat down on the stool next to mine. "It wasn't a stretch to think you might come here." He held up his hands. "I promise, I've called the dogs off you." He extended one of those hands to me. "So, truce?"

I shook with him. "Truce." Just then, a table came open. "Wanna play a friendly game?"

Evan rolled his eyes. "Do I want to get my ass kicked, you mean?" He grinned. "Why not?"

Evan wasn't bad, even playing with one of Ollie's crooked house sticks. We'd been playing for an hour before it hit me that most of the tension I'd carried that day was gone.

"You hungry?" I asked Evan, who was trying his damndest to figure out a way to unfreeze the four from the rail.

"No," he said, "but I'd love a cup of coffee. There's way too much blood in my caffeine stream right now."

"Gottcha." I propped my stick against the wall and walked up to the counter, so focused on what I was doing, I never saw it coming.

"You rotten little shit." My father's fist connected with my jaw like a brick. I'd been so relaxed knocking around with Evan, I hadn't noticed my dad come in. Ollie must not have either, because I'd gotten no warning before my dad was on me. The punch took me to the floor. My father followed me down, grabbing my right arm and twisting it behind me with a strength I hadn't known he was capable of. The force of it was sickening, enough to make me want to black out. Or maybe the whole blacking-out thing was because my father was slamming my head against the floor with every third or fourth twist of my forearm.

"I'll break this arm," he screamed in my ear. "Break it so you'll never play again. Bust your head open so there's nothing left of you like there's nothing left of my son."

I heard screaming -- Ollie's voice, Evan's, several more -- but above that and the pounding rush of pulse in my ears I recognized my father's sobs, could feel tears rolling down his cheeks and onto my bloody face.

"Wha--" I tried to say, but just then somebody managed to pull my father off me. Unfortunately, he still had hold of my arm. All I managed was a hoarse yell before whoever had him made him let me go. I tried to get up but Evan wouldn't let me.

"Hush," he said with an authority I found strangely comforting. "The ambulance is on its way." To my dad Evan said only, "So are the police, you fucker."

"We don't need the police." Through my pain-slitted eyes I could see Ollie coming around the counter with Leon, who was cocked. "I'll take care of this right here."

"Go ahead," the miserable lump that was my father said from between the two guys I could now see were pinning him down. "Shoot me. Damned if I want to live without my son."

I got what he was saying, the words more painful than any blow. "No. Vic--"

"He's dead," my father sobbed into his hands. "Killed himself, all because of you."

Chapter Six

I tried to refuse the ambulance, but Ollie and Evan weren't having it. That's probably a good thing considering I blacked out as the EMTs were loading me onto the gurney. I woke up in the ER. Evan was sitting on one side of my cot, Ollie on the other.

My first words were, "Where's my stick?"

Evan looked up to the heavens, but Ollie just laughed. "I had Steph put it behind the counter. Nothing for you to worry about there."

That taken care of, I asked the hard question. "What about my father?"

"They took the bastard to jail before I could shoot him," Ollie said with some regret, "but he'll pay for this."

"No," I croaked. Evan held a cup of water for me while I sucked greedily at the straw. I lay back against the pillow. "Vic. What did he mean about Vic?" I hadn't cried since I was sixteen, but damned if I didn't feel like it now.

"I called your mother," Evan said. "She said she'd come as soon as she's done at the jail." Under his breath, I heard him say, "The bitch."

"But Vic--"

"We don't know anything yet." Evan took my hand, holding it tight like he couldn't care less that we weren't the only ones in the room. "Let's not lose our shit until we know what's happened. In case you didn't notice, your father was drunk off his ass. Jesus, couldn't you smell it?"

Since my father had busted my nose as an opening salvo, my sense of smell'd been a little off.

My doctor came in about an hour after I woke up to tell me quite cheerfully that I had a concussion, a broken nose (which I'd already figured out for myself), and some severely bruised ligaments in my arm. They were keeping me overnight because I'd lost consciousness, and my arm would be in a sling for a couple of days -- tender for a couple of weeks -- but other than that I should be okay.

Since I didn't know whether my brother was currently dead or alive, my own prognosis didn't much interest me, but I thanked the guy anyway.

My mother showed up about two hours after I'd been admitted to my own room. Ollie'd gone back to Richter's to square things on his end, but Evan hadn't budged. He'd taken up residence in a plastic chair with the declaration that he wasn't leaving until I did.

If my mother had been hoping to speak with me alone, she was out of luck.

Mom was red-eyed and shaky. She eased into a vacant visitor's chair, never coming too close to the bed. "Your father's in jail. They won't let me bond him out until tomorrow."

"Boo-fucking-hoo," Evan said. "When I get through with the two of you, you won't have enough money to bond him out." His eyes were narrow and mean. "In case you haven't figured it out, I'm calling in my loan. I'll take a cashier's check."

That's Evan for you. Hit 'em right in the wallet.

I held up my good hand, bringing a string of tubes and wires with it. "Mom, what about Vic? Dad said..." I couldn't finish the sentence.

Her eyes filled. "He called us this morning, said he'd left the hospital. Those counselors," she said with venom, "wanted him to sit in a room full of *those people*, talk about everybody he's ever hurt, but Vic, he's too sensitive for that." Tears were rolling down her cheeks now, her makeup running in long black smudges. "Vic told me he couldn't live with it, that he wanted to thank us for all we've done but his life was such a mess he wasn't sure he could go on." She took in a heaving breath. "And then he hung up." She pulled a wad of tissue from her purse and blotted her eyes. "The police down there are looking for him but... oh, God, why did you have to make him go down there?" She turned angry eyes on me. "Why can't you leave your brother alone? Is it because you think we chose him over you? We wouldn't have if you weren't that way... if it weren't for..."

So much for the woman who'd hugged Vic not two days ago and told him he was doing the right thing.

"Oh for God's sake." Evan stood, his whole body vibrating with anger. "If you want Drew to leave Vic alone, how about leaving Drew out of it next time Vic screws the pooch?"

My mother, not accustomed to being talked to that way, said, "Now just one second. My son is--"

"Lying right here in a hospital bed, or did you forget you've got two? I don't know where Vic is, but I think you can save the funeral plans for now. From what I've seen, Vic loves himself too much to off himself anytime soon." He pointed to the door. "Why don't you show yourself out?"

She went without another word.

"Damn. Either these are good drugs, or I'm easily impressed." I settled into the pillows, the warm fuzzies taking hold.

"Probably a little bit of both," Evan said, "but I meant what I told her. I honestly believe Vic's okay." He fussed with my blankets. "Just in case, I've got my guys looking into it."

"This must be hard on you after what happened to Cade."

"I told you that Vic reminded me of Cade and in some ways he does. Cade had a good sense of humor like Vic's. Likeable. Easygoing most of the time." Evan sat back down. "The biggest difference between them is that Cade wasn't wrapped up in himself like Vic is. I honestly think part of the reason Cade killed himself was to spare us from having to take care of him." Pain flared in his eyes. "Cade wasn't thinking. Vic, he's *always* thinking, always working some angle."

I was afraid to hope, but I held on to those words as the drugs lulled me to sleep.

My nurses woke me every two or three hours just to make sure they could. Each time I woke up, Evan was there, sleeping in the most uncomfortable looking chair ever created. I have to admit I was touched. What touched me more was when my breakfast tray came, bringing Aunt Quinn, Uncle Arthur, Max and Trixie with it.

"No fair," Trixie said. "All you got was a sling." She kissed my cheek, stole my bacon, and left for the vending machines.

"You called them?" I said to Evan, like I didn't already know the answer.

"A better question is why didn't you call us." Aunt Quinn kissed my forehead. I knew I had a pair of bright-red lips on my head now, but I didn't care. Having my family there... I didn't even know how much I'd wanted it until they walked in.

"I hope you gave as good as you got," Uncle Arthur said. He shook Evan's hand and then sat down on the edge of my bed.

"I didn't get a chance." The memory made me wince. "Sucker punched me."

"I hope they keep him in jail for the next twenty years," Aunt Quinn said with a snarl. "I hope he drops the soap and some big guy makes Randall his bitch."

Max bit his lip and Evan coughed.

"You watch too much TV." I brought her down for a one-armed hug. "Did Evan tell you about Vic?"

Aunt Quinn nodded. She sat down on the other side of my bed, just inches from Arthur. My feet were squished but I didn't mind. "Evan tells me he's got people looking for Vic."

"Then you don't think he--" I just couldn't finish that sentence.

"No, honey." She patted my hand, carefully avoiding the IV. "We'll find him."

"But you know why dad was upset." Here came the sticky part. "I... I can't press charges against the guy after he finds out his son may or may not have tried to... you know."

Evan, Max, and my uncle had some strong, loud opinions about that one. Aunt Quinn was strangely composed. In a soft voice, she said, "Arthur, boys... could I speak to Drew alone, please?"

Max and Uncle Arthur went. Evan started not to, but my aunt turned on the charm and he finally went. "Cute boy," she said. "I like him."

"You do know he's blackmailing me, right?"

She pooh-poohed me with her hand. "We had a long talk about that. Evan's blackmailing Vic and your parents, if you can even still call it that after all Vic's done. You... you chose to get involved, just like always." Aunt Quinn stroked my cheek with a feather-light touch, probably checking my bruises for herself. "I know why you do this, Drew, and you have to stop. If yesterday doesn't prove it to you, nothing will."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Nice try, doll, but you do." She stroked my hair. "You remember what you said to me the day your folks kicked you out?"

I'd said a lot of things that day, none of them good. "You want to be more specific?"

"Your dad had crammed all your stuff into garbage bags -- had you all ready to go out the door the minute you got home from school -- and you, the little optimist that you always were, looked at me and said, 'I'm gonna be staying with y'all for a while. Just until Mom and Dad calm down.'"

I shook my head. "I don't remember."

"Maybe not in here," she tapped my head, "but I think a part of you is still waiting to go home."

I shifted in the bed, unable to get comfortable all of a sudden. "That's crazy."

"Yes it is. I knew your parents were through with you the day they sent you packing to my house, but a part of you never got it." I tried to look away, but she wouldn't let me. "It's why you gave them money anytime they asked. Why you kept bailing Vic out even after you said you were done." She took my hand, squeezed it as hard as she dared. "They've never loved you the way they loved Vic, even before you told them you were gay. They didn't love you like they should, but they weren't above using the hell out of you, and you just rolled over and let them."

I knew she wasn't trying to be cruel, but it still stung. "What should I do, just let them hang?"

"It's what they'd do to you, every last one of them." Aunt Quinn grabbed her purse and pulled out an old-fashioned compact, one I'd seen her use dozens of times. "Look at your face, honey. Take a long, hard look and then you tell me what you should do."

I didn't want to look in that mirror. If I looked half as bad as I felt, I knew I'd give Frankenstein's Monster a run for his money. Took me a minute, but I manned up and made myself look. I was the standard victim of an in-your-face sucker punch. Broken nose, busted lip, two black eyes. All that would heal, but knowing my father had done that to me -- regardless of what he'd thought about Vic, of where Vic was now -- told me my Aunt Quinn was right.

I wasn't a part of that family anymore, and it was time I stopped trying to be.

I visited with my family -- my real family, the kind who'd fly across the country to check on a guy who had nothing more serious than a sore arm, a headache and a broken nose -- until the doctor released me that afternoon around three. Aunt Quinn insisted I fly home with them immediately, but I held her off.

"I know what we talked about and you were right." I hugged her as close as I could. "Doesn't mean I don't have some loose ends I've got to tie up here, though."

"We'll stay in town with you, then." She pulled her phone from her purse, probably to find a hotel.

"You know Uncle Arthur's emphysema isn't up to a summer vacation in Florence." I covered her hand with mine. "This is something I need to handle on my own."

She didn't like it, but she went. Max gave me a back-slapping man hug. "You need anything?"

"I'm good. Take care of Trix. Keep her out of trouble."

"I heard that," Trixie said from down the hall. Uncle Arthur ushered them out with a wink at me and a smile.

"I like them," Evan said. "Especially your aunt."

"Thanks." I settled into the wheelchair the volunteer brought for me. "She liked you, too."

"So..." He said as we walked down the hall. "You and that Max guy..."

I looked at him like he was nuts. "Your detective didn't tell you Max was as straight as my grandmother's hatpin?"

"No," Evan said with a smile, "but it's good to know."

Evan made the high-handed decision that we were going to be roommates when I got out of the hospital. I told him that I wasn't staying at his house like the heroine from some cheesy soap opera. He told me that was fine, he'd stay in my suite with me.

"Are you always this big a pain in the ass?"

"Worse, actually." Evan helped me get situated on the bed. "You should see me when I really get stubborn. I--" He was cut off by a knock on the door. "Probably room service. I ordered you something to take your pain medicine with."

I rolled my eyes. Just what I needed, some bossy little twink who thought he was in charge of my life all of a sudden.

Evan came back a minute later not with room service, but with a short, stocky guy I'd never seen before.

"Drew Harris, this is Ken Peele." I held up my sling as an excuse not to shake and Ken nodded. Drew said, "Ken works for me."

I got it. The detective.

Evan sat down beside me. "Ken's got a lead on Vic. He's alive."

I didn't hear Ken and Evan talking, didn't hear Ken leave, didn't hear anything much past *Vic's alive*. I held onto that like a lifeline, a part of me desperately afraid to believe Aunt Quinn and Evan had been right all along. I didn't realize I was shaking until Evan sat down beside me.

"Hey." He put his hand on my shoulder. "It's okay."

"Yeah. I know." I'm not the kind of guy who falls apart on a whim, but finding out Vic was still alive was one hell of an emotional release. "I think I'm having an adrenaline rush." I swallowed. "Maybe I need another painkiller."

"That's not what you need." Evan leaned in close. "I think we both know it."

Having sex with Evan Stacie was probably the worst idea I'd had in a long time, but logical thought left as soon as his lips touched mine. I was wrung out, emotionally exhausted, and horny. Too strong a combination to fight. My swollen face be damned, the two of us made out like teenagers. The thought reminded me that Evan was almost a full ten years younger than I was.

I tried to pull away.

"Don't even think about it," he said, nibbling on my neck. "I've wanted to fuck you since the first time I walked into this room and saw your arrogant ass. No way you're backing out now."

Me? Arrogant? I tried to protest, but Evan's nimble fingers had found my fly and it was a lost cause. Within five minutes Evan, the smartest guy in the world at that moment as far as I was concerned, had us both completely naked and me strapped back in my sling.

Talk about service.

Evan came over top of me, careful of my arm. He was beautiful, the soft daylight coming through the curtains showing every angle of his body. Not buff, but well built and enough to make any gay boy's mouth water. Speaking of mouths, Evan was attacking mine -- making my lip burn as if I gave a shit at the moment -- when he pulled back and said, "Damn."

"What?"

"No condoms, and no way is your mouth and nose up for a sixty-nine." Evan went quiet for a minute, and then a smile spread across his face. "The old-fashioned way, then." He pressed our cocks together and it was on.

I've never been big on dry humping, but right then I thought it was the best invention ever. Evan's cock was thick, hard, cut, and made enough pre-come to lube us both. Not that I wasn't making my share, mind you. The two of us settled into an even rhythm, the only sounds the slap of skin on skin and the hitching of our breath. Tight jolts of pleasure zinged through me with every slide of Evan's flesh. Way before I was ready for the sensations to end, my balls tightened up and I was on the edge.

I pulled him against me with my good arm. "I'm coming," I said into his ear. God, he felt good.

Evan's answer was a low groan, and then I felt a blossom of wet heat between us. I ran my fingers through his hair, enjoying his weight on top of me. We lay like that for a long time, catching our breath, enjoying the moment.

Evan was the first to pull away. He padded naked to the bathroom, got a washcloth and cleaned us both. I'm usually not much of a cuddler after sex, but with Evan, for some reason I wanted to. I was relieved when he helped me maneuver under the covers and then crawled in beside me. I turned on my side to face him.

"Wow," I said with a loopy grin that had more to do with him than the painkillers.

"I hope you aren't going to do something stupid," Evan said. He pushed my hair away from my forehead with two fingers.

"Like what?" I yawned.

"Like thank me, or tell me it was great but we can't do it again because of the situation or because you're older than I am." He stroked my neck. "Have I pretty much covered all the dumb thoughts rolling through your brain?"

"I think you got most of them, yeah."

"Good. Now here's something you should know: I plan to wait until you fall asleep, then I'm going to slip out and buy the biggest box of condoms and the largest bottle of lube I can find."

My loopy smile returned. "Hope you're gonna get dressed first."

He pinched my butt and I fell asleep with a smile on my face.

Evan was there when I woke up, with condoms and lube like promised. I started to second guess myself, but by then Evan was getting naked again so stopping was a lost cause.

"You should know," I told him as he crawled up beside me, "that I'm a total top."

"I'll roll like that, but it won't be easy with your arm in a sling." He grabbed a Trojan and a tube of KY from the bedside table. "You should know," he parroted my words, "that I've been known to top from the bottom on occasion."

At that point I didn't care if he liked to yodel during orgasm. I wanted Evan -- all of him -- and I was tired of waiting.

I tried to help prepare him, but it was awkward with my left hand. In the end, I lay back and watched as Evan fingered himself. It was one of the most erotic things I'd ever seen. Made me hotter than I could ever remember being in my life.

Then again, maybe that was just Evan.

He rolled the condom onto me with agonizing slowness and got himself into position. I held my cock steady as Evan mounted me, his tight heat making me want to thrust up into him before he was ready. I forced myself to be patient and was rewarded with Evan's lone, throaty moan.

"Fuck, that's good."

Exactly what I was thinking, though I'm incapable of complex speech during sex. I put my hand on his hip and guided his movements as he began a torturous dance up and down my cock that kept me on the knife's edge between pleasure and pain for what seemed like hours but probably took no more than fifteen minutes (unlike Evan, I'm not twenty-four). I reached for his erection, jacking him as best I could with my left hand. Not that the pressure seemed necessary. I felt him clench around me, and then we were both coming.

I closed my eyes and let the sensations take over.

"You sure you're up for this?" Evan was watching me dress with an eagle-eye.

"Yep. I'm starving. I never did get that room service you promised me." I eased my sling back in place. I couldn't wait to get rid of the stupid thing. "Doesn't sex make you hungry? I thought twenty-somethings were supposed to be hungry all the time anyway."

Evan rolled his eyes. Then he surprised me by pulling me in for a hug. "You aren't gonna get hung up on the age thing, are you? Nine and a half years isn't a big deal. You're hardly robbing the cradle here."

Since I wasn't sure yet if I was going to get hung up or not, I didn't answer, just made a big deal about putting on my shoes.

Evan let it go, instead turning the conversation back to dinner. "So, are you thinking pizza or Chinese?"

"Pizza," I said. "MSG and I aren't friends." We were halfway out the door when my room phone rang.

I knew it was going to be Vic before I answered it. He was crying as he said, "Drew, I... God, can you help me? I... I fucked up."

My brother, the master of understatement. "Where are you?"

"East Florence. I... a friend picked me up at the bus station this morning."

Part of me wanted to ask and part of didn't want to know. "Meet me at my hotel suite in twenty minutes." I hung up before I got his answer.

I'd heard the phrase "looks like hell" before, but I'd never seen anyone who fit the description until Vic came staggering into my room. His eyes were bloodshot, he stank, and he was wearing the same clothes I'd last seen him in.

Since he didn't ask about my face, I made a conclusion. "You talked to Mom."

"Yeah." He sank onto the loveseat, eyes downcast. "She told me what Dad did to you. Jesus, Drew, I'm sorry."

"You're sorry." Evan rounded the coffee table so that he was in Vic's face. "What the fuck did you think was going to happen when you called your folks and told them you were going to kill yourself?"

I walked in behind Evan and put my arm on his shoulder. "Easy, tiger. Why don't you fix us some drinks?" I sat on the table's edge. "Where you been, Vic?"

"I tried to stay in that place, Drew. Swear to God I did, but it just wasn't me."

This was the point where I usually swooped in and fixed things. Instead, I said, "Where'd you get the money for the bus ticket?"

Vic's cheeks went nuclear. "I... uh, I cashed out."

"Excuse me?"

Vic pulled at his collar. "The clinic gave me a partial refund."

I glanced at Evan, who nodded. Of course, since it was Evan's money, I guess the clinic had told him.

"So you owe Evan what, twelve grand?" I leaned back. I knew I was about to get a load of bullshit.

Vic teared up. "I... the thing is..." He gulped. "I don't have it."

I already knew that. I guess Evan did, too. Neither of us said a word. Evan handed me my drink, set one on the side table beside Vic, and then took a chair for himself. Me, I just sat quietly and waited for Vic to hang himself.

"This guy in my group therapy session," Vic explained in a rush, "he was telling me about this sure thing down in Ocala. Back room Texas Hold 'Em. I figured I could take Evan's money and triple it, maybe go back to rehab with enough money to pay Mom and Dad back for all their troubles. Maybe even make enough to get you out of this mess."

I wondered if Vic really believed himself anymore or if he'd been lying for so long he didn't know any other way. "How did that work out for you?"

The tears fell, just like with Mom, right on cue. "I lost." I guess Vic didn't see the level of sympathy he'd hoped for on mine and Evan's faces because he said with some desperation, "But you have to know it wasn't my fault, Drew. I know this son-of-a-bitch was dealing from the bottom of the deck and--"

"Stop." I took a slow, deep breath. "I love you, Vic. You aren't going to believe that after you hear what I have to say, but I do. No matter how I feel about Mom and Dad, you're still my little brother. Even when I'm mad enough to strangle you, I still love you."

"Yeah, I know." Vic's smile was edgy, like he knew what was coming and didn't want to believe it.

"No, I don't think you do. Love to you means flying out here and bailing you out every time you get in over your head." I set my drink aside and ruffled his hair, the way I'd done when we were kids and he'd skinned his knee on the driveway. "You owe Evan two-hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Two sixty-two, now," I amended. "I suggest you get yourself a job and start making payments."

Vic couldn't have looked more surprised if I'd slapped him. "You don't mean that."

"Every word. If you were a drunk, I wouldn't offer you a bottle of Jack." I got up off the table and made my way to the door. "Offering a compulsive gambler an open-ended get-out-of-jail-free card's pretty much the same thing." I held the door open for him. "I can't help you, Vic. Not until help's really the thing you want."

"But I do want help." Vic was full on sobbing now. "You said you'd play in that tournament. You said you'd do it to keep Mom and Dad from losing everything."

I nodded. "I said all of that. Before my own father tried to redecorate my face. Before you faked a suicide so you could bet it all on another 'sure thing.'" I twisted and untwisted the doorknob. "Before I realized I'm not helping either of us, not like this." I dared a glance at Evan, who was blank-faced. "I can't play that tournament. I think you know why."

"You can't do this." Vic came across the room, the tears gone, his eyes crazed. "You've got to help me."

"If you really want help," I said, even though I knew it was a useless effort, "I'll pay for you to go back to rehab. This time with a stipulation that the money can only be refunded to me, and with the understanding that no matter how long you stay -- three days or three months -- you're going there only to get well." I locked eyes with my brother. "Because I meant what I said, Vic. You've got to get out of this one on your own."

"He'll call in the debt." Vic was wild now as it finally dawned on him he had no way out. He ran to Evan, who was now standing beside his chair. "You'll call in my debt if Drew doesn't play."

"After the stunts you and your father pulled, you're getting off easy." Evan's expression of disgust said as much as the words. "I can't believe I thought you reminded me of my brother. More fool me." He took a step back from Vic. "If I were you, I'd take Drew up on that offer of rehab."

Vic lost it then. I guess since the begging and pleading hadn't worked he'd decided to give anger a shot. "Fuck you and your rehab." He stopped at the door, pointing one finger in my face. "You're dead to me, you bastard. You're no brother of mine. I hope you die of AIDS, you fucking

fag." Vic yelled those parting words loud enough for most of Florence to hear and then took off down the hall at a dead run.

"Fucking fag.' Now there's something I haven't been called in a while." I'm not a good enough liar to say it didn't hurt, but I held it together. I closed the door and turned to find Evan watching me.

"If I told you I was sorry for this whole sordid mess, I don't guess that would come close to cutting it, huh?" Evan didn't look twenty-four anymore. He'd aged at least ten years in the last twenty minutes.

"You didn't create Vic's problems."

"No, but I took advantage of them." Evan pushed his hand through his hair until it was standing on end. "Dragged you straight through hell in the process."

Since I couldn't argue with him there, I didn't try. "What are you going to do about Vic's loan?"

Evan tilted his head to the side, watching me. "You're really going to walk away, huh?"

So he hadn't believed me either. Okay, that one hurt. "And if I do walk away, what then? You'll find yourself another player, come up with a new way to ruin Jude Simpkins life?" I walked back into the bedroom, Evan right behind me. "Will you back some other family into a corner the way you did mine?"

"No offense," Evan said through clenched teeth, "but your family's for shit."

"None taken, but you didn't answer my question." I grabbed my suitcase out of the closet and set it on the bed.

"You know why I have to do this." Evan grabbed my arm as I went for the dresser. "Damn it, would you wait?" He came in as close as he could without knocking me down. "I thought we were starting something here?"

"Answer my question," I said. "If I don't help you, are you going to do to some other poor bastard what you tried to do to me?"

"You aren't leaving me much choice."

That's when I got it. Evan was as addicted to revenge as Vic was to gambling. Didn't matter what I said or what I did. Evan's need to make Simpkins pay would always come first. Until Evan got what he thought he wanted, it would eat him alive.

"Good luck, Evan." Damn but those words cost me. "I hope you find what you're looking for."

"So that's it," Evan growled. "You're just gonna leave me?" He crowded into my personal space again. "Don't you know how much I want you?"

"But not as bad as you want to destroy Simpkins."

Evan hesitated just a little too long. I turned my back on him and resumed my packing. I heard him leave a few minutes after that.

I had two things to do on my way out of Florence. The first was stopping by Richter's to say goodbye to the best friend a kid ever had.

"You're looking pretty spry, boy." Ollie handed over my pool case and then led me outside, away from the listening ears of the rest of the pool hall. "Guess it takes more than a couple of punches to keep you down."

"Yeah." I cleared my throat. "Listen, Ollie, I'm leaving and I, ah..."

Ollie's hand came down on my shoulder. "You're a good kid, Drew. God knows I've missed having you around this place. That said... if I was you I wouldn't never come back here again."

I knew Ollie would get it. He always did. "I'll still call every now and then."

"Damned right you will." Ollie squeezed my shoulder. "Take care of yourself, boy."

My second stop after Richter's was the city jail. The desk sergeant looked at my battered face and my bound arm with a raised brow when I told him I wanted to drop the assault charges against one Randall Harris, but after I informed him I was leaving town and wouldn't be back for a trial, things went pretty smoothly. Well, they would have if I hadn't run into my mother outside on the way back to my car.

"Andrew, what are you..."

"You should be able to pick him up in a few minutes." I had no idea if that was true or not, but I imagined they were processing him out. "I won't be pressing charges."

My mother reached a hand toward my face but dropped it before she made contact. "Your father wasn't thinking when he did that. You know Randall's never touched you like that before."

"Yeah, lucky me." I shook my head. "I didn't drop the charges because I don't think he deserves to pay for what he did. Like I told the officer in charge, I won't be here to make the charges stick."

My mother paled. "You're leaving?"

"I guess you haven't talked to Vic in the last hour or so."

"No." She put her hand to her breast. "Why?"

"The deal with Evan's off. I'm out." Just in case she didn't get it, I clarified. "Vic's on his own."

All of a sudden my mother was Scarlett O'Hara, ready to fall into a swoon. "But what about us? Our businesses, our home?"

I shrugged. "Take 'em out of hock, make Vic pay his own way for once in his life." I looked down at her, and for the first time in thirty-four years, the distance between us didn't hurt. "You had twenty-four hours where you didn't know if Vic was dead or alive. If you keep enabling his addiction, he really will wind up dead and you'll have only yourselves to blame."

My mother was still sputtering when I walked away.

Chapter Seven

Call me naive, but I figured I'd go home and pick up where I'd left off like nothing had changed. I went straight back to work, had dinner once a week with my aunt and uncle, and ate lunch every work day with Max. I dealt with customers, met up with my pool league even though my arm was still too tender for any serious play, and pretty much fell back into my life as I knew it.

After a week and a half of this so-called normalcy, my family staged an intervention. The four of them ambushed me in my office around eleven o'clock on Thursday.

"What gives?" I said as Max locked the door and Uncle Arthur guided me into my chair. Trixie was sitting on the edge of my desk, smacking her gum.

"Sorry, sweetheart," Aunt Quinn said with pinched lips, "but we can't let you go on like this."

"What are you talking about?" I was truly baffled. "I'm fine."

"Too fine," Max said, arms crossed over his chest. "You're like a frickin' robot. If you were any more fine you'd come with a remote control and an on/off switch."

"You've been through one hell of a something, kiddo." Uncle Arthur patted my arm. "You need a break. We're making you take one."

Of all the bossy, in-my-business stunts they'd pulled in the past, this one took the cake. "You can't make me do anything." My jaw was doing that crazy thing again. Worse, I was ready to throw a fit the likes of which I hadn't thrown since I was a teenager. "I own this place."

"Half this place," Max said, easy as you please. "I own the other half, and my half is throwing your half out for the rest of the week. You're not to do anything more strenuous than lie on the couch, surf channels, and bum around."

"You can't--"

"Dude, give it up." Trixie wrinkled her nose. "You know you're gonna lose. Surrender to the process."

When an eighteen-year-old kid tells you you're screwed, you're screwed.

I left not speaking to any of them. I told them I wasn't speaking to them, which made my aunt laugh.

I drove the Viper way too fast, just because I could. I'm surprised I didn't get a ticket, which would've been the cherry on the crap sundae that was my day. My first inkling that maybe my family'd sent me home for a reason was when I pulled up to see a strange car in my driveway.

It had rental tags.

My front door was open. The only thing keeping the bugs and the heat out was the glass security door. I pulled it open and stepped inside, heart pounding in time with every step I took.

"Hello?" If I was being robbed, I wasn't winning any points on sneaking up on the intruders.

"Hey." Evan came out of my kitchen, a dishtowel in his hand. "I hope you don't mind, but I thought I'd get started on making us some lunch. Max... he gave me a key."

"Lunch." Just one word, but since my tongue was stuck to the roof of my mouth, I was proud to get it out.

"Nothing fancy, just some omelets and toast." He gave me a hesitant smile. "Your refrigerator didn't have a whole lot to offer."

"No, I guess. I haven't... Evan, what are you doing here?" There were so many ways he could answer that question, but only one answer I wanted to hear.

"You told me you hoped I found what I was looking for." He tossed the dishtowel in the vicinity of my kitchen table and came toward me, stopping when we were about three feet apart. "What if I told you I'd already found it? What if I told you what I was looking for was you?"

"Two weeks? You've known me two weeks and you're ready to say that." It's not that I don't believe in love. It's just that I've always been pretty sure some fairytale romance isn't in the cards for somebody like me.

Wasn't sure I wanted it to be in my cards.

"I'm not saying I want to move in tomorrow." He rolled his eyes, the smile that went with it the one I was coming to know as pure Evan. "But my casino in Tunica's been doing so well, my partners and I have been thinking of picking up some of the slack in Vegas. Casino owners out west are always looking to sell or expand, and with so many foreclosures in the Vegas housing market, it would also be a great place to look into maybe doing a franchise of my property business. Buying, fixing, and renting until the market goes back up can be a good strategy in a down market and... I'm info dumping again." He came closer. "I miss you Drew. Less than two weeks in my life and I miss you so bad it's like I've got a fucking toothache that won't go away no matter what I put on it."

"Be still my beating heart."

"You know what I mean."

I braced myself. "What about Simpkins?"

Evan sighed. "You want me to tell you that I'm over it, that I was able to let all my revenge fantasies go and get on with my life but I'd be lying and we'd both know it." He took my hand and led me over to my couch. "I did have long talk with someone, though, who helped me put things into perspective."

I settled next to him on the sofa. "Who?"

"Cade's father." He laughed, the sound directed at himself. "It's so funny. I was so sure Cade's dad would be on the same page with me when it came to taking Simpkins down, I never bothered to talk to him about it."

"But he wasn't."

"God, no. Not even close." Evan sounded bewildered still, like he'd never considered such a thing. "He told me this isn't what Cade would want, that destroying Simpkins wouldn't bring Cade back, and I would only hurt myself in the long run."

It's hard not to feel smug when you're right. "Now maybe you get why I couldn't go along with your grand plan."

"Yeah, yeah. Terrible burden, knowing everything." He elbowed my ribs. "The point is, I was already hurting. I'd blown my shot with you, turned myself into the kind of prick who used Vic and your parents to get what I wanted." He sobered. "I don't want to be that man, Drew. If it means Simpkins gets a free pass, then no matter how much it galls me -- no matter how often I think about how great it would be to see him bleed the way he bled Cade -- then that's just something I guess I'll have to make my peace with. It's killing me, hard as I've worked to make the rat bastard pay, but I know I have to accept it's out of my hands."

"Nobody gets a free pass." I leaned against him. "Haven't you heard? Karma's a bitch."

"Doesn't mean I don't want to be there to see it when Simpkin's karmic payload comes home to bite his ass." Evan picked up my hand and started playing with my fingers. "Have you heard from Vic or your folks?"

"Not since the day I left Florence."

Evan nodded. "In that case you should know I forgave Vic's debt." When I started to speak he pressed his finger softly against my lips. "I did it because it was the right thing to do, not because of any bargain I was hoping to coax you back into. There's no way I would've let Vic run up that much debt under normal circumstances. Hell, I should probably lose my gaming license as is."

"You're making it right," I said. "I only hope Vic knows what a second chance he's been given."

"After the way he and the rest of them treated you..." Evan's face went dark. "Like I said, I didn't do it for Vic."

I brought his hand to my mouth. "I don't want to talk about Vic." I kissed my way up his arm.
"Or my parents."

"Lunch is in the kitchen, ready to go," he said on a ragged breath.

"That's the great thing about omelets," I worked on his neck. "They re-heat just fine in the microwave."

Evan didn't need much convincing.

Epilogue

Four years later

"Have I told you lately how much I love you?"

I groaned. I hadn't even finished my coffee yet, and it was starting. "You tell me you love me every day. The only time you amp it up an extra notch is when you're in trouble or you want something." After three years of what we considered marriage (fuck anybody who didn't consider mine and Evan's relationship as real as theirs) I was pretty good at reading his signals. We were sitting across the breakfast table of the house we'd bought just six months before -- in a seemingly squirrel-free zone, no less -- and I could tell by the look on Evan's face something was bugging him big time.

"I got a call from the Florence office yesterday. Vic left his number." Evan's eyes held firm on mine. "I called him back."

It's a good thing I hadn't had any coffee yet. I probably would've choked on it. Still, living with Evan -- loving him -- I'd learned to trust him. He'd made a lot of sacrifices for me in the last four years. He'd bought interests in several Vegas ventures, and as promised he'd opened a real estate firm out my way, only in Tucson, not Sin City. Evan still owned the Tunica Casino and the Florence shop, but he'd hired managers to handle most of the upkeep. He took care of the rest via monthly business trips.

He'd made so many changes for me, the least I could do was hear him out.

"How is he?" I'd had so many nightmares of my brother lying dead somewhere in a ditch, I was relieved to know Vic was still with us. It's not like my parents would call to tell me otherwise.

"Good, to hear him tell it." Evan went into the kitchen and came back with two mugs and the coffee pot. "Vic says he's been on the straight and narrow for last two years."

"Did you believe him?" I wasn't trying to be an asshole, but this was Vic.

Evan filled up my mug. "For some reason, I did. Vic says he's been a part of Gamblers Anonymous for a while now. He wants to come here and make amends to you." He filled his own mug and took it back to his seat.

"And he didn't ask me himself because..." I made a rolling motion with my hand.

"Maybe he was afraid you'd say no." Evan shrugged. "Who knows with Vic?" He pulled a card from his pocket with a number written down on the back. "Here's his number. You should call him. Invite him out."

"Invite him out?' After all that drama the last time we saw him, your answer is to invite him out?"

"Remember what you once said to me about karma?" Evan sipped his coffee, giving me time to think.

Not that I needed the reminder. Jude Simpkins, Evan and I had learned a few days after the ill-fated pool tournament, had stored up a boatload of bad karma. Seems Jude never made it to that tournament. His penchant for drunk driving caught up to him once again and Jude wrapped his Porsche around a tree.

He didn't walk away from that one.

"I remember."

"Well, maybe Vic is trying to change his karma for the better." He glanced down at his watch. "I've got to go." He stole a couple more sips, then grabbed a quick kiss. "See you tonight." I got another kiss, this one longer. "Make the call. You'll feel better once you do."

I wasn't too sure about that, but I grabbed the house phone and dialed the numbers, anyway.

"He should've been here by now."

"You know how airlines are, Drew. Chill."

I looked out the window again, pretty sure my fingers were going to make permanent creases in the blinds. "I don't know why he didn't want us to meet him at the airport."

"He told you he wanted to rent a car. He also told you he was bringing somebody with him." Evan came up behind me, his arms sliding around my waist. "If you don't relax you're going to be a gibbering mess by the time he gets here."

He was right, and the sad part was, I don't even know why I was nervous. For all I know, the Vic I'd talked to on the phone, the one who'd sounded happy and well adjusted -- the one who'd talked about having a good job at a garage in Muscle Shoals and going to meetings each week -- that could be some kind of act.

So much for Mr. Optimist. I was just about to give up on them when a silver Dodge pulled into our driveway. I met Vic on the porch.

He looked good, healthy for the first time since I couldn't remember when. He'd put on some weight and had a summer tan. He was also smiling in an easy, real way that was out of character for the Vic I remembered.

I reached out to shake with him, but he pulled me into a hug instead. He held me tight, the way he'd done when we were younger, before my folks had decided they were done with me.

"Man it's good to see you." Vic looked behind me to where Evan was standing guard. "You, too, Evan."

"Vic." Evan sounded easygoing and casual, but I knew he was ready, willing, and able to swoop in at the first sign of trouble. Unnecessary, but I loved him all the more for it.

The sun was so bright, I couldn't see who else was in the rental car, just shadows, but it was damned hot outside. "Let's get under the AC."

"No, wait." Vic showed the first signs of being nervous. He laughed a little. "I want to do this now, without a big audience." He wiped sweat from his face. "God, this is hard." He took a breath. "So you know part of my program is making amends, right?"

Evan and I both nodded.

"I owe you a thousand apologies." Vic faltered for a brief second, but he kept going. "I owe you for the times you came to my rescue, for all the pain and grief I put you through and," he shuddered, "for that awful thing I said to you the last time I saw you." He touched my arm. "I owe you for not standing up for you with Mom and Dad all those years ago."

"I'll give you the rest of them," I said in a voice that was a little tighter than normal, "but not the thing with Mom and Dad. That's on them."

"I don't have much contact with them these days, myself," Vic said. "I... two and a half years ago I got into a one pocket game with a mean son-of-a-bitch who figured out real quick I couldn't pay." He raised his shirt so I could see a shiny, ropy scar. "Bastard tried to gut me. I nearly bled out before the ambulance came."

I couldn't stop the shiver that overtook me. It was my worst fear for my brother, realized.

Vic saw it and mock-punched my arm. "Hey now, none of that. Turned out to be the best thing that could've happened to me." He shook his head. "Guess I'm one of those guys who had to hit rock bottom before I could claw my way back up." He lowered his eyes. "I was in the ICU for a week, and the whole time, all I could think about was what I'd said to you, what a piece of shit I'd been to my own brother." He looked at me then, clear-eyed and smiling. "I made a promise right then that if I could only live through it, I'd be the kind of man I should've been all along." He laughed nervously. "I'm just sorry it took me so long to work up the guts to come tell you all this."

So was I, but he was here now, and I was glad. "What's the deal with Mom and Dad? I'd think they'd be over the moon now that you're doing so well."

Vic snorted. "I think they liked me better when I was gambling."

I thought it was because they could control him easier while they were holding the purse strings, but I kept the opinion to myself. "I'm happy for you Vic. Happy your life is back on track."

"It is. Well, almost. There's somebody I'd like you to meet." He turned around, motioning like crazy to whoever was in the car.

A petite brunette, a blonde girl of about twelve, and a boy who was the spitting image of Vic, aged ten, came up the walk.

"Drew, this is my wife, Misty. We, ah..." Vic actually blushed. "We got remarried about a year ago. And this is my daughter, Kaitlin, and my son, Tory. Kids, this is your Uncle Drew and his partner Evan."

"It's so nice to finally meet you," Misty said. "Vic's told me so much about you both. Tory!" She gasped in horror to where the kid was trying to balance a potted cactus on his head. "For God's sake."

"So you two," Kaitlin wagged a finger between me and Evan, "you're partners in one of those *Jennifer Has Two Daddies* kind of way, right?"

Vic put his head in his hand. "Did I mention the two of them are carbon copies of me and you at their age?"

With an ear-to-ear grin, I opened the door and welcomed my family into my home.

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