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Gabrielle Evans

Life Out Loud

Salem Nights 1

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Life Out Loud

It's been five years since her broken heart sent her running clear across the country to Virginia. Now, Quinn Harper is back in Oregon and faced with a whole new set of problems. She's been in love with Zach for years, and now that he's back as well, she doesn't know how long she can hide the truth.

Zachary Jensen is done with the FBI undercover gig. He's come home to put down roots in the rural community where he grew up, and he can't imagine anyone he'd rather do it with than Quinn.

After finally admitting their feelings, the pair embarks on a whirlwind romance, but not everyone is happy for the couple. Strange gifts, cruel words burned into the front lawn, and Quinn's car demolished—someone wants her gone. Can Zach unravel the mystery of Quinn's unwelcome admirer before he loses everything?

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EROTIC ROMANCE



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DEDICATION

To my amazingly awesome and supportive brother, Dan, for teaching me to dream big, reach for the stars, and live life out loud.

LIFE OUT LOUD

Salem Nights 1

GABRIELLE EVANS

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Chapter One

She took a deep breath to calm her anxiety and reached out to rap on the door. The weathered porch, the wooden swing, the lovingly tended azaleas reminded her of simpler days. She smiled fondly at the faded red cushions on the old oak swing. How many mugs of hot chocolate had she consumed in that seat? How many spring nights had she spent swaying against the breeze and chattering away with her best friend about hair, makeup, and boys?

The door flew open, and a loud squeal pierced her eardrums. “Oh, it’s so good to see you! I can’t believe you’re finally here.”

Quinn Harper barely had time to drop her purse before the woman launched into her arms, squeezing the breath from her. Quinn hugged her tightly, smiling like a lunatic. “I know, Sasha. It’s good to be back. I’ve missed you.”

“Well, whose fault is that? I’m not the one that moved off to fucking Virginia.” Sasha huffed and clucked her tongue as she released Quinn and took a step back. “It’s good you’re home. We need you.”

Quinn couldn’t contain her snort. “No one needs me, Sash. I’m sure everyone has managed just fine without me.”

To her surprise, Sasha frowned and shook her head. "I need you, Quinn, and so does Brody."

Quinn's heart seized, and the breath caught in her throat. Apparently, Sasha had seen the wince because her features softened, and she reached for her again. Quinn held up a hand, shaking her head. "I'm fine. Just...don't. Brody made it perfectly clear years ago that he does not need me."

"It was five years ago, Quinn!" Sasha rolled her eyes, fisting her hands on her slim hips. "Brody was a selfish, immature, ignorant boy."

"It doesn't matter."

"It most certainly does matter." Caroline Jensen waltzed into the room and pulled Quinn into a tight hug. "We've missed you, Quinn."

"Ms. Caroline." Long and statuesque, with ample breasts, Ms. Caroline often reminded Quinn of a raven-haired Sophia Loren. A few strands of gray had crept into the dark locks over the years, but in her early sixties, Caroline Jensen exuded the grace and beauty of women half her age. "It's so good to see you."

"It's good to see you, too, honey." Ms. Caroline stepped back and patted her cheek lovingly. "It's been too long."

"Well, I'm home now. So, tell me what's been happening around here." Quinn didn't want to talk about Brody anymore.

"Brody is in the hospital," Sasha blurted.

Quinn felt the blood drain from her face, and she stumbled back a step. "What? Why? What happened?"

"He was shot three times in the chest," Ms. Caroline said. "It was work related and happened late last night. He came through surgery, but he's still in critical condition. That's all we know right now." Her voice cracked a little, and she took a deep breath to steady herself.

"We're about to head back to the hospital, but we wanted to be here when you arrived." Sasha bit her lip, her eyes sparkling with moisture.

Quinn pulled both women into her arms. "You should have called me. I would have gotten a hotel or something."

"Nonsense," Ms. Caroline said as she patted Quinn's back. "We already have the guest room set up. You are more than welcome to stay until you close on the new house."

Sasha grinned widely. "I can't believe we're going to be living together!"

Quinn mirrored her friend's smile. "I know. It's crazy, but I can't wait."

"Well, we will be leaving shortly. Why don't you go and freshen up, Quinn? You can unpack when we return."

Quinn grimaced. "Ms. Caroline, I can't go. It's been five years, and Brody and I didn't exactly part as friends. I don't think he's going to want to see me."

"Of course he wants to see you. Now, go do what you need to do." Ms. Caroline waved a hand dismissively.

Quinn swallowed down her groan. Caroline Jensen had been like a second mother to her for more than a decade. She could no more argue with the woman than she could turn into a pink elephant. So, she just nodded and went to prepare herself to see the only man who had ever broken her heart.

* * * *

"I think we should take a break." Brody spoke to the floor, not looking at her, as he pulled on his jeans.

"What are you talking about?" Quinn sat up in bed, wrapping the sheet around her chest and tucking it under her arms. "You just took my virginity not three minutes ago, and now you don't want to see me anymore?" She fisted her hands in her lap. "Was it that bad?"

Brody sighed and shook his head. "We're both starting our graduate year, and I think we need to concentrate on our studies. I'm on scholarship, Quinn. I can't afford distractions." He sat down

beside her and tilted her face up to his. "It's just for a little while. You know I love you."

Quinn nodded jerkily, tears slipping from her eyes to trail down her cheeks. "If that's what you want."

"Hey, don't cry. It's not forever." He kissed the tip of her nose, pulling away quickly when she turned to offer her lips.

Brody needed to focus on his studies. Quinn could understand that. Though it hurt, he said it wouldn't be forever. "If that's what you want," she repeated.

She made it two whole weeks before showing up at his dorm room that semester, eager to see the man she loved. His roommate opened the door, frowning at her. She'd met him a few times the year before, and though they weren't exactly friends, he seemed like a nice guy.

"He's not here."

"Oh." Quinn's heart fell, but she hitched her smile up a notch brighter. "Do you know where he went or when he'll be back?"

Brody's roommate, Dustin, shook his head, looking uneasy. "Uh, he's on a date, Quinn. I don't think he was planning to come home tonight."

Quinn pushed away the memories and bit her lip as she stood outside of the ICU room behind her best friend. Her heart pounded in her chest, and her stomach felt queasy. She couldn't do this. She absolutely could not.

Ms. Caroline wrapped an arm around her waist and squeezed gently. "Calm down, child. Everything will be okay. He probably won't even be awake."

Quinn nodded shakily. She squeezed her eyelids together and allowed Ms. Caroline to lead her inside the room. When they stopped moving, she forced her eyes open and immediately wished she hadn't.

Even pale and attached to all kinds of tubes and wires, Brody Jensen looked mouthwatering. She could still see the boy she had fallen in love with all those years ago, but Brody had grown into a well-built, finely chiseled, gorgeous man.

Quinn pulled her jacket around her self-consciously. She had gained twenty pounds since she'd left college that semester and transferred to a school in Virginia—as far away as she could possibly get from Riverton, Oregon. Her hips were curvier, her breasts fuller, and her ass rounder. She didn't even want to know what Brody would think of her larger size.

As though in a trance, she slowly walked to the bedside and stared down at the man lying there. Her heart rolled over in her chest, and she opened her eyes wide in an effort to keep the tears at bay. She had loved Brody Jensen with her entire being—heart, mind, and soul. Looking down at him now, Quinn realized she always would.

He looked peaceful in sleep, free of pain. White gauze wrapped securely around his torso, and another gauze bandage covered his forehead over his left eyebrow.

She reached out and brushed a lock of ebony hair away from his face. Brody turned into her hand and sighed, nuzzling against her palm. Quinn swallowed back a sob as tears fell freely down her cheeks. She missed him so much.

Part of Quinn wanted Brody to open his eyes, to acknowledge her, prove he would be all right. The other, more cowardly, part of her hoped he wouldn't wake up until she left.

Quinn leaned forward, knowing it would be her only opportunity, and pressed a kiss to the top of Brody's head. She breathed in his scent—warm and masculine, with a hint of the cologne he had always worn—and lost the grip on her composure.

Turning from the bed, she ran out of the room as the breath rushed from her lungs in a broken sob. Too impatient to wait for the elevator, she took the stairwell, and didn't stop running until she pushed through the door to the visitor's courtyard behind the hospital.

Pressing her back against the cool stone of the building, she slid down to the ground and pulled her knees up under her chin. Quinn wrapped her arms around her legs, buried her face against her jeans, and cried. She cried because Brody was hurt, because Brody had

stolen her heart and then broken it, because she had gotten fat while Brody looked like a Greek god. Mostly, she cried because after all this time, she still loved the man.

Quinn didn't know how long she sat on the cold ground and cried before strong arms lifted her to her feet and enveloped her. She stiffened, her body tensing, preparing to fight or run.

"Easy there, Junebug."

"Zach!" She threw her arms around his neck and squeezed, feeling his chest vibrate against hers as he chuckled softly.

Quinn hadn't seen him in almost four years. "When did you get back?" She released her hold on Zach and stepped away to get a good look at him.

Tall, muscular, with dark hair and deep blue eyes, the eldest Jensen sibling looked every bit as gorgeous as his stepbrother. Quinn found it ironic how much the three looked alike considering none of them shared blood.

Ms. Caroline had been married three times before deciding she was better off on her own. When each marriage ended, her husbands' children had chosen to stay. She raised them as her own, loving each as much as if they'd come from her own womb. The three siblings had taken Ms. Caroline's maiden name, and they had become a family.

"A couple of days ago." Zach smiled down at her as he pushed the hair back from her forehead. "Undercover work is exciting, but I'm finished with it. I'm home for good now."

Quinn just beamed at him and nodded. "Good, I've missed you."

Zach pulled her back into his arms and squeezed her tightly. "I've missed you, too, Junebug. How long are you here for?"

"I'm home for good as well. Sasha and I are buying a house over on Juniper."

Zach pushed her back, holding her by the shoulders. The shock on his handsome face made her giggle. "No shit?" he exclaimed. "No one ever tells me anything!"

Quinn laughed, feeling happier than she had in a long time. “There’s a little cottage for sale across the street.” She winked. “We could be neighbors.”

Zach blinked once then threw his head back and laughed as well. “You’re on, babe. We’ll go look at it in the morning.” Then he sobered, and his face became serious. “Are you okay, Quinn?”

He must have been worried for him to use her given name. Zach only ever called her babe or Junebug. “I’m okay. It’s just hard being back, seeing him again after all this time.” Quinn shrugged, trying for nonchalant.

Zach frowned at her. Apparently, she hadn’t pulled off the casual attitude she aimed for. “If you need to talk...” He trailed off, giving her a meaningful look.

Only Zach and Quinn knew the reason for her split with Brody. She’d sworn him to secrecy and begged him not to go find his brother and beat him bloody.

She reached up and pressed her palm to Zach’s warm cheek. “I’ll come and find you if I need to talk to someone.”

It seemed to be enough for Zach. He nodded once, took her hand from his face, and placed a soft kiss in her palm. “Welcome home, Junebug.”

Quinn shivered, and tears prickled the corners of her eyes again. “Welcome home, Zach.”

* * * *

Zach swallowed his sigh and wrapped an arm around Quinn’s waist, leading her back inside the hospital. It felt so good to have her in his arms. He had been in love with Quinn Harper for as long as he could remember.

Beginning at the age of fifteen, Quinn had been there every summer and holiday when he came home from college, growing and maturing, and driving Zach out of his mind.

By the time she had turned eighteen, he had made up his mind to claim her as his own. When he came home on Christmas break to find Quinn in the arms of his brother, it had felt as though someone pumped ice water into his veins.

Quinn had looked so happy, so obviously in love, so Zach had stepped away and tried his best to hide his feelings.

Inside, though, he seethed. Brody was an arrogant, obnoxious, egotistical, self-centered prick.

They had remained close, but he knew she thought of him only as a friend. He supposed it was better than being just her boyfriend's brother. He tried his best to be there for her. He'd listened and consoled her when she and Brody would fight, always telling her things would work out.

Then she and Brody split, and Quinn transferred to a school out east. Zach accepted a position at the FBI office in New Mexico, and they had slowly drifted apart.

Though they'd never been extremely close, his relationship with his brother deteriorated further after that.

Zach thought his heart would break all over again when he'd found Quinn huddled on the cold ground, crying into her knees. Apparently, time couldn't heal all wounds.

Quinn suddenly stopped, pulling against his arm and dragging him back to the moment. He looked up at the elevator doors, and then down to the woman beside him. "What is it, Junebug?"

"I can't go back up there, Zach." She sucked her bottom lip between her teeth and looked down at her feet.

Zach frowned, his heart aching at the sadness in her voice. "Okay. Have you eaten?"

Quinn shook her head, her chin still resting against her chest. "You should go see your brother. I'll just wait down here until everyone is ready to leave."

“Quinn, he won’t even know I’m there. Besides, I’ve already been up to see him. Mom told me you were here, so I came to look for you.” He smirked at her. “Now, are you hungry or not?”

Quinn sniffled, but nodded. Then she met his eyes and gave him the sweetest smile he had ever seen. “Starved.”

Chapter Two

Quinn spent a lot of time with Zach over the next week. She took him to see the new house, watching on as he beamed from ear to ear and exclaimed over the workmanship. She didn't understand half of what he said, but it made her feel good to see him happy.

They looked at the cottage across the street, but Zach had been anything but impressed. He said he needed more room and a bigger yard. When Quinn asked why, he said he wanted a puppy. The pout on his lips as he gazed at the miniscule backyard through the kitchen window looked so adorable Quinn had had to leave the room to keep from laughing.

She and Zach had eaten lunch at a cute little Italian diner, gone shopping for new furniture, been to the movies, went bowling, and even volunteered at the local soup kitchen.

She steadfastly refused to go to the hospital again. To her relief, no one had pushed the issue. Brody had been awake for three days, and Quinn knew she would have to face him soon. Her week with Zach had been amazing—one of the happiest she could remember in a very long time. She didn't want it to end.

Taking the bag of popcorn from the microwave, Quinn poured it into a bowl and added a little cinnamon sugar—just the way Zach liked it. She grabbed the bowl and headed into the living room, where she plopped down the couch beside Zach, putting the bowl in between them.

“So, what are we watching?”

“*The Grudge*.” Zach grinned wickedly.

“You know I’m the biggest baby when it comes to horror movies.”

Zach just continued to grin.

Twenty minutes into the movie, the popcorn ended up on the coffee table, and Quinn cuddled next to Zach with her hands over her ears. Zach just laughed, putting an arm around her and pulling her close.

“You are the only person I know who covers their ears instead of their eyes.”

“It’s not the blood, or gore, or even the killer popping up out of nowhere.” Quinn elbowed him in the ribs, huffing indignantly. “It’s the damn creepy music and the sudden loudness that gets me.”

That, eyeballs, and mirrors. Disembodied eyeballs, especially those peeking widely through a hole in the wall, always made her skin crawl. A shadowy figure reflected in a mirror in a horror movie left her heart racing. Even at twenty-six years old, Quinn still couldn’t look into a mirror or out of a window after dark.

By the time the movie ended, she practically sat in Zach’s lap, one leg draped over his, an arm slung across his midsection, and her head resting on his chest.

Mm, Zach felt so warm. Quinn cuddled closer as he used the remote to switch the television to the nightly news. His fingers slipped through her long hair absently, and the steady rhythm of his heart beneath her ear had Quinn struggling to keep her eyes open.

She didn’t want to fall asleep. Zach started his new job as a detective at the Riverton Police Department the next day. Though happy for him—he more than deserved the position—she would miss this. Funny, kind, ridiculously smart, endlessly patient, and always up for anything, Zach was the best friend she’d ever had.

No matter how long they had been apart, no matter the miles that separated them, he had always been her safe harbor.

She loved him.

The thought snapped Quinn out of her drowsiness. She loved Zach. It had been staring her in the face for years, so why hadn't she ever realized it before? She doubted Zach felt the same way about her. He had only ever thought of her as a friend, or even a little sister.

No. She couldn't love Zach. Not romantically anyway. Hadn't she just admitted to herself that she still held feelings for Brody? How could she love Zach and still love Brody?

Quinn bit her lip to keep from sighing out loud. The lie sounded weak and without conviction. How pathetic that she couldn't even deceive herself. She did love Zach and, since she was being honest now, had for years.

God, she had wanted him something fierce from the moment she laid eyes on him. At fifteen, her hormones raged out of control, and her immature brain screamed that she would die if she couldn't have him.

Though he had to have thought her a pesky teenage brat, he'd never treated her that way. Zach listened, really listened, when she spoke. He afforded her ideas the merit and consideration they deserved. He never talked down to her, or made her feel ignorant or stupid.

He stood up for her, comforted her, became her refuge when life became too much. It hadn't taken long for her to fall head over feet in love with him.

When he went off to college in California, she began to see less and less of him. Her feelings for him didn't diminish, but as she matured, she realized she didn't have a future with him. He would be her friend, her best friend, but nothing more.

Then, somewhere around her eighteenth birthday, Brody started taking an interest in her. She couldn't remember exactly how it had happened, but she suddenly found herself falling for the younger Jensen brother as well.

Did she still love Brody? She thought so. All the memories, good and bad, had coming rushing back when she'd seen him in the

hospital. Maybe that's all it was—the ghost of a remembered love. How did she know for sure?

With a silent sigh of resignation, Quinn decided she needed to go see Brody, to talk to him, and set things straight once and for all. She wouldn't be able to move on until she did.

But, what did she do about her feelings for Zach? She didn't doubt she loved the man, but with no way to know his feelings for her, she felt hesitant to initiate anything between them.

No. Zach could never find out. She wouldn't risk destroying what she had with him for anything. She'd rather have him as a friend than not have him at all. She'd already allowed one Jensen brother to break her heart. She wouldn't put herself in the position to let it happen again.

That firmly decided upon, Quinn relaxed, curled closer to Zach, and drifted off to sleep.

* * * *

Zach waited until Quinn's breathing evened into the steady rhythm of sleep before releasing the breath he'd been holding since she'd wrapped herself around him. God, she smelled good. So soft, so beautiful, and she fit perfectly against him.

He knew she felt self-conscious about the weight she had gained over the years. She never said anything, but he could tell by the way she never wore anything the least bit revealing and always tugged absently at her clothes. It showed in the way she ducked her head when a toothpick of a woman walked by.

Quinn's breasts were bigger, fuller. Her hips and waist were softer, and her ass a little rounder. She had never looked better.

Zach had always preferred curvy women, and he wanted to run his tongue over every inch of Quinn's body. She had been beautiful as a teenager, though a little knobby for Zach's tastes. Now, though, she dazzled him.

He needed to go to bed. He had to work in the morning, his first day on the force. He would be meeting his superiors and his new partner. He didn't want to let go of Quinn yet.

Just a few more minutes.

Zach didn't get many chances like this. He always guarded his movements, his emotions, the way he touched Quinn or reacted to the way she touched him. He rarely had the opportunity just to enjoy the feel of her body pressed against his.

He continued to stroke his fingers through her hair, marveling at how silky it felt against his skin. Dark and wavy, Quinn's hair flowed over her shoulders and down to brush against the small of her back. Zach wanted to wrap his hands in it, feel it cascading over his bare chest—his stomach, his thighs—as Quinn did sinful things to his body.

His cock twitched at the mental image of Quinn's ebony hair fanned over white, satin sheets. Her sun-kissed body, flushed with her arousal, spread out like a banquet for him. Her emerald green eyes burning with desire as she arched her slender neck to gaze up at him.

His cock swelled, aching for the woman he could never have. Biting back a groan, Zach took deep breaths, trying to force his overheated body into submission. He couldn't force her to love him, and he wouldn't risk damaging their easy friendship.

The four years Zach spent doing undercover work had been grueling. He had gotten along, became accustomed to not seeing or hearing from his mother or siblings. He'd dealt with the loss of missing holidays and Sunday dinners.

He had missed Quinn every single day.

Ironically, considering she had been the reason he accepted the undercover assignment in the first place. He thought if he could get some distance from Quinn, not see her or talk about her, or hear her name every time he came home, just maybe he would be able to get over her.

The moment he had seen her, huddled on the ground and crying outside of the hospital, Zach had known he'd only been deluding himself. No matter how much time or distance he put between them, he would always love Quinn.

Even if he couldn't have her as his own, he could still be near her. Living without the girl was agony, so he didn't see a choice in the matter.

Zach glanced at the clock on the DVD player and sighed. Almost midnight, and he really needed to get some sleep.

Just a little longer.

The sound of keys in the front door drew his attention. It would be either his mother or his sister. One of them always stayed with Brody since his move from ICU to a private room. Zach felt a little guilty that he hadn't offered to stay, but he didn't want to give up his time with Quinn. Besides, he doubted Brody would want him there anyway.

Sasha huffed and pouted, whining about the unfairness, demanding Zach should have to take his turn at his brother's side. Their mother never pushed. She just smiled and told him to drop by during the day. She always had a little gleam in her eyes, a soft sort of sparkle. He could only guess what it meant.

He loved his mother and trusted her unconditionally. She would never do anything to hurt him or anyone else, so Zach would let her have her secrets...for now.

Sasha walked into the room, stumbling to a stop when she saw Zach and Quinn cuddled on the couch. She stood there, one hip pushed out, with a slight frown on her face, looking between them, before focusing on Zach. She tilted her head to the side and cocked an eyebrow.

Zach just shrugged, smiling at his sister. What could he say?

Sasha gave him a little smile in return. "You need help getting her to bed?" She spoke quietly as she came forward and propped herself on the arm of the sofa.

Zach shook his head. “No, I’ve got her, but thanks. Is Mom staying tonight?”

“Yeah, though Brody keeps insisting that he doesn’t need a guardian. You know Momma though.” Sasha rolled her eyes. “She said to wish you luck on your first day tomorrow.”

Zach felt his grin grow wider. “Well, if I don’t see her in the morning, tell her I appreciate it.”

Wiggling out from under Quinn, he stood and stretched, arching his back and groaning softly. He lifted Quinn into his arms easily and carried her down the hall to her bedroom. Sasha rushed ahead of him, opening the door and turning down the blankets. Together, they got Quinn situated, and Sasha left to get herself ready for bed.

Zach pulled the blankets up over Quinn’s shoulders and brushed his lips softly against her temple. “G’night, Junebug.”

He trudged up the stairs to his room, berating himself for staying up so late. Almost one o’clock, and he hadn’t even prepared his clothes for the morning. Damn, he hated ironing. He just wanted to crawl into bed and sleep.

Zach paused at his closet door and had to smile. His favorite suit hung from a hook over the back of the closet door, still inside the bag from the dry cleaners. Bless his mother! God, he loved that woman.

He noticed a small note pinned to the bag and stepped forward to read it.

Good luck tomorrow, Detective Jensen!

You deserve it.

-Junebug

Zack swallowed around the lump in his throat. He didn’t think he could love Quinn more than he already did.

He’d been wrong.

Unpinning the slip of paper, he folded it gently and slipped it inside his wallet.

Chapter Three

Quinn pulled up in front of her new home and just sat there. Three more days, and it would be all hers. Well, hers and Sasha's, but it would technically be her name on the loan. She couldn't wait to move in.

Gray clouds rolled overhead, churning in the sky and echoing her mood. Everyone she knew had resumed their normal lives, leaving Quinn to her own devices. She quickly realized she lacked the proper enthusiasm when it came to entertaining herself.

She had washed a load of laundry, tidied up her room, and read a little of a new novel. Then she moved on to grooming herself—eyebrows plucked, fingernails and toenails painted, hair washed and curled. In total, it had taken her about three hours. Now, she needed something to occupy her for the next six.

She should probably be out looking for a job. As the last remaining Harper, Quinn had inherited three generations worth of wealth when her parents died. Her bank account swelled until it threatened to spill over. She would never have to work a day of her life.

Really, she hadn't. She held a degree in philosophy, but a fat lot of good it did her. She had chosen the major when she transferred schools, seeking the meaning to life, and a way to understand, if not mend, her broken heart.

She finished out her final year, took her useless degree, and found a job at the small public library in Grafton, Virginia. Then she had lost her parents the previous winter when their car skidded off the ice-covered roads and into a retention pond. With no other family, and

only a handful of acquaintances on the East Coast, Quinn sold her family's home and moved back west.

She thought parents were supposed to move to Florida when their children went off to college. No, her parental units had up and moved to Virginia, for God only knew what reason. Quinn had never bothered to ask. Now, she would never have the opportunity.

So, now she had come home, back to the one place that held any sort of sentimental value to her. She had close friends, a new house, and a new car. She could be close to Zach, and maybe even work out her feelings for Brody. Yeah, she had it all.

Still, she needed to work. She needed to interact with people, to create something, to be productive. Quinn shuddered to think of the damage to her sanity and the size of her ass if she simply remained idle and coasted through life.

She wanted to write, and she didn't want to write novels about vampires or be the next best-selling author.

She wanted to be a journalist.

Quinn wanted to write important articles about important topics. Attack the issues and make people take notice. She wanted to influence and inspire those same people to take action, get involved, and work together to find solutions.

And why not? She had the time and money to go back to school. She had the determination, the will, the drive, and the enthusiasm. She could do this.

Quinn grinned widely, her outlook on the day vastly improving. She had a plan, a purpose, and she was eager to get started. She couldn't wait to tell Zach. He would support her no matter what she chose to do. If she told him that she wanted to drive a garbage truck and own fifteen cats, Zach would support her.

Quinn's cell phone rang, making her jump. She grabbed it off the passenger seat and flipped it open.

"Hello?"

“Hey, honey, what are you up to?” Sasha’s voice flitted over the line.

Quinn smiled. “I’m sitting in front of our new house.”

“Oh, Quinn, I wanted to talk to you about that.” Sasha sounded hesitant to continue.

“Just say it, Sash.” Quinn sighed. She had been afraid something like this would happen. Exactly the reason she had only taken the loan out in her name. She loved Sasha dearly, but the girl had always been a bit...flighty.

“Well, Brody is going to be released from the hospital in a couple of days, and he doesn’t want to stay with Momma while he finishes recovering.” Sasha paused then blurted out in a rush, “So, I’m going to stay at his place for a while until he gets back on his feet.”

Quinn immediately felt guilty. She assumed Sasha had decided against moving in with her altogether. Quinn didn’t need help paying the mortgage or the bills, but it would be nice to have the company. Now, she just felt like an ass.

“That’s great, Sash. I know Brody will appreciate the help. You take all the time you need, and your room will be waiting for you when you’re ready.”

“Thank you.” Quinn heard the relief in Sasha’s voice, which only served to make her feel worse. “I promise it will only be for a couple of weeks.”

“Don’t worry about it. Really, it’s okay. I understand.”

“Well, there’s one more thing.” Sasha sounded uneasy again.

Quinn tensed. Whatever Sasha had to say, Quinn doubted she would like it.

“Can you go by the hospital and see Brody?”

Nope. Not going to like it at all.

Okay, so she needed to go see her ex and clear the air. Find out what had happened all those years ago so she could form some kind of closure and hopefully put Brody Jensen behind her.

She so didn’t want to do this. “What’s the room number?”

“Oh thank you! Do you want me to go with you? I’m not supposed to get off work for another hour, but I can probably ditch out a little early.”

Quinn refrained from rolling her eyes. “I’m a big girl, Sash. I got this, but thank you. I’ll see you at home.”

Sasha rattled off the room number, and they said their good-byes. Quinn started her car and turned it in the direction of the hospital before she could chicken out.

* * * *

Quinn took a deep breath, then another, in an effort to calm her racing heart. She brushed her knuckles lightly across the door, the sound soft, almost nonexistent. Maybe Brody would be sleeping, and she could put off this little reunion until a future date. Never sounded like a good time.

“Come in.” Deep and masculine, Brody’s voice drifted to her from the other side of the wood.

Quinn resisted the urge to groan and pushed the door open.

Brody sat up in bed, the sheets tucked around his waist, and his bare, muscled chest on prominent display. His coloring looked good, better than the last time she saw him, and his lips stretched into a huge grin.

“Quinn! I was wondering when you were going to come see me.”

“You know,” Quinn said as she went to stand beside the bed. “I didn’t think firemen were supposed to get shot. Isn’t that kind of your brother’s area?”

Brody’s laugh turned to a groan, and he put a hand to his chest. “Don’t make me laugh. I’m still sore as hell.” He leaned back against the pillows, his smile returning. “It’s good to see you, Quinn. You look great.”

He didn’t mean it. It’s just something people said to someone they hadn’t seen in a while. Still, it made her feel good.

“You look like shit.” She smiled in return, some of her anxiety slipping away.

“Thanks, Miss Sunshine.” The smile slowly slid from his face, and his tone became serious. “How have you been?”

Quinn wanted to tell him that she’d been wonderful. That life had been good and she was married with a pack of kids. She wanted to tell him she had everything she ever wanted out of life.

She’d never been a very good liar.

“I’ve been okay.” Quinn shrugged and looked away.

“No, you haven’t.” Brody shook his head slowly. “I’m sorry, Quinn. I’m sorry for the way things ended between us.” He looked her right in the eyes, his mouth turned down at the corners, his brow wrinkled. “I was an asshole, and it wasn’t fair to you.”

Quinn held her hand up, palm out, as the tears pooled in her eyes. “That’s not why I came here, Brody. It’s in the past, and that’s where it should stay.”

“It is in the past, but it’s exactly the reason you came here. I know I don’t deserve it, but will you please just give me a chance to explain?”

Yes, Brody spoke the truth. She had come to see him, to talk to him about the exact thing she now tried to deny. Quinn sighed and eased her bottom onto the edge of the bed. “What happened?”

“I was so messed up back then.” Brody ran a hand through his short hair and sighed. “Hell, I’m still messed up. Back then, though, I didn’t know what the hell I wanted, or who I was. Or maybe I did, and I was just too young and scared to admit it.”

As Quinn listened to him talk, she remembered what it had been to love him freely. They had been good together. She had good memories, and she would always cherish them, but that’s all they were...memories.

Sitting close to Brody, listening to his deep voice, smelling his clean scent, all the things that used to send her hormones into overdrive now did nothing for her.

“You have to know it wasn’t your fault, Quinn. I was a complete prick to you, and yet you still cared about me. I just...well...”

“Kiss me,” Quinn said.

Brody’s eyes widened, and he started shaking his head. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. I’m trying to explain why—”

“Please,” Quinn pleaded, interrupting him. She needed to be sure, to know if she had wasted the last five years, pining for the man for nothing.

Brody eyed her critically, then smirked. He opened his arms and beckoned her forward. “C’mere, you.”

Quinn eased into his arms, careful of his injuries, and pressed her lips lightly against his.

Nothing. No spark, no sense of coming home, not even a faint tingling of arousal.

She pressed her mouth to his more insistently, running her tongue along his bottom lip, and dipping inside when he opened for her.

Nothing. She mapped the inside of his mouth, trying to find some hint of the longing she had once felt for him, but came up empty. He tasted the same, sweet with a hint of spice, but it did nothing for her.

Her body didn’t burn for Brody. Her heart didn’t ache, nor did she melt from his touch. In fact, she felt a little guilty, as though she were somehow betraying Zach. Quinn eased out of the kiss and stared at Brody in a kind of awed amazement.

For so long she’d dreamed about being in his arms again, fantasized about how it could be between them. She still felt a kind of closeness to Brody. She hoped they would be friends, but the woman she had become couldn’t reconcile with the girl she had once been.

“Nothing, huh?” Brody grinned at her.

Quinn smiled sheepishly, and her cheeks flushed crimson. “No.” *How embarrassing!* “I’m sorry.”

“I’m not.” Brody winked at her. “Quinn...I’m gay.” His entire body seemed to tense as he waited for her reaction.

She blinked at him then started to giggle. She couldn't help it. "We are a mess, aren't we?"

Brody chuckled quietly, and some of the tension seeped away. "I guess we are."

"Then why the hell did you just let me kiss you?"

Brody shrugged. "You're pretty, and it was a damn hot kiss."

Quinn snorted. "So, have you always been gay? Is that why..." She trailed off, giving him a meaningful look.

"Yeah, that's why." Brody nodded, and a little sadness returned to his eyes. "I'm sorry, honey. I'm sorry that I couldn't tell you, but I couldn't even admit it to myself. When we had sex, this is going to sound awful, but I just wasn't into it. I wanted to try one more time, ya know, to make sure."

Quinn frowned but nodded. Yeah, it sounded pretty horrible, but at least now she could understand his reasoning.

"I'm sorry I used you that way, Quinn. It wasn't fair to you. Your first time should have been romantic and wonderful, and you deserved so much better than me." Brody took her hand and squeezed it gently. "I'm so sorry."

"I forgive you." Quinn squeezed back and smiled softly. "So, can we be friends again?"

Brody grinned and nodded. "I'd like that. I've missed you."

"Good." Quinn leaned forward and brushed her lips against his cheek. "I've missed you, too."

Brody leaned back against his pillows and frowned. "Zach just left," he said before she could ask. "He looked pissed."

Quinn whipped around to stare at the empty doorway and grimaced. She had created this mess, and she needed to fix it. "He's just afraid that you're going to hurt me again. He's my best friend, Brody. He worries about me." She looked at Brody, and her eyes narrowed. "You haven't told him, have you?"

Brody scrunched his nose and looked away. “No. I haven’t told Sasha either. Mom knows, but she’s promised not to say anything until I’m ready to let everyone know.”

Quinn cupped his cheek, waiting until he met her gaze. “If you want me to be there when you tell them, just let me know.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it. Maybe it would help since Zach’s in love with you.” Brody smirked.

Quinn started shaking her head, immediately pulling away from him. “No, he’s not. We’re just friends.”

Brody captured her retreating hand and placed a chaste kiss in the palm. “He’s been in love with you for forever, Quinn. Open your eyes.” He pinched her chin between his thumb and forefinger. “You love him, too. It’s always been, Zach. Not me, but Zach.” He grinned bemusedly as though a light switch had gone off in his brain.

Quinn blushed again and opened her mouth to argue, but Brody held up a hand to halt her. “Is it that obvious?” she asked instead.

“Go get him, Quinn. You deserve to be happy.”

She grinned broadly and nodded. “Thank you, Brody. I’ll be back to see you. I’m happy that you’re in my life again, even if I am a little surprised at how it came about.”

Brody leaned forward and kissed the tip of her nose. “Me, too. Now go.”

* * * *

Zach’s heart seized in his chest, and he rubbed his palm over it to ease the ache. He’d stopped by the hospital for his promised visit to his brother, but really, he just wanted to hurry home and see Quinn.

Walking into Brody’s room just in time to see the woman he loved smile her million-watt smile and kiss his brother’s cheek had not been on his list of things to do. Zach hadn’t known whether to scream or cry, so he’d done neither.

He felt like a fool. He knew she still held a torch for Brody and would never love him as she did his brother. So, why did it hurt so much?

Zach reached the parking lot, hurrying to get to his pickup, when he heard his name called. He spun around just in time to catch Quinn as she threw herself at him. He wrapped his arms around her and held her close, burying his face in her hair.

He didn't know why Quinn had come after him. He assumed she and Brody were too busy mooning over each other to notice his entrance, let alone his departure.

If he could only have Quinn's friendship, he'd take it and be grateful for it. Pathetic, but he couldn't be without her.

"Hey, Junebug," he whispered into her hair.

Quinn leaned away and looked up at him with wide eyes. She opened her mouth to speak, then closed it. Finally, she sighed and gave him a hesitant smile. "I want pie. There's a diner around the corner that has the best pecan pie. They make pretty decent coffee, too."

She seemed jittery. Zach almost advised against coffee, but decided to hold his tongue. Quinn had never been nervous around him before, not even as a teenager. It made him uneasy.

He couldn't deny her anything, though. So, he said nothing and allowed her to lead him down the street.

Chapter Four

Quinn held tight to Zach's hand as they made their way to the little diner around the block. The wind whipped her hair around her face, and she huddled closer to his warm body, shivering from the cold.

Her mind raced, and her heart hammered. Should she take a chance at ruining everything and tell Zach she loved him? *What if Brody's wrong? What if Brody's not wrong?* What if she started seeing Zach and it ended badly? Could they remain friends, or would the strain of a breakup tear them apart forever?

Zach wrapped his arm around her, rubbing his big hand up and down her arm to try and warm her. Quinn tucked her face into his shoulder and smiled, shivering again, but not from the cold.

"Where's your coat, Junebug?"

"I left it in the car. It's okay. See? We're here." Quinn motioned toward the rundown-looking diner in front of them.

Zach held the door open for her, and Quinn stepped inside, sighing in relief to be out of the cold October chill. They snagged a booth in the corner, and Quinn reached for a menu, hiding her face behind it, unsure of what to do next.

By the time the server left with their orders, Quinn relaxed enough to be herself. "So, Mr. Jensen." She held a spoon to her mouth like a microphone and adopted her best television anchor voice. "How was your first day at the Riverton Police Department? Is the city safe from the evils of criminal masterminds? Have you recovered little Billy Johnson's bicycle? What about uncovering the mysteries of Mrs. Wade's chicken surprise?"

Quinn pushed the spoon toward Zach's mouth, trying desperately not to giggle at his arched brow. "Well, Miss Harper," he said seriously, linking his fingers together and placing them on the tabletop. "Today was mostly an orientation of sorts. I met my partner and my superior, and toured the precinct. I can assure you, the city is safe for the moment. Billy Johnson's bike was recovered from the backyard of one Tommy Hilbert, reportedly Billy's best friend. Mrs. Wade's chicken surprise is still, unfortunately, a surprise."

Quinn dropped the spoon to the table and slapped her hands over her mouth to stifle the sound of her giggles. She missed acting silly and foolish, and no one could bring it out of her like Zach.

"In celebration of your first day on the force, dinner is on me."

"Junebug, if I let you pay for dinner, you may as well take away my man card." Zach shook his head. "Not gonna happen."

Quinn snorted. "Well, I would hate to puncture that overinflated ego of yours, so by all means." She waved a hand to indicate he could pay.

"You're such a brat." Zach frowned, which sent her into another fit of giggles.

She loved spending time with him. They had an easy camaraderie and could talk for hours about nothing at all. He set her at ease and made her feel content and peaceful. She never had to censor herself around Zach.

She really did love him.

A pretty brunette sidled up to the table and beamed brightly at Zach. "Zachy! I haven't seen you in ages!"

Zachy? Eww. Quinn twitched her nose in distaste, looking the woman over, sizing her up. Her eyes narrowed, and she almost growled when the little tramp slipped into the booth beside Zach and threw her arms around his neck.

Long, dark hair, baby blue eyes, killer legs, and a body to die for, Quinn couldn't deny the woman looked amazing. Which only served to make her hate the slut even more.

The hussy kissed Zach's cheek as she cuddled up next to him in the booth. Apparently, she wouldn't be leaving anytime soon. She chatted away, flipping her hair, rubbing her fake breasts against his arm. Her other hand disappeared beneath the table, and Quinn almost came out of her seat.

Quinn propped her elbows on the table and bit her lip, fighting to keep her temper leashed. Zach belonged to her!

Whoa! Where the hell had that come from? She had no claim on Zach. For all she knew, he enjoyed the attention Miss Silicone showed him. She pried her eyes away from the ample mounds smashed against his arm and focused on Zach's face, trying to discern his reaction.

Surprisingly, he looked uncomfortable. He pressed back into the corner of the booth, his cheeks blazing scarlet, a nervous half smile on his lips. He glanced over to meet her gaze, a silent plea in his beautiful cerulean eyes.

Quinn leaned forward and cleared her throat loudly. The trollop glanced at her dismissively and went back to giggling at Zach. "Oh, is this your sister?"

Zach's eyes rounded, and he started choking, beating his fist against his chest as he coughed. "Uh, this is my Quinn. I mean...I mean this is Quinn. My...my..." His eyebrows drew together, and he cocked his head to the side as if he couldn't find the word.

Quinn couldn't suppress her smile. Perhaps Brody knew a thing or two after all. She winked at Zach before wiping the smile from her face and turning back to the woman beside him. "Who are you?" Okay, she probably could have been a little politer, but whatever.

"Lucy Bennett." She curled her glossy upper lip over her teeth.

"Uh-huh. So, how do you know Zach?" Quinn nodded her head toward him. Poor guy looked like he would rather be in a pool full of piranha.

"We went to college together." Lucy showed off her impossibly white teeth. "We had a lot of fun together." Innuendo slipped into her

sultry voice, and Quinn wanted to rip her vocal chords out. “Didn’t we, Zachy?” She rubbed against him again, purring like a kitten.

“Oh...uh...well,” Zach stammered.

“Are you sure you’re not Zachary’s sister? I remember her to be very...homely.” Lucy grinned over at Quinn evilly before sniffing and turning her nose up in disdain.

That does it!

Quinn smiled her brightest smile, letting the honey drip off her words as she spoke. “I assure you, I am not his sister, Miss Bennett. Now,” Quinn allowed the steel to creep into her voice, “if you will kindly tuck away your oversized, plastic tits and get your fucking hands off of my man, I’d really appreciate it.”

Lucy huffed, placing her hand over her chest. “Zach, surely you aren’t going to allow her to talk to me like that.”

But, Zach didn’t spare her even a passing glance. His eyes were rounded and dazed, and locked on Quinn.

“Zachy!” Lucy drug the word out into three syllables, her nasally whine hitting octaves only dogs could hear.

“Quinn?” Zach spoke just above a whisper.

Now that she’d staked a claim on the man, Quinn figured she had two options. Either she could pretend as though she’d only done it to get rid of Little Miss Look-At-Me, or she could back it up.

The second option scared the hell out of her. Her heart thundered inside her chest, her stomach knotted, and her head spun.

“Oh, you can’t be seeing *her*.” Lucy sneered the last word, gesturing toward Quinn with a flick of her wrist.

Consequences be damned, Quinn stood, reached across the table, and fisted her hand in the front of Zach’s button-down shirt. She yanked on it roughly, smirking a bit when he came to her readily.

Here goes nothing...or everything.

A picture might be worth a thousand words, but Quinn could think of only three she wanted to convey as she crushed her mouth down on Zach’s. *He. Is. Mine.*

* * * *

Shock froze Zach, and he couldn't respond to the hungry lips that nibbled away at his mouth. He'd loved Quinn for years, wanted her with an intensity that scared the shit out of him.

By the time his dazed brain had caught up with his body, Quinn had pulled away, staring at him with wide, terrified eyes.

"Oh, god," she mouthed. "I'm so sorry." Then, before he could blink, she stepped out of the booth and ran for the door.

Zach stood paralyzed, watching her flee the restaurant. "What the hell just happened?"

"It looks as though the poor girl just made a fool of herself." Lucy tossed her hair over her shoulder and looked up at him. "Why don't you come back to my place? We could...catch up." She smiled seductively. "Perhaps we could invite that delicious brother of yours. Oh, brothers would be so much fun."

"Go away." Lucy had been an easy lay in college, so he'd chosen to overlook her conceited and self-important attitude. Now, she just annoyed the hell out of him.

He ushered her out of the bench seat, slapped a twenty on the table, and left her sputtering and huffing as he headed for the exit, chasing after the object of his desire.

Quinn had kissed him. Right there in the middle of a shabby little diner, in front of Moses and everyone, Quinn had kissed him.

Now, he just needed to know why.

The bell clanged loudly, banging against the glass when Zach shoved the door open and stepped out into the chilly night. He turned his head one way and then the other, searching for Quinn.

He spotted her almost immediately, huddled against the cold wind and hurrying down the sidewalk toward the hospital.

"Quinn!" Zach's feet pounded against the sidewalk as he ran to catch up with her.

Quinn spun around, and he watched the color drain from her face. “I’m so sorry, Zach. Please, just go. I promise I won’t ever bother you again. I just...I wanted to—”

Zach cut her off by fisting his hands in her long curls and pulling her mouth against his. He took advantage when she gasped in surprise, thrusting his tongue through her parted lips to delve inside. He couldn’t decide which one of them moaned louder.

Finally, after years of wanting, yearning, of watching her in the arms of his brother, he finally had Quinn Harper all to himself. She kissed *him*. She grasped at his shoulders, pulling him closer as she arched against his chest. Zach wanted to shout it from the rooftops. Quinn June Harper wanted *him*!

A bothersome question in the back of his mind stole some of the joy from the moment. After all this time, all these years, why now?

His aching cock strained against his zipper, screaming at him to shut the hell up and just roll with it. He gently eased out of the kiss, slipping his hands through Quinn’s hair and down to cup her cheeks. Staring into Quinn’s dazed eyes, he had to know the truth.

“Why?”

“Because I love you.” He heard the breath catch in her throat with a little hiccup when she realized what she’d said. Her eyes widened, and she slapped a hand over her mouth, taking an unsteady step in retreat.

Zach felt dizzy. His mouth stretched into a satisfied grin, and he couldn’t help but ask, “Really?”

Quinn dropped her hand from her mouth and fisted it on her hip as she glared at him. She looked adorable, and his lips tingled, begging to kiss her again. “Yes, really, you big dummy! What kind of question is that? I said I love you, and ‘really’ is the best response you have?”

“That’s my girl.” Zach chuckled before wrapping his hand around the back of her neck and pulling her to his mouth again. He hadn’t had nearly enough of the magnificent woman in front of him.

Quinn belonged to him, his to protect and care for. As his first act of duty, he needed to get her out of the cold and into someplace warm—preferably with several flat surfaces.

Breaking the kiss, he pulled his jacket off and slipped it over her shoulders, pulling the front together and tugging her back to him. He buried his face in her silky hair, inhaling her warm, flowery scent. “Let’s get you out of this wind.”

Quinn shivered as she nuzzled her face against his chest. “Okay.”

“There’s something I need to tell you first.”

She groaned as she rolled her forehead against his chest. “You have a girlfriend, don’t you?” She tried to step away from him, but Zach wrapped an arm around her waist, holding her securely in place. “Or you have a secret baby somewhere? Maybe a wife? Please, don’t tell me you’re gay, too.”

“Gay? Who’s gay?”

Quinn bit her lip and shook her head. “So, what do you need to tell me then?”

Zach leaned over her, blocking the wind, and trailing wet kisses along the column of her throat. “I love you, Junebug.” It felt so good to say it. Zach wanted to tell everyone, maybe take out an ad in the paper. “Let me take you home.”

“Yes.” She stepped away from him and smiled. “I’ll meet you there.”

“What? No, you can ride with me. We’ll get your car tomorrow or something.” He couldn’t let her leave his sight. He’d waited too long to hear those three little words from her, to hold her in his arms as a lover and not just a friend. If they had time apart, she might reconsider and decide she had made a mistake.

Quinn just laughed at him, a soft, musical sound that went straight to Zach’s groin. God, she had a beautiful smile.

“Zach, I can see what’s going on in that head of yours, but I’m not going to change my mind.”

He didn't stop to think. He grabbed Quinn's hand and took off at a fast clip, dragging her behind him. She giggled cutely and hurried her footsteps to keep up with him.

"Where's your car?" Zach stepped into the parking lot of the hospital and scanned the vehicles.

Quinn pointed in the opposite direction from where Zach had parked. "Over there." She sounded out of breath, and though he should have felt guilty for pulling her along like a rag doll, it mostly turned him on. She handed his coat back to him and started in the direction she indicated.

"And where the hell is your coat?" Zach barked.

Quinn pointed again. "Over there," she repeated with a raised eyebrow.

Zach sighed as they continued to walk. "Sorry, Junebug."

Quinn didn't respond, but she smiled at him, so he knew she forgave him. When they reached Quinn's car, he pulled her into his arms and gave her one last searing kiss.

When Zach felt he had kissed her to the best of his ability, he pushed her away gently and pecked her forehead. "Hurry. I'll take care of any traffic tickets."

Quinn smiled as she pulled her keys from her pocket. "If I get pulled over, it will take even longer to get home, but I'll remember your offer in the future." She winked, then pulled open the door and slid into the driver's seat. "Go, Zach."

Zach didn't hesitate. He raced across the parking lot, jumped into his pickup, and drove like a demon to get home.

Chapter Five

Zach waited on the front steps, his heart hammering inside his chest as he watched Quinn's SUV pull up alongside the curb. The air rushed from his lungs in relief when she jumped out of the driver's door and came running across the front lawn, beaming from ear to ear.

She threw herself at him, linking her hands behind his neck, and pulling him into a possessive kiss that had him hard and wanting in seconds. Gripping the rounded cheeks of her ass, he lifted her into his arms to adjust for their height difference.

Ah, much better.

Quinn encircled his waist with her legs, attacking his lips and rocking against him. She tangled her fingers in his hair where it curled just above the collar, urging him closer.

Zach battled back the urge to take her right there on his mother's front porch. Holding Quinn securely with one arm, he reached behind him with his other hand, fumbling with the doorknob.

He almost wept with gratitude when he found the door unlocked. Unfortunately, that also meant his mother and sister were home.

Quinn trailed kisses along his shoulder, his neck, his jaw. She used one hand as an anchor around his neck, and the other to explore his chest, pulling a deep groan from his throat.

"Shh, your mother," she whispered, but didn't pause in her assault on his senses.

Zach stumbled blindly through the living room, his body trembling and his cock aching. He'd kill them both if he tried to make it up the stairs to his room.

“Your room.” Zach hurried down the hall and into Quinn’s temporary bedroom where he eased her to the floor as he kicked the door closed.

It should have been obvious that he and Quinn were on the same page, but Zach needed to be certain. “Are you sure?”

In response, she grabbed the hem of her sweater and tugged it over her head.

* * * *

Self-consciousness crept in when Zach just continued to stare at her. He had lifted her so easily, not grunting or straining to carry her. Quinn had completely forgotten what a fat cow she had become.

There she stood, her flab hanging out for him to see, and she hadn’t even insisted that he turn off the light. Could this moment be any more embarrassing? Yes, she could have lost her head completely and gotten totally naked.

Still, Zach didn’t need to look so thunderstruck. Surely, he’d seen his fair share of naked females. They couldn’t all be perfect.

Quinn wrapped her arms around her midsection and stared down at her toes. What did she do now? While she wanted to grab her sweater and run from the room, she figured it would be kind of childish. So, she stood there, waiting for Zach to work through a gentle rejection in his mind before transferring it to his lips. He was a nice guy that way.

“You’re beautiful,” he whispered.

Quinn’s head snapped up, and she finally met his gaze. She couldn’t miss the admiration and desire in his voice. “Zach?”

He ambled forward, taking her wrists and prying them away from her stomach. His hands roamed along her rib cage and across her belly in a featherlight caress. “Gorgeous.”

Before Quinn could argue, Zach swooped in, plunging his tongue deep into her mouth. She sighed, arching up on her tiptoes, wrapping her arms around his corded neck.

“Gorgeous,” Zach breathed again, smiling against her lips. “And short.” He chuckled. “What do you say we take this to a more even playing field?” He dipped his head toward the bed in suggestion.

Quinn looked between the man she desired and the mattress, chewing on the inside of her cheek. “Can we turn the lights off?”

“No,” Zach stated without pause. “I meant it when I said you’re beautiful. I want to see you, every inch of you.” He kissed her again before she could argue. It was becoming quite the habit of his.

Zach tasted so good, and he kissed like a dream. Quinn forgot to be annoyed with him. Her head swam, and her body tingled with expectation. Feelings she thought were lost to her coursed through her body, setting her blood boiling and her skin burning.

“Get on the bed, Junebug.”

Quinn could only nod. The man held her captive, and she couldn’t refuse him in anything. She walked backward until her knees hit the mattress and sat heavily, never taking her eyes from Zach’s handsome face.

“In the middle,” he said. His long, masculine fingers worked open the button on his slacks, and the rasp of the zipper made Quinn shudder. “This might go a little better if you got undressed.”

Oh, right. Quinn shook her head to clear the fog from it as she reached behind her back to unhook her bra. “Hey, where’d my bra go?” Quinn looked down at her naked breast, then back up at Zach accusingly.

He just winked, then pushed his pants and underwear to his ankles, kicking them off of his socked feet.

Quinn’s mouth watered, and her eyes grew as big as dinner plates. Every tanned inch of Zach’s chiseled body made her want to roll over and beg for his touch. His hard cock jutted proudly from the nest of

close-cropped curls at his groin—long and thick, a perfect mushroom-shaped head, thin veins running the length like sensual snakes.

Though she'd never done it before, Quinn longed to taste him. She wanted to know what that satin-covered, steel erection would feel like sliding across her tongue, filling her mouth, and nudging the back of her throat. Would he taste sweet and earthy or salty and bitter?

Quinn took an involuntary step forward, licking her lips, her eyes still on the masterpiece between Zach's legs. "Can I..." She trailed off, nodding toward his erection.

Zach scrunched his eyebrows and tilted his head to the side, stopping Quinn in her tracks. Perhaps she had said something wrong. She knew women did that kind of thing. She had read about it, heard her friends talk about it. Maybe Zach just didn't want it from her.

"Quinn, how much experience do you have?" He came forward and sat on the edge of the bed, pulling her down into his lap.

Quinn squirmed, trying to get free, very aware of the naked prick rubbing against her jean-covered bottom. "Does it matter?" she snapped.

"It does to me."

Quinn stopped struggling and slumped against his chest. Why did he have to be so honorable? This was not something she wanted to discuss while sitting on top of a naked penis with her breasts fully exposed.

"I haven't been with anyone since Brody," she finally whispered, speaking to his collarbone.

"Oh, baby." Zach sighed and kissed her temple. "All these years. Are you really sure about this? We don't have to do anything. I'm more than happy to just hold you in my arms." He squeezed her tight, punctuating the statement.

"I want to." Quinn looked up at him through her eyelashes. "I just don't know what to do. Don't be disappointed," she pleaded.

"I could never be disappointed with you. We'll go as slow as you need to." Zach smiled wickedly. "I'll teach you everything I know."

Quinn smiled and squirmed out of Zach's lap. He nibbled kisses along her stomach, his hands smoothing up her back and along her spine as she tried to get the button of her jeans undone with quivering fingers.

When she'd finally managed to undress herself, she took a step back and bit her lip, waiting for Zach's reaction. The heat in his gaze gave her confidence. No one could fake the look of passion that emanated from his eyes as they slowly raked over her nude body.

Lowering herself to her knees, she pushed Zach's thighs wide and crawled between them. "I want to taste you. I obviously don't know what I'm doing, so tell me if I do something you don't like."

Zach nodded, and his nostrils flared. "Just don't bite it off, and I doubt there is anything you can do that I won't like."

Whether he meant to or not, his words put her at ease. Quinn smiled inwardly as she reached out and wrapped her fingers around the base of Zach's leaking cock. "It's so hot," she whispered. It was like holding a lightning rod in her hand.

She gave it a couple of good strokes from root to crown, delighting in the way it jumped and jerked in her hand. A clear drop of pre-cum dripped from the slit, and without thought, Quinn darted her tongue out to catch it.

Zach moaned, his thighs twitched, and his head fell back on his shoulders. Oh, he liked that. Quinn swirled her tongue around the spongy head a few times before wrapping her lips around it and sucking hard.

The sounds flowing from Zach's parted lips grew in volume the more Quinn sucked and lavished attention on the head. His hands settled lightly on the back of her head, encouraging rather than forcing. Taking a deep breath, she dove forward until the tip of his cock pressed against the back of her throat.

Zach cried out, arching his hips off the bed and pushing further into her mouth. Apparently, Quinn didn't have a gag reflex because the action did little but excite her. Dragging her lips back up the

pulsing shaft, she dipped her tongue into the slit, gathering more drops of pre-cum.

Zach tasted amazing. Sweet, and a little salty, just like she hoped he would. Setting up a steady rhythm, Quinn bobbed her head, raking her lips along the smooth flesh, swirling and flicking her tongue as the slick cock slid in and out of her eager mouth.

Zach's hands fisted in her hair, and he pulled her back until his prick slipped from her swollen lips with a pop. "Enough," he growled.

Before Quinn could start to worry that she'd done something wrong, he lifted her from the floor and tossed her to the mattress. "I want to be inside you, and I'm never going to last like that. You're a natural, baby."

Queen preened at the compliment, ecstatic that she had made her man feel good. Zach frantically dug through the nightstand, then slammed the drawer shut and growled. "I don't have any condoms."

The frustration and disappointment was written in the lines of his face. "I trust you," Quinn whispered. "I can't...I can't have children, and I don't have any diseases."

"You can't have children?" Zach looked horrified. "Why not?" He moved back to the bed, crawling up beside her and gathering her in his arms.

She didn't want to talk about this. Quinn had wanted to be a mother since her first child development class in high school. To know that she would never fulfill her dream left her sad and angry. Zach wouldn't let it drop until she explained, though. The quicker she got it over with, the quicker she could have that beautiful cock filling her.

"I had cervical cancer last year. It spread, and they had to perform a full hysterectomy." Quinn shrugged. She wouldn't let on to how much it hurt that she could never have children of her own.

"You never told me," Zach said, the pain evident in his voice.

"I never told anyone," Quinn amended.

“After your parents died?” Quinn nodded, biting her lip and blinking rapidly. “Oh, Junebug. You went through that all by yourself?” Zach crushed her in his arms, pulling her tight against him, and covered her mouth in a toe-curling kiss. “You’ll never be alone again,” he promised in a sultry whisper. “Never.”

“Make love to me.” She didn’t want to linger on unpleasant memories. She wanted to lose herself in the feel of Zach’s body pressed against hers, invading her depths, pushing all thoughts but desire and pleasure from her mind.

Without a word, Zach covered her mouth again, this kiss better than the ones before it. Rolling Quinn to her back and coming to rest on top of her, he cradled her hip with one hand and braced himself on the bed with the other.

“Tell me if I hurt you,” he murmured. “I imagine it will be a little uncomfortable at first, but I don’t want to hurt you.”

Quinn nodded, beyond the ability to speak. He kissed down her neck, over her shoulders, and across her collarbone before his skillful tongue came to rest against her hardened nipples. He flicked them lazily, drawing languid circles around the pebbled nubs then took them in turns, sucking each into his mouth, nipping lightly.

Quinn whimpered and panted. Slick heat drenched her throbbing pussy, flaming her desire. “Zach, please!”

Zach released her nipple, blowing cool air across it, causing it to harden almost painfully. “Patience,” he mumbled against her breast. “I have waited a lot of years to get you under me, and I won’t be satisfied until I’ve tasted every inch of you.”

To prove his point, he began kissing and licking his way down her stomach, his hands roaming over her body as his mouth played havoc on her nervous system. By the time he’d settled between her splayed thighs, Quinn didn’t know how much more she could take. She felt as if she were the on the precipice of something amazing, something that would rock her to her core.

Zach parted her gently, and all thoughts fled, replaced by electricity that raced along her spine to gather in her belly. His tongue felt wet and slippery, hot and wonderful, as he sucked and laved her clitoris.

Quinn's heart raced, sweat glistened across her skin, flames licking beneath the surface, melting her alive. The sensations swamped her until she felt light-headed, dizzily spinning out of control. "Zach," she panted. She didn't know what was happening to her body, but she felt like a hand grenade waiting to detonate.

Zach sucked her pulsing clit into his mouth, and two long fingers found her throbbing opening, pushing in swiftly.

Quinn screamed until her throat felt raw. Her head and shoulders came up off the bed, her eyes open but unseeing. Her inner muscles clamped down on the thick digits inside her pussy, and everything exploded into a blissful euphoria.

Slumping back to the bed in a boneless heap, Quinn's mind reeled with her first orgasm. "Oh. My. God," she breathed.

Zach climbed back up her body and slipped his tongue between her parted lips. "You haven't seen anything yet," he promised roguishly.

* * * *

Zach still couldn't get over the amazement that Quinn Harper lay beneath him, panting and flushed from an orgasm he had given her. Though always beautiful, she left him breathless in her passion.

His prick leaked and pulsed between his legs, throbbing with the need to burrow inside Quinn's soft body. "Need you," he whispered against the shell of her ear.

"Yes." She ran a possessive hand down his hips to squeeze his buttocks, pulling him closer.

Zach couldn't wait any longer. He had waited too long to begin with. He wanted Quinn, and he intended to have her. Settling between

her legs, he grabbed the base of his erection and lined it up with Quinn's drenched cunt. He pushed in carefully, watching Quinn's face, preparing to stop or even pull out if she showed any signs of discomfort.

Her eyes fluttered closed, and a look of pure ecstasy covered her face. "More," she demanded.

He continued slowly, sheathing himself in the velvet-lined warmth, until his balls brushed against her body. Struggling to remain motionless, he waited for her to adjust to his girth.

Quinn opened her eyes and smiled up at him. "You won't hurt me," she whispered. "Move."

Zach had no choice when she bucked up into him, the silky heat of her inner walls clamping down on his cock. His eyes rolled back in his head, a feral groan bubbling up from his chest.

He set a slow pace, gliding in and out of her welcoming body. All too soon, though, he felt the pressure build in his tightening sac, his spine tingled, and his belly burned. Zach couldn't take his eyes away from Quinn's gaze.

"Faster. Harder," she demanded. She arched into him, grasping at his shoulders, her legs locked behind his back as she moved with him.

Zach aimed to please. Bracing both hands on the bed beside Quinn's head, he plunged into her, increasing his pace as the primal need to mark her as his own overwhelmed him. Sounds he could never remember making filled the room, echoing off the walls.

"Come for me," he managed to growl through gritted teeth. "Come on my cock, baby. Strangle my dick with that tight pussy."

Quinn's eyes went wide, and a sharp cry ripped from her throat as she shuddered and jerked beneath him. Taking the order to heart, her pussy grasped his turgid flesh, squeezing and contracting in waves as Quinn's orgasm rolled through her.

With one final thrust, Zach threw his head back and roared as his orgasm blasted through him, his seed scorching the inner depths of Quinn's slick cunt.

Still panting, he gently eased out and collapsed beside Quinn on the bed. “Holy shit,” he mouthed. Suddenly worried that he’d hurt his girl, Zach propped himself on his elbow, prepared to apologize.

He chuckled quietly at the sound of Quinn’s soft snore.

Chapter Six

Zach fidgeted in his seat, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel, urging traffic to move faster. He couldn't wait to get home to Quinn. In the three days since they'd become lovers, his little Junebug was proving to be quite insatiable.

He thrilled to the idea that he alone would teach her the joys of sex. He'd made love to her in every position he knew, and some he'd made up on the spot. Quinn was an enthusiastic lover, a quick and eager learner. Zach enjoyed showing her new ways of pleasuring not only him, but herself as well.

Though phenomenal, Zach would happily give up the sex to keep Quinn in his arms forever. The pure joy of watching her face light up when he told her how much he loved her warmed him right down to his soul.

She had always been important to him, always special, but in the past three days, Quinn Harper had become his world.

So, when he finally rushed through the front door and found Quinn sitting with Brody on the sofa, her hand clasped in his brother's, Zach felt like he would hurl all over the entryway.

"Quinn?" he choked.

His panic was short lived when her head snapped up, and she bestowed the most beautiful smile on him. She popped up from the sofa and bounded over to him, throwing her arms around his neck and kissing his lips.

"Missed you."

Zach clutched her close and shuddered with relief. "Love you, baby," he whispered into her hair.

“Love you more.” She eased out of his arms and winked. Then she led him back to the sofa, settling between him and Brody, curling up to snuggle against Zach’s chest.

“What’s going on?” He looked around the room at his family. His mother’s patient smile calmed him, but Sasha’s angry glare left him cold.

“Brody has something to tell us,” Sasha said icily.

Zach watched his brother swallow hard, wincing at their sister’s scathing tone. Quinn sat forward, moving to perch on the edge of the cushion, and took Brody’s hand in hers. Zach’s hand clenched into a fist on top of his thigh, and he fought the urge to snatch her away and growl like an animal.

“It’s okay, Brody,” she whispered. “I’m here for you. Just tell them.”

Brody looked pale and shaken, his normal cocky air replaced by a shroud of fear and uncertainty.

“Are you dying?” Zach asked, unnerved. He’d never seen his brother like this.

Brody chuckled, but it sounded strained and unnatural. Zach saw his hand flex around Quinn’s as he shook his head. “No, I’m not dying.” He took a deep breath and raised his head to meet Zach’s eyes. “I’m gay.”

Sasha jumped to her feet, marching across the room to hover over Brody. “No, you are not!” she shouted. “Just because Quinn is fucking Zach now doesn’t mean that you are gay. There are plenty of other girls out there!”

“Sasha.” Brody spoke quietly, his voice sad. “This has nothing to do with Quinn and Zach. I’m really happy for them.” He turned to face Zach again and smiled. “Really, big brother, you deserve to be happy, and so does Quinn. I think it’s wonderful that you two have finally seen what’s been staring you in the face for years.”

Zach swallowed around the lump in his throat even as he smiled. “Thank you, Brody.” He pulled Quinn to him and pushed her head down on his chest. “She means everything to me.”

Brody grinned and nodded. “I know. I’ve known forever. I think she’s the only one that didn’t.” He pushed Quinn’s thigh playfully.

“Hello!” Sasha shouted, waving her hands like a lunatic. “This is ridiculous, Brody! You can’t be gay. You’re just hurt right now because you thought you and Quinn would get back together. You’ll find someone else. She’s not worth it.”

Zach felt Quinn flinch in his arms and heard her sharp gasp. This had gone far enough. “Sasha, shut up,” he said flatly. “Brody’s right. This has nothing to do with Quinn. She’s your best friend for fuck sakes.”

“Not anymore,” Sasha answered coldly. “Not after she turned my brother into a fucking faggot!”

“Sasha Diane Jensen!” Ms. Caroline exclaimed. “You will not speak with such disrespect in my house. Brody can’t help who he loves any more than you or I can. Just because he prefers men does not make him any less a member of this family.”

Sasha didn’t speak another word, but continued to glare daggers at the threesome on the sofa.

“Brody,” Zach began, ignoring his sister. “I don’t give a shit who you want to fuck.”

“Zachary!” his mother gasped.

“Well, I don’t,” he stated firmly. He turned back to his brother and smiled. “Have you met someone?”

Brody grinned sheepishly and nodded. “His name is Sean.”

“Congratulations.” Zach let the smile fall from his face and put on his “big brother” glare. “If he hurts you, I’ll kick his ass.”

Brody leaned back on the sofa and laughed. “And I’ll let you. He’s important to me. I want you guys to meet him. I...I love him.”

Sasha glared at him for a long time before silently walking out of the room. Zach thumped his brother on the back and ruffled his hair.

“Don’t worry about her. She’ll come around. You know how she gets when she’s not the center of attention.”

Brody dipped his head in acknowledgement, but he didn’t look reassured. “Honey, are you okay?” he asked Quinn. “Don’t let those things she said get to you. You know she didn’t mean them.”

Quinn shrugged and tried a horrible attempt at a smile. Zach saw the moisture shining in her eyes, and he promised himself he’d have a little talk with his sister later.

“I want you two to stay with me,” Quinn said. She scooted around to face Zach. “I guess I could have picked a better time to ask, but since I find myself without a roommate...would you like to move in, Detective Jensen?”

“Hell yeah,” Zach answered immediately, making Quinn giggle.

“Brody, I want you to come stay with us until you can manage on your own,” Quinn stated firmly, looking over her shoulder at him.

“Thanks, honey, but...well, I know Sean has been wanting to play nurse.”

Quinn blushed, and her mouth rounded in a cute little O. “Oh, of course.” She scrunched her nose up, and her brow wrinkled. “Did he come visit you at the hospital?”

“No,” Brody whispered, his cheeks burning as red as Quinn’s. “I wasn’t ready to let everyone know about me...us yet.”

“So he hasn’t seen you since you’ve been shot?” Quinn yelped. “Brody Jensen, give me your cell phone right now.”

Brody looked startled but fished his cell phone from his pocket and handed it over. Quinn flipped it open and scrolled through his contact list. “Sean Ashby or Sean Wright?”

“Sean Ashby,” Brody answered automatically, then seemed to realize his mistake. He snatched for his phone, but Quinn held it out of reach, jumping from the couch and dancing around as she held the phone to her ear.

“Quinn Harper, give me my damn phone,” Brody demanded as he started to rise from the sofa.

Zach put a hand on Brody's shoulder, pushing him back to the couch. "You touch her," Zach said around his laughter, "and I will end you."

"Hello, Sean Ashby?" Quinn paused, smiling like a crazy person. "Yes, this is Quinn Harper. I'm a friend of Brody's."

Brody groaned, and Quinn glared at him, sticking her tongue out.

"Yes, that's right. Brody is tired and hurting, and I think he needs to get some rest. Would you be a dear and come pick him up? I think he needs his private nurse."

Quinn remained silent for so long, Zach thought she'd hung up. When he looked up at her, she was beet red, pressing her palm against her mouth to hold in her mirth. "Sean, calm down," she gasped. "Here, why don't you talk to Brody?"

She bounced over and pushed the phone into Brody's waiting hand. "Make it right," she mouthed sternly.

Brody shooed her away as he lifted the phone to his ear. "Hey, babe. Yes, I told them. No, we don't have to hide anymore. Yes, they want to meet you. Sure." Brody rattled off the address, and a dopey smile spread over his face. "Love you, too," he whispered.

Zach knew the feeling and figured he probably wore the exact look most of the time. "You've got it bad," he told his brother when Brody hung up. Zach looked up at Quinn, and sure enough, he felt the sappy grin spread over his mouth. "I know from experience."

* * * *

"Your boyfriend is really hot," Quinn whispered conspiratorially as she helped Brody into Sean's mid-sized SUV. "And sweet as punch. I think you two gave me a cavity," she teased.

"He's great, huh?" Brody sighed, all moony and love-struck. He looked over to where Sean stood talking to Zach, and his lips turned down at the corners. "Would you go get your man to back off of mine? I would kind of like to keep this one around for a while."

“Have there been many?” Quinn knew it was none of her business, but she was curious.

“A few, but none that were important to me like Sean. I want to spend my life with him.” He cleared his throat and added sternly, “Which is why I don’t want my brother interrogating him.”

Quinn laughed and patted Brody’s shoulder. “I’ll take care of it.” She started to turn, but paused with her brows drawn together. “You know that if he hurts you, even I won’t be able to stop Zach from kicking his ass.”

Brody smiled. “I know. I’m afraid I haven’t always been a very good brother, but I love Zach. I’m just glad he cares enough to want to protect me.”

“He loves you, silly. Of course he wants to protect you.” She kissed Brody’s cheek and stepped back to shut the door. “I’m going to go save your boyfriend.”

She hurried up the drive and bounced onto the porch. “Zach, I think Sean needs to take Brody home so he can take his pills.” She didn’t miss the grateful smile Sean threw her way.

“He’ll be fine for a minute,” Zach replied in dismissal. “So, Sean, what do you do for work?”

“Uh, I’m an accountant,” Sean stammered.

Oh, how adorable. Quinn just wanted to pinch him. He was a little guy, several inches smaller than Zach or Brody. His blond hair fell over one eye, and he pushed it back nervously.

“And just how old are you anyway?” Good grief, Zach played his big brother bit to the hilt.

Quinn rolled her eyes and wrapped an arm around Sean’s shoulders. “Ignore him, honey. He loves his brother, but he’s being an ass.” Quinn led him out to the car. “Go take your man home.”

Sean nodded enthusiastically and hurried to the driver’s side.

“Quinn!” Zach barked.

Quinn turned and narrowed her eyes at her lover. She pointed a finger at him, her other hand on her hip. “I’ll deal with you later,

Zachary Dane Jensen!” She turned back to Brody and winked. “Hurry.”

“Thank you.” Brody beamed at her. He put his hand on Sean’s knee and squeezed. “Let’s go home, baby.”

Quinn waved and smiled until they were out of the drive, then rounded on Zach. “Who in the hell do you think you’re talking to? You think you can just start barking at me, and I’m going to quiver in fear? You’ve got another damn thing coming, Detective!”

She marched right up to her man and poked him in the chest. “I will not be treated that way, so you get that through your thick skull right now. And what the hell was all that with Sean about? He’s a nice guy, madly in love with your brother from what I could see, and you just scared the hell out of him.”

Once Quinn got started, she couldn’t find the off switch. *Oh well, best to get it all out in one shot.* “And another thing—”

Quinn completely forgot what the “other thing” was when Zach scooped her up, cradling her like a baby, and landed a scorching kiss on her lips. Damn him for distracting her in such a way, but she’d scold him for it later.

“Damn, you’re sexy when you’re mad,” Zach said long moments later. “Remind me to piss you off more often.”

“Don’t curse so much,” Quinn whispered, licking the crease of Zach’s lips and delving back inside his warm mouth.

“Bite me.” Zach grinned mischievously.

“Bad boy.” Quinn played the game with a smile. “Go to my room.”

Chapter Seven

Sliding the key into the lock, Quinn paused and took a deep breath before she turned it, and pushed the door open. She stepped over the threshold, held her arms wide, and spun in a circle. “Welcome home, Zachary.”

Strong arms circled her waist, and Zach placed a soft kiss on her neck. “Welcome home, baby. Are you sure about this?”

“Well, I better be. I just signed a thirty-year mortgage on this place.”

Zach squeezed her tighter and laughed. “I meant about me moving in, goofball.”

“Oh.” Quinn turned, slipping her arms around his waist and crushing him with all the strength she had. “Absolutely,” she mumbled against his hard chest. She smiled up at him reassuringly. “You are my best friend, Zach. When Sasha said she wanted to stay with Brody for a while, I planned to ask you to stay anyway.”

Zach looked mollified, but Quinn couldn’t resist teasing a little. She kissed the smooth skin just below the hollow in his throat. “Having you in my bed is just a bonus, Detective Jensen.” She sobered, taking a step away and holding his hands in hers. “I don’t want to be alone.”

Wrapping his arms around her again, Zach cradled her head, pressing it to his chest, right over his heart. “I already told you, Junebug. You will never be alone again.” He kissed the top of her head. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Do you think Sasha will be okay?” Quinn worried about her friend. The things Sasha had said about her were hurtful, but she didn’t take it personally. Sasha always tended to go for the dramatic.

Zach’s chest-rumbling growl startled her. “Don’t worry about my sister. She had no right to say those things about you.” He sighed and rested his chin on the top of her head. “I’m sure she’ll come around when she’s had time to process everything. None of this is your fault.”

“Oh, I know that. It’s not like I turned Brody gay. He seems really happy with Sean, huh?”

“Yeah, he does. I wish he had told me sooner. We haven’t really been close for a long time, but I would have understood, been there for him. I imagine it’s been hell for him to hold a secret like that all these years.”

Quinn swallowed around the lump in her throat. She had caused the distance between the two by running straight to Zach when Brody had hurt her. Young, stupid, and heartbroken, she had unwittingly turned her champion against his own brother. “I’m proud of you,” she whispered.

“Oh, don’t get all girly on me. I don’t do mushy.” Zach stepped back and raked his fingers through his hair. “Ready to get dirty?”

Quinn’s heart hammered, and her body tingled. “Oh, yeah.”

Zach rolled his eyes and laughed. “One-track mind,” he muttered. “Come on, Junebug. That moving van isn’t going to unpack itself.”

* * * *

Quinn sat up in bed and stretched lazily, reaching her arms over her head and groaning at the pull on her sore muscles. She guessed she should be used to it by now. Zach was a zealous lover, and they’d been going at it like animals since moving in. She craved every minute of it.

Smiling to herself, Quinn slipped out of bed, wrapped herself in a pink silk robe, and padded out of the bedroom. Waking up alone had taken a little getting used to, but over the last few weeks, she'd begun to enjoy her morning solitude.

She felt a little guilty about lounging in bed while Zach had to wake up early and go to work, but he said he loved watching her sleep in the mornings. It gave him a warm feeling knowing she was safe and sound, snuggled down in their bed.

Yeah, her man could be a big ole sap sometimes, but that just made him all the more loveable. Quinn couldn't imagine her life with anyone else. Hopefully, she'd never have to.

Shuffling into the kitchen, Quinn smiled hugely at the paper lying, neatly folded, next to a fresh pot of coffee. Her favorite mug, a spoon, and the sugar sat next to the paper. Could Zach be any more perfect? She highly doubted it.

After doctoring her coffee, Quinn left the paper and walked through the house, her cup wrapped up in both hands. She had almost made it back to her bedroom when the doorbell rang. Frowning, she hurried back down the hallway, wondering who could be at her door so early in the morning.

She drew back the curtain and peeked through the small glass pane of the door, but couldn't see anyone. Her scowl deepening, she unlocked the door and pulled it open, protecting her morning caffeine in the other hand.

A small box wrapped in gold paper sat in front of the door. She shook her head and grinned. "Oh, Zach, what have you done now?" The man was fond of leaving little gifts for her to find around the house. Quinn told him countless times that she didn't need him to buy her things, but it made him happy, so she eventually relented.

Bending, she retrieved the pretty box with one hand and carried it to the sofa, where she sat to examine her new gift.

She cocked her head to the side and pursed her lips. Usually, Zach's gifts came with a note or silly poem. She cherished those more than she did the actual object.

Maybe the note was inside the box. Quinn set her coffee aside and began tearing at the paper like a child on Christmas morning. As far as she was concerned, people who took their time and saved the wrapping lacked proper gift-receiving character.

Quinn pulled back the single piece of tape on the plain brown box and lifted the top to peer inside. *Aha!* There was that pesky note. Pulling the envelope from the box, Quinn sat it beside her and lifted the filmy gauze out as well.

She screamed, pushing the box from her lap and vaulting over the back of the sofa. Scrambling on her hands and knees, she moved as quickly as she could to the kitchen.

She reached the linoleum, pushed to her feet, and sprinted to the phone. Cursing her shaking hands, she fumbled with the telephone, glancing over her shoulder as if the box would sprout legs and come after her. It took three attempts to get the digits right.

"Jenson," Zachary answered on the third ring.

"Zach," Quinn squeaked. For heaven's sake, she needed to get ahold of herself. "I need you to come home."

"What's wrong, Junebug? What happened?"

"I...I got...oh, crap, just come home please." Quinn lost what little composure she'd managed to scrape up and started crying.

"Do you need me, or do you need Detective Jenson?" Zach always seemed to know what to say to get through to her.

"I need you, but bring the badge."

* * * *

Quinn flew out the front door and launched herself into Zach's arms before he'd even cleared the top step of the porch. He held her

tight while she trembled, waiting while she pulled herself together. “What happened?”

She pulled away, looking over Zach’s shoulder at his partner, and flushed a very becoming shade of pink.

“Sorry.” She turned to Sine and held out a hand. “I’m Quinn Harper.”

“Chris Sine,” he replied with a smile. “Don’t apologize.” He looked Quinn up and down, his gaze travelling over her bare legs and lingering over the gaping fabric that exposed her cleavage.

Zach growled, nudging Quinn through the front door. “Get dressed.” He barely managed to sound human.

“Oh, shoot.” Quinn turned even redder as she clutched the fabric together over her chest and disappeared down the hall.

“She’s beautiful.” Sine leered.

“And mine,” Zach bit out. “If you feel the urge to keep breathing, you’d do well to remember that.”

Sine burst out laughing. “Relax, partner. You can’t blame a guy for looking.” He held his hands up in surrender. “I’ll behave.”

Zach nodded, turning to see Quinn standing behind the sofa, dressed in a pair of track pants and his UCLA sweatshirt. She’d pulled her hair back into a high ponytail that bobbed a little as she bounced nervously on her toes.

“Okay, what’s going on, Junebug?”

Quinn pointed to the floor beside his feet. Zach glanced down and saw the open box, turned on its side, just inches from his right foot. He’d been so pissed at his partner, he had almost stepped on the damn thing without realizing it.

Crouching down, he pulled a pen from his breast pocket, using it to flip the box upright. He grimaced at the contents.

A small white mouse, the kind anyone could buy from a pet store, lay dead inside. Pinned on its back to a piece of cardboard, slit open from throat to groin. Blood stained the rodent’s white fur, its mouth hanging open, completing the gruesome scene.

“Where did you get this?” he asked, looking up at his lover.

“Someone left it on the front porch.” Her hands fisted on her hips. “I damn sure didn’t buy it at the crafts store.”

Zach dipped his head to hide his grin. Damn, she was a feisty one. “What time?”

“About two minutes before I called you,” she huffed.

“Did you see anyone?”

“Obviously not.” She glared daggers at him.

Zach looked over to his partner, surprised and a little impressed at the progress Sine made trying to cram his entire fist into his mouth. “Don’t start,” Zach grumbled.

Sine squeezed his eyes together and bit down harder on his knuckles, shaking his head.

“Someone just left it on the front porch?” Zach went back to questioning Quinn.

“That’s what I said.”

“Honey, I have to ask—”

“Don’t you ‘honey’ me!” Quinn pointed a finger at his face. “You can ask me anything you want, but don’t treat me like a child or an idiot. Someone rang the doorbell, and by the time I got there, this was on the front porch, and no one was around. I thought it might be from you, so I brought it in and unwrapped it.”

“Unwrapped it? Where’s the paper?”

Quinn rolled her eyes and pointed down at the sofa. “Are you sure you’re a detective?”

“Quinn.” Zach growled in warning.

She ignored his threat, reaching into her pants pocket and producing a small envelope. “This came with it.” She thrust it towards Zach.

Zach took it by the corner, trying to touch as little of it as possible, and placed it on the coffee table. “You didn’t open it?”

Quinn looked down at the still-sealed envelope and sighed. “Obviously not,” she repeated.

"I'm trying to help, Junebug. It would be nice if you could lose the fucking attitude!" Zach never yelled, but damn it! He'd been terrified on the way over, scared out of his mind at the thought of something happening to Quinn. Now that he knew she remained unharmed, her shitty attitude grated his already frayed nerves.

Quinn threw her hands in the air and stomped out of the room. "Whatever!" she yelled over her shoulder.

Zach pinched the bridge of his nose, closing his eyes, and sighed. He didn't know what had gotten into his girl, but it didn't help matters.

"She's a bit of a control freak, huh?" Sine stood staring in the direction Quinn had retreated.

"Why do you say that?"

"She's scared, man." He turned his attention back to Zach and shook his head. "She doesn't have any control over this situation, and she doesn't like it one damn bit." He shrugged. "At least she's not screaming and crying."

Zach smiled a little. "Not her way."

"Didn't figure it was." Sine waved a hand toward the box on the floor. "Call this in?"

"Yeah, though it's probably just some neighborhood kids trying to gross out the new lady on the block." Zach rubbed the tense muscles of his neck and groaned. "She's going to be pissed."

"Looks like she already is," Sine said.

Zach went to the kitchen and found the latex gloves they kept under the kitchen sink. He'd laughed when Quinn insisted on buying them, simply because they were on sale. She'd just shrugged adorably and told him they never knew when something like that would come in handy. Well, they were sure handy now.

He pulled out a pair and slipped them on as he made his way back to the living room. Picking up the envelope from the coffee table, he used his pen to pry open the seal and pulled out the card inside.

"Fuck."

Sine flipped his phone closed and slid it back into his pocket. “What’s up?” He moved to stand behind Zach, eyeing the typed words over his shoulder. “Leave,” he read. “Not exactly Robert Frost.”

“Not exactly neighborhood kids,” Zach tossed back. “I don’t know what it means, but don’t mention this to Quinn.”

“Don’t mention what?” Quinn stood in the hall entryway and glowered. “What does it say, Zach?”

“Damn it, Quinn!”

“I have a right to know,” she countered.

“Fine!” he yelled. He spat the one little word on the card at her, getting a sick satisfaction as the blood drained from Quinn’s face. “Feel better now?”

Quinn didn’t speak for a few seconds. “I told you those gloves would come in handy.” She didn’t say anything else, but turned and went back down the hall.

“We need to question her,” Sine said quietly.

“I know, but give her a minute.”

“Go talk to her.” Sine turned toward the front door. “I’ll wait for the guys to get here.”

Zach dipped his head in thanks and went to find Quinn.

Chapter Eight

Quinn sighed when the front door slammed closed. Zach had been stomping around, growling like an angry grizzly all week. She understood how frustrated he felt about the lack of evidence they found—or hadn't found—in her little surprise. Nothing else had happened though, and Quinn felt Zach needed to let it go.

"Hey, honey," she sang cheerily from the kitchen.

Zach grunted something in return but didn't come into the kitchen. Quinn threw her hands up in exasperation. Being a cop's girlfriend sucked sometimes, and this definitely seemed to be one of them.

Deciding to leave Zach to stew, she lifted the glazed duck out of the oven and grinned. Maybe instead of journalism she could take up the culinary arts. Whatever. There were so many things she wanted to do. Hell, she had the time, the money, and the will. Maybe she could just try everything. Major in majoring, so to speak.

Quinn giggled to herself at the absurdity. She started to hum, dancing around the kitchen, cleaning here and there. She stirred the white sauce she made to go over the boiled potatoes, then went back to her dancing.

Lifting her arms in perfect imitation, she glided around the kitchen with her invisible partner. She closed her eyes as she drifted across the floor, counting her blessings. She had the man she loved, Brody's friendship, and even Sasha. Zach's sister had come running the minute she heard about the incident the previous week. She cried, wailing on about how sorry she was and how much Quinn meant to her.

Quinn forgave her instantly. She knew Sasha hadn't meant the things she said back in Ms. Caroline's living room. She had been hurt and upset, lashing out at those she knew could shoulder the weight. Quinn had broad shoulders, bordering on mannish, so it seemed fitting for her to take the majority of the burden.

Strong arms wrapped around her waist and pulled her back against a warm wall of solid muscle. Quinn kept her eyes closed, smiling dreamily as she swayed to the music. "Hey, stranger," she whispered.

Soft lips trailed along the side of her neck, leaving a path of wet kisses. "Hey back. I'm sorry," he added softly.

Quinn turned in his arms and almost swallowed her tongue. Zach kept his arms around her waist and pulled her against him. His muscles rippled, and little droplets of water on his skin sparkled in the florescent lighting. The clean scent of his recent shower clung to him, and he rubbed against her, fully and gloriously naked.

He gripped her waist, encouraging her to move to the gentle rocking of his hips. "You have too many clothes on," he murmured.

Quinn could only nod as she fought to uncurl her tongue from the back of her throat. She slowly lifted her arms in invitation, and Zach wasted no time, slipping his hands under her tank top, and pulling it over her head.

She shivered when the cool air brushed over her breasts, causing her upturned nipples to harden further. Her cotton shorts were the next to go as her lover slipped them down her legs to pool on the floor around her ankles.

"Much better," Zach sighed. He palmed the back of her head, pulling her close and licking at her lips. "Let me in, Junebug."

Quinn parted her lips on a happy little whimper, winding her arms around his neck and pulling him closer. She loved the way Zach kissed her, full of love and passion, promise and desire.

Lightning zipped down her spine and straight to her belly to roll and boil like molten lava. Her entire body thrummed with electricity, short-circuiting her brain and leaving her panting.

“Need you, Zach.”

He twirled them around and pushed her roughly against the kitchen wall, covering her body with his own. Zach’s mouth crashed down on hers in a hungry kiss that left Quinn’s head spinning. Without breaking the kiss, he lifted her into his arms, pressing her firmly against the wall.

Quinn had no choice but to wrap her legs around his waist and hold on for dear life. Zach reached between their damp bodies and gripped his turgid flesh, guiding it to Quinn’s eager entrance. “Let me in,” he repeated seductively.

“Yes,” she hissed, arching her hips off of the wall and impaling herself on his thick length in one long, hard stroke.

Zach closed his eyes, dropping his forehead against the wall beside her. “You feel so good,” he moaned.

“Feel better if you moved.” Quinn’s heart raced until it felt like it would explode from her chest. Her breath lodged in her throat, making it difficult to speak.

Zach pulled out until only the crown remained and slammed back in. He looked into her eyes, his gaze intense, as he set a demanding pacing. Quinn met his thrusts with wanton delight, crying out to the ceiling.

His hard cock invaded her depths, retreating and plunging, demanding a response from her. With no leverage, and Zach pinning her to the wall, Quinn was completely at his mercy. She couldn’t think of anywhere she’d rather be.

Zach lifted her higher, changing the angle and hitting something deep within her that caused her body to shudder and convulse as bright lights exploded behind her closed lids.

He grunted and groaned, the sounds primal and primitive. The rhythm intensified, Zach driving into her harder, faster, and deeper. Flames licked along her skin, her pussy throbbing and drenched.

Zach took one of her hands from around his neck and guided it between her legs where their bodies joined. The first touch of her finger against her swollen clitoris felt like an electrical shock.

Quinn threw her head back and screamed. Her inner walls clenched, tightening around Zach's steel rod, as her orgasm rocketed through her.

Zach moaned, low and sexy, pushed in as far as he could go, and froze. His muscles flexed, the chords in his neck strained, and Quinn felt his hot, sticky release within her core.

She sagged in his arms, slumping back against the wall. "I so needed that."

Zach started to chuckle, his breath stuttering across her neck. "I'm sorry that I've been an asshole. I'll do better, baby."

Quinn didn't think her heart could hold so much love without bursting. She smiled serenely as her lover slowly lowered her to the floor. "Love you, Zachary."

He kissed her lips, soft and sweet. "Ditto, Junebug."

* * * *

Zach mumbled and rolled over in bed when Quinn shook his shoulder. The shaking only became more persistent, rattling his teeth.

"Zach!" Quinn hissed. "Zach! Wake up! Do you smell that?"

Grumbling under his breath, he forced one eye open to look at her. "What? Everything is fine. Go back to sleep." He reached for his girl, trying to cuddle her to him.

She slapped at his chest and hurdled out of bed. "Zach! Get your ass up! I smell smoke."

With that, she had his full attention. Zach set up in bed and sniffed the air. He could definitely smell the acrid scent of smoke, but only a faint whiff, and a soft, flickering glow illuminated the window across from the bed. Sluggishly, he climbed from the comforting cocoon of the blankets and went to the window to investigate.

Quinn hurried in from the bathroom, wrapped in her silk robe. Zach turned from the window, immediately positioning himself to block her way. "Go call the fire department, baby." His words flowed evenly, calmly, but anger and fear roiled just beneath the surface.

"What's going on? What's burning?" Quinn tried to sidestep him, but he stepped with her, wrapping his arms around her waist.

"Just go call the fire department, Quinn. Everything is fine."

"If everything is fine, then why won't you let me go?" She pushed at his chest, struggling to free herself from his tightening hold. "Let me go, Zach!" The quick jab of her forearm caught him in the ribs, and he grunted, stumbling back and releasing his hold on her.

Quinn took the opportunity to slip around him and ran straight for the window. Her hand went to her mouth, and a soft gasp escaped her trembling lips. "Who...Who would do that?" she whispered.

Zach moved slowly to stand beside her, staring down at the front lawn below. Flames leapt merrily in the grass, lighting up the night sky. The fire burned brightly, twisting, turning, and curving into letters.

Quinn looked up at him, a stoic expression on her face. "I am not a whore!" she insisted, jabbing her finger at the window, and the single word burned into the entirety of the yard beneath it.

Surprisingly, he found himself laughing. "I never thought you were, Junebug. Now, please call someone to come put this out. I need to call it in to the station." He kissed her forehead and moved away to find his clothes and cell phone.

Quinn stood at the window for another minute before turning away with a derisive snort. "Those neighborhood kids are a bunch of nasty little things," she huffed.

Zach didn't say anything, but he would bet his badge that kids hadn't set the blaze out front. This clearly implied a threat to his woman, and he took the offense personally.

"Yes, you heard me correctly. Someone burned the word 'whore' into my front yard. Now are you going to come do something about it

or not?” Quinn had a full head of steam, and someone definitely seemed to be getting an ass chewing.

He chuckled and shook his head as he snatched up his phone from the nightstand and dialed quickly.

“Sine.”

“Hey, man, get dressed and get your ass to my place. The black and whites are on their way, but you’re gonna want to be here.”

Sine groaned. “What happened?”

“You’ll see when you get here. Quinn is hoppin’ mad, though, so watch yourself. I’ll see you in a few.”

“Yeah, I’m on my way.”

Chapter Nine

Strong arms wrapped around her and pulled her into a crushing embrace. “Are you okay?”

Quinn smiled weakly. “I’m fine, Brody. Nothing hurt except my dignity. Who the hell hates me this much?” She looked out of the front window and frowned at the charred remains of the vandalism.

“Maybe it’s just kids, like you said. They can be vicious little beasts.” Sasha wrinkled her nose in distaste. “It could have been worse. I’m just glad it was your grass and not the house.”

Though grateful as well, Quinn still felt violated. Kids or not, they had taken this too far. She couldn’t think of anything she had done to anyone to garner such unwanted attention. Maybe she should have stayed in Virginia.

She glanced over to the corner of the room where Zach and his partner stood, their heads bent together in conversation. Her pulse sped, and a warm, fuzzy feeling settled in her gut. No, she couldn’t regret coming home, not if it meant having Zach in her life.

He looked up and caught her staring. A slow smile spread over his lips, and he winked at her. No matter what happened, they were in this together. She looked around the room and felt her chest swell. Ms. Caroline, Brody, Sean, Sasha—everyone she loved gathered to lend her support and comfort. She couldn’t ask for a better family.

“Perhaps you and Zachary should come stay with me until this mess is dealt with.” Ms. Caroline’s voice floated to her, soft and concerned.

“I don’t know who is doing this, but I will not bring it to your doorstep.” Quinn spoke with conviction. “Thank you, but I will not be

run out of my own house. Besides,” she paused, glancing at her lover, “I have Zach. Who better to protect me?”

Zach wandered over and kissed his mother on top of her head. “Relax, Mamma. I’ll take good care of her.”

“We can stay with you guys for a while,” Brody offered, taking Sean’s hand.

“Certainly,” Sean agreed. “More eyes and ears couldn’t hurt.”

Zach grinned and shook his head. “Thank you, all of you, but we’re fine. It’s just juvenile pranks. We’ll be fine.”

“I don’t think Quinn should be alone during the day while you’re at work,” Sasha spoke up. “Maybe we should take turns sitting with her.”

“I am not a child!” Quinn appreciated their concern, but she didn’t need a babysitter. No one had tried to harm her physically, and she didn’t see the need for all the worry.

“Junebug’s right,” Zach said to her surprise. “You all have your own lives. I love that you feel protective of her, but I don’t think it’s that serious.”

Everyone grumbled about that for a while longer, then slowly began making their way to the door. “Call us if you need anything,” Sean said as he kissed her cheek.

“Yes, anything at all,” Ms. Caroline added.

“I get off work at two tomorrow. I’ll come by, and we can go shopping.” Sasha gave her a brief hug and slipped out the door before Quinn could argue.

“If something happens, and you can’t get in touch with Zach, you call me. Understood?” Brody crossed his arms over his chest and glared at her.

Quinn smiled and nodded. “I’ll be fine, Brody, but thank you.”

He nodded tersely and kissed her forehead. “Go get some sleep. You look like shit.”

She slapped his chest. “Get out,” she grumbled.

He laughed all the way out to his pickup. The asshole.

Quinn turned to find Zach in a deep conversation with his partner again. She didn't want to interrupt, but she felt she had a right to know if they had found anything. She walked up to the pair and stood just a few steps back, waiting patiently for them to notice her.

Sine's head popped up, and he looked startled for a moment before masking his features in a pleasant smile. "Miss Harper. I think we're just about finished here. Did one of the officers take your statement?"

Quinn nodded silently. She didn't trust his Officer Friendly façade. "What did you find?"

Sine's smile widened, fake and forced. "Nothing for you to worry about, Miss Harper. We'll be in touch with you if we do find anything, though."

Quinn stood there, arms akimbo, and glared at him. "You can cut the bullshit, Chris. I'm not some delicate little flower that you need to coddle. Someone set my damn lawn on fire, and I want to know who the fuck it was. If you know something, I suggest you start talking."

"Junebug," Zach began. He sounded condescending, which only served to raise Quinn's hackles further.

"Oh, no, you don't, Zachary Jensen. This happened to me. To *me*," she emphasized, pointing to her chest. "Someone better start talking, or I'm going to the Chief."

Zach sighed and shook his head. "Just another note. That's all."

"What did it say?"

"Same as last time." Sine growled in frustration. "What the hell does it mean?"

"Sometimes, I honestly doubt your credibility as detectives." Quinn huffed in exasperation. "It seems pretty obvious that someone wants me gone."

Sine rolled his eyes. "Yes, funny enough, I gathered that much. I meant why do they want you gone?"

Quinn didn't have a good answer, so she bit her lip and said nothing.

* * * *

She picked at the wilting lettuce on her plate and sighed. Diets sucked. Quinn didn't mind salad...as long as she could smother it in one type of fatty dressing or another. Whoever said lemon juice made an appropriate substitute had obviously lost their taste buds in some bizarre science experiment.

Washing away the tang with her water—something else she hated—she pushed her plate away and flopped back in her chair. She really shouldn't be surprised. Sasha had never been on time for anything. According to her father, she had even been three weeks late for her own birth. Still, she could have at least called.

Quinn dropped money onto the table to cover lunch and gratuity, and gathered her purse to leave. Sasha said to meet her at two-thirty, but the time had come and passed nearly forty minutes before.

Shuffling along the busy sidewalk, Quinn dug through her purse, searching for her cell phone. Maybe Sasha had tried to call, and she hadn't heard the phone ring. Just as she wrapped her fingers around it, someone plowed into her, causing her to stumble several steps backward.

"Oh, crap! Sorry, Quinn. I was in such a hurry to meet you, I didn't even see you just now." Sasha panted. Her cheeks tinted pink, and a fine sheen of sweat coated her forehead. "Sorry I'm late. Are you okay?"

Quinn laughed, tossing her phone back into her purse and hugging her friend. "I'm fine. Where have you been? I've already had lunch. Well, if you can call that crap lunch," she added under her breath.

Sasha waved a hand, looking extremely put out. "Someone miscounted one of their drawers, and we all had to stay until they found the missing money. I tried to call you the minute I left, but you didn't pick up. I thought you might be mad at me."

“No, not mad, just worried. I’m glad everything’s okay. So, where do you want to go?”

“Oh, I saw the cutest shoes in the window at D&S the other day. Can we go look at them?” Sasha bounced on her toes, her hands clasped together like a little girl. Quinn couldn’t possibly say no to such enthusiasm.

“Sounds great! I need to find a good pair of screw-me shoes to go with the dress I bought last week anyway. Did you drive?”

“No, I took the bus.” Sasha wrinkled her nose in distaste. “You wouldn’t believe some of the people that use the public transportation system. Some guy actually grabbed my ass.”

Quinn tried not to giggle, but lost the battle quickly. “Well, it is a very nice ass, honey.” She grabbed Sasha’s hand and led her down the street toward the paid parking lot. “Come on, I’ll drive.”

They walked along, chattering about nothing of importance. Quinn’s cheeks burned from smiling so much. Despite the events of the last week or so, she still couldn’t regret coming home. She loved this place, loved the people, and couldn’t imagine putting down roots anywhere else.

“Oh, shit,” Sasha breathed as she came to a stop, yanking on Quinn to stop her as well. “Call Zach.”

“What? Sasha, what’s wrong? Why do I need to call Zach?” Quinn looked around the nearly empty parking lot, but didn’t see anything out of place. No suspicious persons lurked near the vehicles. In fact, she didn’t see anyone at all.

“Call Zach,” Sasha repeated more insistently. She walked forward slowly, staring in shock.

Quinn followed her gaze and almost choked. Her car, her beloved Highlander, lay in complete ruin. The windows and headlights busted, tires slashed, the body scratched and dented. Bright red letters stood out clearly on the black paint of the hood.

“Leave,” she whispered. “Someone definitely is not happy about me being back.” She didn’t have a clue who it could be though. Other

than Zach and his family, she really hadn't spoken to anyone else in town except a few words here and there.

She dug through her cavern of a purse again and finally came up with her cell phone. She dialed quickly, tapping her toes as she waited for her lover to answer. Two rings and it went to voice mail. *Damn it!*

"Call Brody," Sasha said immediately.

Quinn nodded. She dialed again, breathing out in relief when he answered on the first ring. "Brody, I need your help," she blurted before he could even say hello.

"Quinn? What happened? Where are you?"

"I'm at that paid parking lot down near the circle. Someone vandalized my car." Some of the shock had begun to wear off, and anger quickly took its place. "I don't know who wants me gone so badly, but I'm getting sick of this shit!"

"Calm down, honey." Brody spoke soothingly. "Get out of that lot and go where there are people, then call the police. I'm on my way." He disconnected before Quinn could say anything else. Not that she had anything left to say.

Grabbing Sasha around the elbow, she led her back to the sidewalk and a block down to a little bakery. She called the police, thankful when they told her to remain inside the shop until a squad car arrived.

"How could someone do that in broad daylight without someone calling the cops?" Sasha sounded indignant and disbelieving. Quinn knew the feeling.

"I think a lot of people just mind their own business. No one wants trouble, Sash."

"I'm not saying they had to go in like the Lone Ranger, but they could have at least notified security or something. Don't they have surveillance cameras out there?"

Quinn couldn't help but smile. It felt nice to have someone be angry on her behalf. "I wouldn't imagine they do. We'll just let the police take care of it. Okay?"

Sasha crossed her arms over her chest and huffed. “Where the hell is my brother anyway?”

“Which one?” Quinn smirked.

“You know damn well which one! Zach! Where the hell is Zach?”

“He does have a job, Sash. He can’t be at my beck and call all the time.” She stopped talking and frowned when the bell over the door rang and Brody stepped inside. How had he gotten there so quickly? The police hadn’t even arrived yet. And how did he know where to find her?

Paranoia settled in her gut, and she twisted uncomfortably in her seat. No way would Brody do anything to hurt her. No doubt, he’d have a logical explanation for his timely arrival. Before she could ask, he spoke.

“Quinn, are you okay?” He pulled her into a hug, squeezing the life out of her.

“How did you get here so fast?” she blurted.

“I was just a few streets over when you called.” He blushed and looked away. “So, uh, I hurried over here and checked the shops near the lot. I saw you and Sasha through the window.”

“Brody? Why are you blushing?” Quinn thought he looked kind of cute actually.

“I’m not blushing. It’s probably just from running over here.”

“Uh-huh, right. What were you doing downtown anyway?”

“I was at Bannon’s,” he mumbled. His cheeks burned brighter, and he wouldn’t look at her.

“Bannon Jewelers? What on earth...” She trailed off and started squealing like some psychotic pig. “When are you going to ask him?”

“What? Ask who? What the hell are you talking about?” Sasha jumped into the conversation.

Brody took a deep breath and let it out in a rush. “I’m going to ask Sean to marry me,” he said confidently. “If I can ever find the right ring. Why the hell are there so many?”

Quinn snorted and shook her head. “I think it’s wonderful. Congratulations, honey.”

“Don’t jump the gun. He hasn’t agreed, yet.” Brody looked nervous all over again as he shoved his hands into his pockets.

“He will.” Quinn leaned up and kissed his cheek. “I’ll kick his ass if he doesn’t.”

Brody laughed. “Will you help? I honestly have no idea what I’m doing.”

“Of course.” Brody and Sean were the cutest couple. They made her smile just looking at them.

“You can’t marry a man,” Sasha scoffed. “That’s ridiculous.”

Quinn dropped her face into her hands and groaned. Sasha had been her friend for years, but the woman really needed to stop being such a stuck-up bigot. “Not now, Sash,” she warned. “We have bigger problems than your prejudices right now. I’m going to see if the officers have arrived yet.”

Brody looked at his sister sadly and shook his head before turning back to Quinn. “I’m coming with you.”

Sasha said nothing, but followed behind them.

Chapter Ten

Some days Zach hated his job.

Standing over the body of the runaway teenage girl, he pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. Too many runaway cases ended like this. “Name?” he asked the uniformed officer next to him.

“Michelle Bradford, age sixteen, reported missing two weeks ago,” the man read from a small notepad.

“Overdose?”

“Yes, sir. The lab guys are working on it, but judging from the tracks in her arm, I’d say heroine.” He shook his head and grimaced. “I have a daughter about her age. It makes me sick to think of something like this happening to her.”

“Has anyone notified the parents?” Sine asked from Zach’s other side.

“The Chief is on his way there now. You know how he is.” The officer smiled weakly.

Zach nodded. The Chief took a personal interest in any life lost in his city. If he could, he always insisted on notifying the family personally, especially the parents of children. Zach figured he’d have to live a lot more years to understand why, but he felt grateful he wouldn’t be the one to deliver the bad news.

His phone vibrated in his pocket. Pulling it out, he checked the display and frowned. He had a missed call from Quinn and two from his sister. The caller ID currently displayed Brody’s number. Fear settled in his heart as he answered.

“Brody?” he asked as calmly as he could.

“Hey, man, we’ve been trying to get ahold of you. Are you busy?”

Zach glanced down at the girl again. "You could say that."

"Well, I don't want you to worry, but I think you need to call Quinn when you get a minute. She's talking to the police now, and I won't leave her alone, but I think she'd feel better if she could talk to you." Brody spoke so quickly, Zach could barely understand him.

"Whoa, slow down, man. What's going on? Why is Quinn talking to the police?" Fear turned to panic, and Zach yelled into the phone. "Is she okay? Is she hurt?"

"No, no, she's not hurt. Someone destroyed her car, though."

"Where are you?" Zach turned from his partner and the officer and ran down the alley.

"At the parking lot on Ventura," Brody answered quietly. "Look, she's headed this way. I've got things under control, but I just thought you should know. I gotta go."

"Take her home," Zach ordered. "I'm on my way."

"Is that Zach?" he heard Quinn ask in the background. "Zach," she said into the phone, apparently taking it from his brother.

"Hey, Junebug. Brody's going to take you home, and I'll meet you there. Stay with him. Do not let him out of your sight."

"Zach, I'm fine. Calm down. There is no reason for you to come home. Go keep the city safe. I'll see you when you get home tonight."

"Stay with him," he repeated, sliding into his car. "I'm on my way."

"Zach! This is ridic—"

He ended the call and sped in the direction of the house he shared with the love of his life. Quinn could be as stubborn and independent as she liked, but she wouldn't persuade him. He would never survive if anything happened to her.

Halfway home, his phone rang again. Growling in annoyance, he snatched it up. "What?" he shouted.

"I'm taking Quinn to Mom's," Brody answered.

"What? Why?"

"You'll see," his brother whispered.

Zach scrunched his eyebrows in confusion. “Okay. I’ll meet you at Mom’s place. Stay with her, Brody.”

“You can count on it.”

The strain and worry in his voice set Zach’s heart racing. He tossed his phone in the passenger seat and pushed harder on the gas. He drove directly to the house he shared with Quinn and parked on the curb.

At first glance, everything looked as it should, other than the burnt grass. Exiting the vehicle, his palms began to sweat as he jogged up the stone path to the front door. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end, and shivers raced down his spine.

Someone watched him. He could feel the weight of their gaze like a heavy blanket. Searching one way, then the other, in his peripheral vision, he found no one. Climbing the front steps, he came to a dead halt at the door.

Taped just above the door handle was a Polaroid of Quinn’s car—or what remained of it. Zach shuddered at the destruction. In the white margins at the bottom of the photograph, someone had written two words.

Go Back.

Movement to the left caught his attention, and he whipped around just in time to see someone disappear around the corner of the house. Leaving the offending image taped to the door, Zach rushed down the stairs and sprinted around the house. He slowed, pulling his gun from his shoulder holster and crouching low as he neared the backyard.

Pressing his back flat against the siding, he peeked around the corner, scanning the deck, the yard, and the fence beyond. He cursed a blue streak a mile wide when he found no one. He carefully swept the lawn, checking every nook and cranny and coming up empty.

Holstering his weapon, he made his way back to his car to retrieve his cell phone. He called his partner first. Once satisfied that Sine would be there shortly, he hung up and dialed his brother.

“Hey, man, did you find it?” Brody asked without preamble.

“Yeah, I found it. Are you telling me no one saw anything? In broad fucking daylight in a public parking lot, and no one saw a damn thing?”

“I don’t know what to tell you, bro. That’s kind of your area of expertise. If someone had set it on fire, I could probably tell you something, but not with this.”

Zach ground his teeth together. He didn’t want to take his frustrations out on Brody. “I have to wait until my partner gets here, but I’ll be there as soon as I can.” He paused and took a deep breath. “Thank you for taking care of her.”

“You’d do the same for me,” Brody replied. “I know what you said last night, but this is more than just kid stuff. I don’t think she should be alone.”

“I agree. I’ll talk to Mom and see if we can stay with her until we find out who’s threatening Quinn. Hell, I’ll assign her a damn bodyguard if I have to,” Zach growled.

Brody chuckled. “I’m sure that will go over well.”

No doubt, Quinn would throw a raging hissy fit. Zach didn’t much care. Besides, he had ways of persuading the beauty. “Let me deal with Quinn.”

* * * *

“Absolutely not! I do not need a bodyguard. I’ve already let some psycho run me out of my own house.” Quinn breathed heavily, pacing the room. “You are being completely absurd!”

“It’s just for a little while, Junebug. We’ll find out who’s doing this, and everything can go back to normal. Please?” Zach stepped in front of her, blocking her path and wrapping his arms around her. “For me?”

She couldn’t hold her glare when he bent and placed a sweet kiss on her lips. “I love you, baby. I can’t do my job if I’m worrying about you all the time.”

“No,” she breathed as he trailed kisses along her jaw and down her throat. She would not let him distract her. “I agreed to stay here with your mother, but I draw the line at a bodyguard.” Three days she had spent at Ms. Caroline’s to put Zach’s mind at ease, but she wanted to go home.

Zach sighed and pulled away. He ran his hands through his already disheveled hair as he took over Quinn’s pacing. “Fine, then you’re under house arrest until further notice. Have you watched the news or read the statistics on stalkers? Do you realize how many of those cases end violently?”

She shook her head. He just didn’t get it. “Zach, you can’t live your life by statistics and news reports. Things don’t always go the way we plan, but you can’t sit around and worry that something bad will happen. That’s why it’s called life. It’s meant to be *lived*! Happy endings don’t just fall in your lap like the fairy tales say. You have to go out and find it, grab it with both hands, and never let go.”

She walked to her detective and caressed his cheek lovingly. “You have to live life out loud. Open up your heart and let the joy ring from the depths of your soul. Nothing has ever been accomplished by sitting on the sidelines and being a spectator.”

Zach looked at her for a long time before finally shaking his head. “Very profound, but hear this out loud, Quinn Harper. You are under house arrest until either you agree to a bodyguard, or we catch this creep. End of discussion.”

“Ugh! Fine!” Quinn threw her hands up and marched out of the room. “I hope you enjoy the couch, Detective Jensen!”

* * * *

A week passed with Quinn traveling no further from the house than the back deck. Zach still slept on the sofa in the den, and they had spoken no more than a handful of words to each other in the past six days.

The silver lining to her storm cloud came in the form of peace from her malicious admirer. Nothing had been destroyed, no gifts, no packages, no photos, phone calls, or burning vulgarity. A small thing to be thankful for, but with her miserable mood, she didn't feel the right to be choosy.

Though she saw him every day, she missed Zach. She missed the ease and friendship they usually shared. She missed the warmth of his arms, the fire in his kiss. She missed his strong body wrapped around her in sleep, the secret looks they shared, and the inside jokes that made his face light up with humor.

Pride be damned, the time had come for one of them to apologize. If that meant she remained under confinement or let some Neanderthal follow her around, then so be it. She needed her best friend back.

Quinn wandered into the living room, intending to find a movie to occupy her time until Zach came home from work. Before she made it to the sofa, the front door burst open and the man himself came barreling inside. He ran to her, scooping her up in his arms and crushing her so tightly she had trouble breathing.

"Are you okay? What happened?" He released her, pushing her back and shaking her roughly. "Tell me what happened, Quinn." He ran his hands over her frantically, his eyes following suit. "Are you hurt? Talk to me, damn it!"

"I'm fine. What the hell, Zach? Why are you even home?" Her lover had obviously lost his mind.

"Brody called and said I needed to come here immediately." Zach still touched her everywhere he could, looking her over with a critical eye. "You're okay?"

"I'm completely fine," she said calmly. "Why would Brody tell you to come here?"

Before either of them could comment on the man's odd behavior, the door flew open again, and Brody rushed inside, followed by a sulky looking Sasha.

“He said yes!” Brody’s face split into a radiant grin. He rushed over and picked Quinn up, much as Zach had, spinning her in circles. “Sean said yes! We’re getting married!”

Quinn laughed, hugging her friend as he continued to twirl her in circles. “Congratulations! I’m so happy for you, Brody!”

“This was the big goddamn emergency?” Zach growled. “You scared ten fucking years off my life, you little prick.”

Brody ignored his outrage. He set Quinn on her feet and grabbed his brother, hugging him hard. “I’m getting married!” he sang.

Zach’s face slowly lost the menacing look, and he smiled as well. “Congratulations, brother.” He thumped Brody on the back and kissed the top of his head. “I’m not wearing a tux, though,” he added seriously.

“Have you all lost your minds?” Sasha yelled from the doorway. “He can’t marry a man! Zach, talk some sense into him. This has gone on long enough, and I am not about to let you throw your life away!”

The room went unnaturally silent. Quinn held her breath, looking between Sasha and Brody, waiting for the explosion. She expected Brody to yell and rage, but he just looked...sad. He turned slowly to Sasha and shook his head.

“I love him, Sash. I’m going to marry him. I’m sorry if you can’t accept that, but you can’t change my mind. I want to be with him, only him, forever. I don’t care what you or anyone else thinks. It’s what makes me happy.”

Sasha launched herself across the room, snarling like a wild animal. “Then you are no brother of mine, Brody Jensen. If you want to ruin everything by shacking up with some...some fucking queer, then you’re dead to me!”

“Sasha,” Quinn spoke softly. Her heart broke for Brody, but anger flared at Sasha’s hateful words.

“Fuck you,” Sasha snarled at her. “This is all your fucking fault to begin with. If you had just been enough of a woman for him, then he wouldn’t have gone off and fucked some fag!”

She turned to Brody and sneered. "So, tell me, big brother, do you bend over and take it in the ass? Are you the woman in this *relationship*?"

"We are both very much men. That's why they call us gay, because we don't like *cunts*." He spat the last word, looking her in the eye pointedly.

"I knew it," she scoffed. "You're the bitch."

Without conscious decision, Quinn reached out and slapped Sasha across the face with an open palm. "That's enough," she said harshly. "Get out."

Sasha glared at her, holding her hand to her reddening cheek. "You can't kick me out. You don't even belong here. This is my mother's house, and I will stay as long as I fucking please!"

"Get out," came a soft voice from behind them. Quinn whirled around, shocked and embarrassed, to find Ms. Caroline standing there.

"What?" Sasha looked appalled. "You're taking her side?"

"I'm taking no one's side." Ms. Caroline spoke calmly as if they were discussing the news. "As you said, this is my house, and I will not tolerate such rudeness. You were raised better than that, Sasha Jensen. I should know." She dipped her head slightly. "You are no longer welcome in my home until you can act like a lady instead of a beast."

"I hate you all," Sasha said coldly. "All of you." She turned on her heel, marching to the front door and out into the night.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Caroline. I didn't mean to hit her. I just got so angry." Quinn tried to defend herself.

"Not to worry, child. Had you not done it, I would have slapped her myself. I have never heard such foulness from a lady before." She stuck her nose in the air and sniffed indignantly. Quinn had the almost uncontrollable urge to giggle.

Ms. Caroline held out her arms and wiggled her fingers for Brody to come to her. Wrapping her arms around her son, she kissed his

cheek and sighed. “Congratulations, Brody. I am very happy for you and Sean. He’s a wonderful man, and I hope you two have many happy years together. He is always welcome in this house.”

Brody’s shoulders heaved, and he sounded shaky. “Thank you, Momma.” Quinn’s chest ached when his voice broke twice. “I love you.”

“As I love you, son. If he makes you happy, I can’t ask for more than that.”

Chapter Eleven

So many emotions warred inside Zach, he couldn't settle on one. Anger at Sasha's cruel words, happiness for his brother, frustration that they still had no leads on Quinn's case, and pride in his girl for standing up to his sister's deplorable behavior. Pushing away the things he couldn't do anything about, he wrapped Quinn up in his arms and buried his face in her hair.

Oh, he had missed this. "I don't want to fight anymore," he whispered. "Let me come to bed."

Quinn clung to him, nuzzling against his neck, her sweet breath fanning against his skin. "I don't want to fight either. Take me home, Zach."

He closed his eyes and groaned. Why did she always have to be so damn stubborn? "We can't go home, Junebug. Not yet. Please, listen to me. I need you to be somewhere safe, baby."

Quinn tightened her hold around his waist and kissed his neck. "You're my home, Zach. Wherever you are, that's my home."

Zach melted at her words. He felt exactly the same way. Holding Quinn, loving her, just being near her, felt like coming home. Every vile and horrendous thing he saw at work, every injustice and misfortune, slipped away when he saw her. Everything disappeared, and he could finally breathe, really and truly breathe.

"Bed," he demanded. He needed to feel her, touch her, make love to her, to renew his claim on her. He just plain needed her.

"Zach," Quinn giggled breathlessly, "it's three in the afternoon. Don't you need to go back to work?"

He closed his eyes and pouted in frustration. “Not fair,” he whined.

Quinn giggled again, the sound sending lightning bolts of pure lust zipping down his spine to burn in his groin. He would never make it through the next three hours.

He glared at his brother. “I’m so going to get you back for this,” he threatened.

Brody didn’t look the least bit sorry. He just smiled and winked. “I don’t even want to hear it. I just got engaged, and my man had to go back to work. He’s going over quarterly reports, dude. I’ll be lucky if I get to see him before midnight!”

“Aw, poor Brody,” Quinn teased. “You didn’t even get an engagement blow job.”

Ms. Caroline squeaked, placing her hands over her ears and shaking her head. “No, no, no,” she mumbled. “My babies are virgins.” Then she turned and practically ran from the room.

Everyone burst into laughter. “Nice, Quinn,” Brody said through his chuckles. “You completely scandalized my mom!”

Zach could feel the heat radiating from her cheeks. “Oops,” she whispered.

She looked so adorable, so completely edible. He cupped her chin, tilting her face up to his view, and claimed her luscious lips. He kept the kiss brief, but made sure to give her a preview of things to come. “Hold that thought,” he panted when he pulled away. “I’ll be back soon.” He kissed her again, a little longer than the first time, and jerked away with a groan. “I gotta go, baby.”

Quinn looked dazed as she nodded her understanding. “I’ll be waiting,” she whispered. The husky quality of her voice almost made Zach decide to beg off work and spend the rest of the afternoon in bed with her. He probably would have if his phone hadn’t chosen that exact moment to ring.

He pecked Quinn on the forehead and flipped his brother off. Pulling his cell phone from his pocket, he pressed it to his ear as he hurried out the door.

“Jensen.”

“Houston, we have a problem.”

Zach climbed into his sedan and slammed the door. “Where am I headed?” he asked as he started the engine and pulled away from the curb.

“Your house, man,” Sine replied. Zach could hear yelling in the background.

“What? What the hell?” Zach executed a U-turn in the middle of the street and sped toward home. “Did someone just say fire? There’s another fire?”

“I’d say. You’ve got a bonfire in the backyard. The kitchen door was wide open with no signs of forced entry. I looked around, and I’ll need you to confirm, but it looks like only Quinn’s stuff found its way to the burn pile.”

“Motherfucker,” Zach growled. “Anything else?”

“No, no note this time,” Sine answered, interpreting his question. “I’d say that fire is a pretty big statement, though.”

No shit. He groaned internally at the thought of having to tell Quinn. Damn, and he’d really been looking forward to picking up their little interlude where they had left off, too.

* * * *

It took every ounce of self-control in Quinn’s limited reserves not to stomp, scream, and cry like a child. “Why? I haven’t hurt anyone!” Okay, well two out of three wasn’t bad.

She felt justified, though. Dead rats, her car demolished, and a huge bonfire in her backyard comprised of years of memories. “Do you know anything? Have any suspects?”

Zach looked her in the eye while he shook his head. “They found the lot attendant in his booth, passed out. Someone had beaned him over the head pretty good. All he saw before he passed out was someone in jeans and a hooded sweatshirt. We have traffic cams from the street, but they only show the front half of the lot.” He huffed at that.

“None of the neighbors found it odd that someone was piling all of my shit in the backyard?” Quinn stomped her foot and crossed her arms over her chest. Okay, well at least she wasn’t crying...yet.

“It was the middle of the afternoon. All of the neighbors were at work. I mean, who has the balls to do something like that in broad daylight, not once, but twice?” Zach yanked at his hair as though if he pulled hard enough, the answer would suddenly burst from his skull. “Who have you talked to since you’ve been home?”

“You, your family, your partner, and Sean,” Quinn rambled, ticking them off her on her fingers. “Other than that, no one important. Just snatches of conversations with bank tellers, the realtor, and people like that.”

Zach grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. “Quinn, you have to think!” Though he spoke harshly, she could see the fear and frustration in his eyes. “Who would want you gone? Who doesn’t want you back in Riverton?”

“I. Don’t. Know!” she screamed in his face. “I never had a lot of friends here, but no one exactly hated me either. You’re the detective! You figure it out!”

“Quinn June Harper, I swear to G—”

“What? You’re going to do what?” Quinn cut off his threat. “I don’t know what you want me to tell you, Zach. I don’t know anyone that would want me to leave. You’re being a complete ass!” She jerked away and put her hands on her hips. “I knocked over a display of toilet paper at the supermarket a couple of weeks ago. Maybe it’s the stock boy.”

Zach glared at her, his nose crinkling, and his lip pulling up over his teeth. “Why can’t you take anything seriously? This isn’t a fucking game, Quinn!” He grabbed his jacket from the back of the sofa and marched toward the door.

“Where the hell are you going?”

“Out!” he snapped over his shoulder. He stepped through the door and slammed it closed behind him.

Quinn hesitated for a nanosecond before striding across the room and wrenching open the door. “Zachary Jensen, you get your ass back here!”

He didn’t even pause, but continued across the front lawn. Quinn flew down the steps and, before she could think better of it, launched herself at her lover, tackling him to the ground. They rolled in the grass until Quinn gained the upper hand and pinned Zach beneath her.

“You don’t just walk out when things don’t go your way. You are acting like a toddler.”

Zach propped himself on his elbows and looked up at her. His dark hair shimmered in the moonlight, and she could see the lunar orb reflected in his brilliant blue eyes. His breaths came in shallow pants, and she could feel the hard mound between his legs pressing against her ass.

“Zach?”

He sat up suddenly, flipping her beneath him and hovering over her body. “You drive me crazy. Sometimes I can’t decide if I want to strangle you or fuck you into tomorrow.”

Quinn’s libido shifted into overdrive, and she stared at him with wide eyes. Her nipples hardened instantly, perking up and pushing against her thin sweater. A delicious heat spread through her body, slicking her pussy and robbing the moisture from her mouth.

“If you want to say no, now would be a good time.” His voice flowed over her, low, guttural, and full of need.

She shivered in anticipation as desire gripped her body and left her struggling to pull in air to her lungs. His fingers fumbled with the

button on her slacks, but he didn't make much progress. With a growl of frustration, he gripped the waistband and yanked roughly, popping the button off and sliding her zipper down in one jerky movement.

Quinn writhed beneath her lover, pulling the hem of his shirt from his pants and gliding her hands along the corrugated expanse of his rippled stomach. Arching her hips, she helped him slide her pants to her ankles, where he ripped them away and cast them to the side.

Her panties were the next to go, and she hissed when the cold, dew-covered grass pressed against her heated flesh. "Hurry." She couldn't wait much longer. The pressure, the heat, the need raged through her body until she felt she would combust with it.

Zach slammed his mouth down on hers, swallowing her moan of pleasure, thrusting his tongue in wildly and laying claim to her. His calloused fingers found her aching entrance, and he pushed in roughly with two fingers, drawing a cry from her swollen lips.

He pumped his fingers in and out of her, using his thumb to rub against her pulsing clit. Quinn couldn't breathe. She couldn't think. She dropped back to the ground, whipping her head from side to side and thrusting down against his fingers.

Her orgasm took her by surprise, barreling through her and leaving her dizzy and disoriented. When she finally came back to her senses, Quinn found herself on her hands and knees, the side of her face pressed against the wet grass, and Zach pushing between her legs.

The flared crown of his prick nudged her greedy pussy, glided along her slippery lips and back before he rammed in forcefully, pushing deep inside her clenching cunt.

Quinn's head started to spin again as she braced herself on one hand and used the other to reach between her spread thighs to massage the swollen ball of flesh there. She bucked and jerked, moaning out Zach's name as his turgid shaft plunged into her repeatedly.

His hold on her hips was bruising, and he pulled her back against him with each demanding stroke. “Are you going to come for me again, baby?” His voice was so raw, so gravelly, he sounded more animal than man. “Do you want it harder?” He drove into her punishingly as he spoke. “Do you want more? Want me to come? To lose my load inside this hot pussy?”

“Yes!” Quinn screamed her climax, her muscles clamping down around the pulsing cock inside her as a firestorm began in her belly and spread to her limbs.

“Oh, shit! Love the way that pussy grabs my cock.” Zach thrust into her twice more, before pushing as deeply as he could inside her silky depths, and growled his release.

Quinn slumped forward in the grass, content, sated, and exhausted. She grunted when her movement unseated her lover, and he fell on top of her, forcing the breath from her lungs. He quickly rolled to her side, one hand on his chest, staring up at the moon with a satisfied smile.

“Oh, my God!”

Quinn jerked upright, whirling around to face the voice that didn’t belong to her man. She tucked her legs under her, pulling at her sweater to cover her naked lap. “Brody! What the hell are you doing here?”

Brody slapped his hands over his eyes like a little boy and whirled around quickly. “What the hell are you doing fucking in the front yard? Aren’t there public decency laws?” He whimpered a little as a shudder rippled through his body.

“My brother’s naked ass, and a woman’s vagina. I’m never going to be right again.”

Quinn started to laugh and couldn’t stop. She fell back against Zach’s chest, rocking from side to side, clutching her ribs. She looked up her detective and grinned broadly. “Oops,” she mouthed.

“Will you please put some clothes on?” Brody whined. “I think I’m going to need therapy.”

“Oh, relax. It’s just a little pussy.” Zach laughed as he pushed to his feet, not bothering to hide his nudity. He held out a hand to Quinn and pulled her up as well. They quickly dressed and slipped quietly into the house, leaving Brody still standing in the yard with his back to them.

Chapter Twelve

“Hey, Chris,” Quinn welcomed the man, smiling brightly as she stepped aside to let him in the front door. “Zach’s in the shower, but he should be out in a minute.”

Zach’s partner waved his hand in casual dismissal, and Quinn frowned at the white gauze wrapped around it. “What did you do?”

She reached for his hand, but he held it out of reach, pushing it into the pocket of his trench coat. “Oh, I just burned it. It’s nothing big.”

Moisture coated her palms, and she took a step away from the detective. “Oh, how did you do that?” She hoped she sounded concerned instead of accusatory.

“Candle.”

Quinn nodded and took another discreet step backward. “Well, I hope it heals quickly. Is that your shooting hand?”

Sine frowned and shook his head. “No, I’m right-handed.”

The information did nothing to calm Quinn’s sudden fear. “Hey, I meant to ask Zach, did the witness give a description of the guy that smashed up my car?”

Sine stepped closer to her, pushing his way into the room. “Just that he was wearing a black hooded sweatshirt, jeans, and sunglasses. The witness did say he looked smaller than average.” He smiled depreciatively. “A shrimp like me, I guess.”

Quinn nodded her head numbly. “I see. Well, I guess that doesn’t really help you narrow down any suspects.”

“Unfortunately, no. Don’t worry though, we’ll find out who’s doing this to you, Quinn. I know Zach’s going crazy over the whole

thing. You're important to him, so you're important to me as well." He leered at her, taking a deliberate step in her direction.

Quinn jumped like a startled rabbit. "Uh, I'm going to go see if Zach is out of the shower yet. Have a seat. I'll be right back." She turned and hurried out of the room, her heart racing and her legs trembling.

It didn't mean anything. Just because he fit a vague description, had a recent burn on his hand, and seemed a little more friendly than necessary didn't mean anything. Zach had been with Sine when Brody called him from the parking lot, so he couldn't have done those things to her SUV.

See, she could be logical.

Sine had been the one to call Zach about the fire in her backyard last week though. The first one on the scene, according to the report. Still, she hadn't even met the man when her first little gift arrived. On the other hand, he'd arrived a little too quickly when Zach called him about the first fire.

Quinn argued with herself all the way down the hall and into her bedroom. Zach looked over his shoulder at her and grinned when she stepped into the room. He finished buttoning his light blue shirt and reached for his tie. His shirt pulled tight across his shoulders, showcasing the rippling muscles beneath and causing Quinn's mouth to water.

His dark hair curled at the ends, still damp from his shower, and the scent of his shampoo wafted across the room. Quinn breathed in deeply, letting the air out on a sigh. Damn, she loved that man.

"Chris is here," she said neutrally. She had no facts to base her suspicions on, and she wouldn't worry Zach with her paranoid delusions. Chris Sine was one of the good guys.

Zach adjusted his tie as he walked across the room and kissed her chastely. "Thanks, baby."

Quinn smiled and followed him back down the hallway to the living room where Sine waited. She felt foolish and ridiculous for

thinking badly about the man. Besides, what reason would he possibly have for wanting her to leave town?

Sine stood when they walked into the room. His eyes softened and glazed as they zeroed in on Zach, his tongue darting out to lick his lips. "Zach."

Quinn didn't think she imagined the subtle longing in that one word. She watched Zach clap the man on the shoulder, and Sine shivered under the touch. "Uh, Zach, can I speak to you in the kitchen for a minute?"

Zach looked at her in confusion, but nodded his head, trailing after her. She turned immediately, facing her lover, her fingers knotted together over her stomach.

"Is there something going on with you and Chris?"

Zach's eyes widened and jerked away as if she had slapped him. "What?"

"Zach, he looks at you funny." Quinn kept her voice low but urgent. "Is he gay?"

Zach looked more shocked with every word out of her mouth. "Junebug, I'm straight as an arrow, and even if I did lean that way, you're it for me, baby. I don't want anyone else. You have nothing to worry about."

Quinn bit her bottom lip and nodded. "Okay, but be careful. I'm serious. You didn't see the way his eyes went all soft and dreamy when you walked into the room?"

Zach's brows drew together, and he frowned, shaking his head. "Quinn, you're being silly. He's my partner. We're close. We have to be in this line of work. He depends on me to have his back and keep him alive. That's all."

"I get it." She didn't, but what else could she say? "Just don't be surprised if he tries to hit on you."

Zach chuckled and kissed her forehead. "Stop it. I have a meeting in ten minutes, so I need to get going. I'll see you tonight." He kissed her one last time and hurried out of the room.

Quinn sighed in defeat and shuffled toward the coffeepot. “Men,” she mumbled under her breath.

* * * *

Quinn’s warning crept into his subconscious, and Zach found himself watching his partner more closely over the next few days. He didn’t see the looks Quinn mentioned or any other hint of attraction from the man.

He also didn’t detect signs of Sine’s sexual preference either. Not that it mattered. Zach wasn’t a homophobe.

He sat up in his chair and scratched the back of his neck. He couldn’t let his girl’s paranoia affect his judgment. He depended on his partner as much as Sine relied on him. They were a unit, a team, and there could be no disquiet between them.

“Hey, man, can I ask you something?” He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his desk.

Sine glanced up at him, then returned to his paperwork. “Sure. What’s up?”

“Are you gay?” Oh, hell, he hadn’t meant to just blurt it out like that, but really, he couldn’t think of a way to finesse the question.

Sine set his pencil down on his desk and took his time looking up at Zach. “Why do you ask?”

“Look, I don’t care, and I have no problem with it if you are, I just...well...” Zach trailed off, feeling like a complete idiot.

“Are you coming on to me, Detective?” Sine smiled, giving him a wink, and Zach’s insides unknotted a little. His partner sighed and dipped his head. “Yeah, I like men, almost as much as I like women.”

“So, you’re bisexual?”

“If you need to label it.” Sine shrugged. “I just think of myself as an equal opportunity lover.”

The next question weighing on his mind was a little harder to formulate. “So, uh, well,” Zach stammered. “Do you...I mean...oh,

hell.” He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “Are you attracted to me?”

“Yes, very much so.” Sine met him face on, answering without hesitation. “Is that going to be a problem?”

Zach shook his head. Damn, Quinn had good instincts. “Not as long as you realize that I got a girl at home that would skin me alive if I even thought about stepping out on her.”

Sine chuckled softly. “Yeah, there is that little problem.”

Problem?

“Excuse me?”

“Well, I certainly wouldn’t want to compete with Quinn. She’s a regular hellcat. She may not be around forever, though.” He winked again and went back to his paperwork.

Though spoken lightly, the statement sounded a little too ominous for Zach’s peace of mind. His thoughts spun out of control, conjuring all kinds of meanings for the simple sentence. Before he could decide on any one theory, his cell phone rang.

Thankful for the interruption to his less than kind thoughts about his partner, Zach grabbed his phone from the desk and flipped it open. “Jensen.”

“He’s gone! Zach, he’s fucking gone! He didn’t come home from work, but they said he left hours ago. I can’t find him anywhere. I’ve called him a hundred times, but it keeps going to voice mail. You gotta help me!”

“Brody, calm down. I can barely understand you. Who’s missing?”

“Sean!” Brody screamed.

“Brody, listen to me. He’s been gone, what, a couple of hours at the most? Maybe he went for a drink or something.” Zach tried to calm his brother, to inject some kind of reason into their conversation.

“No. I know him. He wouldn’t do that without telling me. He wouldn’t have his cell phone turned off either.” Brody sounded so certain, so convinced, it broke Zach’s heart to ask his next question.

“Could he be seeing someone behind your back?”

“Definitely not.” Brody didn’t even sound angry, just worried about his lover. “You have to help me find him, Zach. Please.”

The soft plea crumbled Zach’s resistance. “I’m on my way. Don’t leave the house, and call me if he comes home or calls.”

“Thank you.”

Zach closed his phone and squeezed his eyes together. Sean had better be in some serious trouble, or Zach was going to beat him bloody for causing his brother to worry. “I gotta go. Family emergency,” he told his partner.

Sine looked at him and grimaced. “I heard some of it. Do you need my help? I have something I need to do when I’m finished here, but I could meet you afterwards.”

Zach felt like an ass for his earlier flicker of suspicion. “Naw. I appreciate it, but I got this. Do what you gotta do, and I’ll see you tomorrow, man.”

He grabbed his coat, threw it over his arm, and hustled out of the precinct. Maybe he should swing by the liquor store. From the panic in Brody’s voice, he had a feeling it was going to be a long night.

Chapter Thirteen

Quinn paced Brody's living room, wringing her hands together and shaking with anxiety. Zach continued to interrogate his brother, asking the same questions repeatedly until Quinn wanted to slap him.

"Zach, how is any of this helping?" she snapped. "You should be out there looking for him!"

"I would if I knew where to begin. Junebug, I know you're upset, but I'm doing my best here."

Quinn deflated, her shoulders sagging as she scooted around the sofa and plopped into her lover's lap. She kissed his jaw and snuggled in against his chest. "I know. I'm sorry. I'm just so worried about him."

Brody stared at the floor, his eyes watery but dazed. Dark circles outlined the red puffiness, and he clasped his fingers together so tightly, his knuckles had turned white. "I called his brother, his parents, his friends, anyone that might have seen him. No one knows where he is." He spoke in a soft monotone, as if his very soul had died. "He should have been home six hours ago."

Quinn sniffled against Zach's throat. Brody's lost appearance, the flatness of his voice, shattered her heart. She could only imagine what he felt. Easing out of Zach's lap, she wrapped her arms around her friend and squeezed him firmly. "We're going to find him, honey."

Brody broke down, twining his arms around her waist and burying his face into her neck. He cried quiet, broken sobs. His shoulders shook, and his chest heaved with every shallow intake of breath. "I can't lose him."

Quinn stroked his hair, smoothing her other hand down his spine in comfort. “We’re going to find him,” she repeated with more conviction. “Everything is going to be okay. You’ll see.”

Zach rose from his seat and moved to sit on the other side of his brother. He pulled them both into his arm, lending his comfort to the group hug. “I’ll do everything I can to find him, little brother.”

A horn blared, and tires screeched against the asphalt in front of the house. Quinn jerked out of the embrace and shot to her feet like a jack-in-the-box. Zach moved quickly as well, rising from the sofa and hustling to the front door.

He stepped to one side of the small glass triangle on the door and pushed the curtain aside an inch or so. Quinn saw his face pale, his jaw muscles twitch, and his hand jerk toward the revolver on his hip.

“Zach? What is it?”

“Stay here, and keep away from the windows.” He eased open the door, peering around the frame before pulling his weapon and stepping out into the night.

Quinn moved slowly, cautiously, to the open door, and peeked out. Zach knelt on the ground near the curb, his hands hovering over...something. “Zach?”

“Call 911,” he answered. His voice floated across the night breeze, strained and wary.

“Zach? What’s going on? What is that?” She started to step onto the porch, but Zach turned and froze her in place with his piercing glare. Even in the dark, she could see the anger in his eyes.

“Call 911! We need an ambulance!”

Quinn jumped at the vehemence in his voice and hurriedly scrambled for the phone in her pocket.

“What’s happening?” Brody pushed past her, shaking off her hand when she tried to stop him. “Zach? What are you—Oh, God!” He launched himself from the porch and sprinted across the small patch of grass to his brother. “No, no, no!”

The panic, the desolation, the absolute heartbreak in his voice raised goose bumps on Quinn's skin. She spoke quickly to the 911 dispatcher, giving the lady Brody's address and requesting they send an ambulance immediately.

After disconnecting with the operator, she took a hesitant step toward the steps. Her pulse raced, and her head swam. Zach turned to her again, throwing his hands up in warning. "Stay there, Quinn."

He moved to the side, and Quinn's next breath lodged in her throat when she saw the clear outline of a prone body on the ground. "Is that...is that Sean?"

She leapt down the remaining steps and threw herself across the lawn, dropping to her knees beside Brody. The sight that met her made her stomach roll and tears bead in the corners of her eyes.

Sean lay crumpled on his side. Drying blood splattered his naked torso where it had run from his face—a face so swollen and battered that Quinn barely recognized the handsome man. His eyes were mere slits, his cheeks and jaw, puffy and bruised. His nose jutted out at an awkward angle, his lips split and cracked.

One arm twisted beneath him, but the other rested over the curb. Blood dripped from the crushed hand, pooling beneath it on the sidewalk. The top of his hand looked swollen to twice its normal size, and his fingers bent in unnatural arcs. All except the pinky—which had been removed completely below the second knuckle.

Quinn clutched at her midsection, turning and crawling to the grass, where she expelled the contents of her stomach. She had never seen anything so gruesome or heinous in her life. Her stomach convulsed painfully, as she heaved around the sobs that bubbled up and seared her throat.

She didn't know what to say, couldn't form words even if she did. Thankfully, sirens blared in the distance, screaming as they moved closer. The ambulance arrived first, followed closely by a Riverton PD patrol car.

A lot of yelling, movement, and general commotion followed. Just as the EMTs were loading Sean into the back of the ambulance, a nondescript sedan skidded to a stop along the curb in the opposite direction. Detective Sine pushed out of the driver's side door and trotted across the street to them.

Quinn eyed him suspiciously. He wore jeans and a sweatshirt, and his hair still looked damp from a recent shower. She knew Zach hadn't called him, so how had he found out so quickly? She continued to watch him as he rushed over to her lover and began talking, gesturing toward Sean.

He waved his bandaged hand around in animation, but his right hand, he kept tucked inside the pocket of his jeans. Travelling further down his body, she frowned at the steel-toed boots.

Glancing back and forth between the marks on Sean's ruined hand and the detective's shoes, she rose silently and marched over to him. Without a word, she gripped his wrist and jerked his hand from his pocket.

"Hey!" He tried to pull away from her, but she held tightly, glaring at the bruises and swelling, the recent cut that trailed between the first and second knuckles.

"This looks painful. What did you do to it?"

"I had a little run-in with an old friend," he answered coldly.

"Your face looks fine."

"Yeah, it does."

"Not for long." Quinn doubled up her fist and punched him square in the jaw. She would have continued her assault, but Zach's arms wrapped around her waist, pulling her away from the man she so desperately wanted to inflict pain on.

"Why, Chris? One Jensen brother wasn't enough for you? You want them both? Sean didn't do anything to you, you sick son-of-a-bitch!" She kicked and flailed, her arms stretched and hands clawing to get to the detective.

“Quinn! What the hell is wrong with you?” Zach struggled to hold on to her, pulling her further away.

“Zach cares about you, so he doesn’t see it. I know what you are though. You’re a fucking monster, and I’ll make sure you pay for this!”

Sine stared at her, pressing his lips into a thin line, and said nothing.

“Quinn, stop it!” Zach moved his hold to secure her arms to her sides.

“Look at his boots, Zach! Look at the impressions on Sean’s hand. His knuckles are all banged up, and his other hand just happened to get burned the same day all my stuff was set on fire. It can’t all be coincidence.” She babbled quickly, pleading for Zach to see reason. “He did this!”

Brody came around the back of the ambulance just as Quinn shouted her accusation. His eyes snapped to Sine, and she saw his intentions a second before he dove at the detective and tackled him to the ground. “I’ll fucking kill you!”

The two men grappled on the ground, rolling and grunting. Sounds of skin slapping against skin and Brody’s continued threats rent the air.

“Oh, for the love of God!” Zach pushed Quinn behind him and glared at her. “Don’t move.” He reached the scuffling pair in two long strides, grabbing his partner around the waist and lifting him off of Brody. He tossed him to the side to land on his ass and stood between them, his arms spread and hands held up.

“Enough!” He looked at his brother. “Brody, go with Sean. I’ll meet you at the hospital.” Without waiting to see if Brody would comply with his order, he turned to Sine. “I’m sorry, man, but I’m going to need those boots, and you’re going to come with me to the station.”

Brody looked murderous as he stomped to the cab of the ambulance and crawled inside. Sine simply looked resigned. He

nodded his head slowly, his eyes never leaving Zach's. "Should I ride with you?"

Zach peeked over his shoulder at Quinn, and she felt her gut tighten at the disappointment in his eyes. "Yeah, I think so."

Chapter Fourteen

“You want to tell me what happened to your hand?” Zach sat a cup of coffee in front of his partner and took a seat across the table.

Sine sighed and shook his head, ignoring the Styrofoam cup. “My ex-boyfriend came by, and we got into it. I got pissed and punched the doorframe.”

“Can this ex confirm that?”

“If you can find him.”

Zach pushed a notepad and pen toward the man. “Write down his info, and I’ll track him down.” He waited until Sine began to scribble before speaking again. “So, is that the thing you had to do after your shift ended?”

Sine dipped his head in affirmation.

“Uh-huh, so how did you get to the scene so quickly? Quinn couldn’t have placed that call to 911 more than fifteen minutes before you arrived.”

“I didn’t know anything about the call. I was headed over there to see if you needed my help to find your brother’s lover.” Everything he said sounded plausible and convincing, but something niggled at the back of Zach’s mind.

“And the burn on your other hand?”

“Burned it on a candle,” Sine said evasively.

Zach narrowed his eyes. “Would that have anything to do with your ex as well?”

Sine looked away, not meeting his eyes.

“If there’s something you aren’t saying, you need to come clean with me.”

Sine glared at him and shook his head once. “How would I have had time to drive by, dump Sean’s body on the curb, make it home, shower and change, and then drive back?”

“How did you know Sean was dumped on the curb? He was already loaded into the ambulance when you showed up.”

“I guess I just assumed,” Sine answered quietly. “What could I possibly gain from hurting Sean? I don’t even know him. I only met your brother that one time. If you ask me, it looks like someone has it out for the Jensen brothers.”

Zach shook his head. “I agree that the attack on Sean is related to the threats against Quinn, but no one has tried to hurt me or my brother.”

“Then maybe someone has it *bad* for you two.” Sine took a sip of his coffee and grimaced. “It wasn’t me, man. I swear to you.”

Zach didn’t know what to believe. The circumstances, the coincidences, were suspicious, but no solid evidence pointed toward his partner. He didn’t have the tingling in his gut or the alarm bells ringing in his head. All of his instincts said the man was innocent.

Still, people’s lives were at stake. He couldn’t just dismiss Sine as a suspect on a hunch. The detective’s statement finally sank in, and Zach’s head snapped up. “What do you mean? You think someone wants Quinn and Sean out of the way so they can have me and Brody?”

Sine shrugged. “It’s the only thing that fits. You said yourself that Quinn doesn’t really know anyone around here. No one has reason to want her gone, unless they want her out of the way.”

Zach shook his head. The entire idea seemed too ludicrous to contemplate. This was real life, not prime-time drama.

Sine looked at him expectantly. “Can you think of anyone? Someone you dated, someone that became unusually attached?”

Zach opened his mouth to deny any such woman existed, but stopped. “Right after I came back, Quinn took me to this little diner by the hospital. There was a bit of an altercation with an old college

girlfriend.” He scratched his temple. “Lucy Bennett, but she doesn’t seem like the type. She’s too prissy.”

“Maybe she’s working with someone.”

“She made a comment about how much fun it would be to have brothers in her bed.” Zach’s eyebrows drew together, and he scowled. “This is insane.”

“I agree,” Sine said. “But, other than me, she’s the only suspect we have. It’s worth pursuing it because I damn sure didn’t do those things to Quinn or Sean.” He leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest.

Zach sighed, reaching for the notepad, and tucked it into his breast pocket. “We’ll check her out. I’m still going to need to talk to your ex, and the lab is processing your boot. As long as you’re a person of interest, I can’t have you working on this case. I’ll talk to the Chief in the morning.”

* * * *

The sound of heels clacking against the linoleum at a fast clip had Quinn looking up from her chair in the waiting room. Her eyes narrowed, and she immediately went on the defensive. “What the hell are you doing here?”

Sasha stumbled to a stop and bit her lip. Her eyes were red rimmed, and tearstains marred her smooth cheeks. “Momma called and told me about Sean.” She wept brokenly, covering her nose with a tissue. “I’m sorry.”

Brody walked to her without a word and pulled her into his arms. She clung to him as she sniffled and stuttered. “Oh, B-Brody! I’m s-so sorry! I d-didn’t mean any of those things. I l-love you.”

“Shh, honey. I know. I know. It’s going to be okay.” Brody petted her hair, holding her to him as she soaked his collar with her tears. “Thank you for coming.”

Sasha nodded and leaned away. "I'm so sorry this happened to Sean. Is he going to be okay?"

Brody wiped away her tears with his thumb and smiled weakly. "I think so. He's in surgery right now, but the doctors think he'll be fine."

"Thank God," she breathed.

Quinn shuffled closer, and Sasha turned to look at her. She eased out of Brody's embrace and wrapped her arms around Quinn's neck. "I'm sorry, Quinn. I'm sorry I said all those nasty things about you. I was such a bitch. Can you forgive me?"

Quinn tightened her arms around her friend's back and kissed her temple. "Already done."

Sean's parents arrived shortly after Sasha, followed by a handful of his friends. Everyone hugged Brody, and a few even hugged Quinn and Sasha. They sat huddled together in groups of two and three, talking amongst themselves with worried expressions.

A man dressed in a white lab coat hurried into the room, and Quinn jumped to her feet. He didn't even give her a passing glance, but went straight to Sean's parents and hugged them each in turn.

Quinn opened her mouth to say something, but Brody's hand on her arm stopped her. "That's Sean's brother, James. He's a doctor in the ICU here."

She tilted her head in understanding and resumed her seat. She jumped up and paced. She sat down again. She paced some more. By the time Zach came around the corner, Quinn had begun a full-on nervous breakdown.

She went to him immediately, grateful for his calming presence. They stood locked in their embrace, rocking together, gathering courage and comfort from one another. Eventually, Zach released her and moved to sit beside his sister, patting Brody on the back as he walked by.

"I don't want any trouble here, Sasha."

Sasha bit her lip and sniffed, her eyes shimmering. "I didn't come to cause trouble. I'm sorry for the way I acted. I don't even know why I said those things." Her chest rose and fell swiftly with the effort to contain her emotions. "If Brody loves him, that's good enough for me."

Zach smiled at her before pulling her close and crushing the life out of her. "Good girl. I knew you'd come around."

Quinn didn't think she could handle any more of the up-and-down bungee her emotions were on. At least the cord hadn't snapped yet. She stood beside the big window, staring out into the graying dawn, praying for the madness to stop.

The doctor came and ran down the list of Sean's injuries. The majority of the bones in his right hand were shattered, plus the missing pinky finger. He had a lot of bruising and swelling, a few minor cuts and abrasions, but infection in his mangled hand was their main concern.

"When can we see him?" Brody stood beside Mr. and Mrs. Ashby, bouncing from foot to foot with his hands clasped behind his back. James stood on their other side with a stoic expression on his handsome face.

"You can see him now, though he's not awake. Just for a few minutes, and only two at a time." The doctor stared at them sternly, then broke into a smile. "He's going to be fine. He just needs to rest."

He left the room, and Brody immediately turned to Sean's family. "You two go first."

Sean's mother pushed up on her toes and kissed his cheek. "You go on with James, dear. He's asleep, and I don't think it matters to him what order we come in. You won't be able to breathe right until you see for yourself that he's okay." She patted his other cheek and smiled. "You're a good boy, Brody. I'm glad my baby found you."

The chord broke. Quinn began to wail and sob so loudly that the entire room turned to gawk at her. She waved them away, though she couldn't quiet her outburst. Zach just smiled and shook his head

before walking to her and picking her up in his arms. He cradled her to him like a baby, kissed her forehead, and nuzzled against her hair.

“She’ll be fine,” he announced as he carried her from the room.

“I’m sorry, Zach.” Damn, she felt like a blubbering idiot.

“Hush, baby. It’s been a long, stressful night.”

“Where are we going?”

“Home.”

Quinn tried to wiggle up a little straighter to look at him. “We can’t leave!”

“We can, and we are. Sean’s going to be okay. He’s resting, which is exactly what you need to be doing. We’ll come back and see him later when he’s awake. Brody has Sean’s family here for him, and there’s no reason that you need to make yourself sick over this.”

She started to protest again, but Zach silenced her with a quick kiss to her mouth. “For once, will you please just do what I ask of you without arguing with me?”

Quinn crossed her arms over her chest and pouted all the way out to the parking lot. “Fine, but I don’t have to like it.”

Zach chuckled softly. “I never said you did.”

Chapter Fifteen

Quinn's bloodcurdling scream chilled Zach to his bones as he jerked out of a sound sleep. He threw the blankets back and bolted out of bed, sprinting down the hall to the living room. "Quinn, what is it? What's wrong?"

His lover sat on the floor, her knees pulled up to her chest, staring in horror and shock at a small manila envelope a few feet from her.

Zach moved closer, stepping cautiously as if the bubble-wrapped paper would suddenly jump up and gouge his eyes out. He spotted the Polaroid immediately, facedown on the floor, beside the offending envelope. Touching as little of it as possible, he caught the corner with his fingernail and flipped it over.

A picture of Sean's battered and abused face stared back at him, but his eyes were open, wide, and fearful. Another message appeared in the white margins, much as the first photograph they had received.

"You're next," Quinn whispered. "Oh, Zach! His...his..." She pointed toward the envelope again when she couldn't continue to form words.

Steeling himself for what he might find, Zach pinched the bottom corner of the thick paper and tilted it up. He jerked back quickly, his stomach rolling, when Sean's missing appendage rolled onto the hardwood floor.

"Motherfucker!" Zach stared at it for a long minute before turning his attention to writing on the photo. "Motherfucker!" he spat again. How many times had he seen that tiny scrawl while reading through his partner's notes? Too many to mistake it for something else now.

“Why on earth would you open this, Junebug?” Sometimes he felt like Quinn lived on her own little planet.

“It had my name on it.” She spoke as though that explained everything. Then she bit her lip and sighed. “The return address is from the library I worked at in Virginia. I thought it was from one of the girls I worked with there. I got excited and didn’t think. I’m sorry.”

Zach choked down his own sigh. “I have to call this in. Go make sure Momma or Sasha don’t come in here and see this.” He had to admit the return address was a clever idea to ensure Quinn opened the envelope. He just wouldn’t say it aloud.

Quinn nodded quick jerks of her head and hurried down the hall.

Something didn’t feel right. Surely Sine wouldn’t be stupid enough to hand print his threat. He was a detective for fuck sakes! While the little amount of evidence they had hinted at his partner, Zach still felt skeptical to point the finger.

He went to the kitchen and grabbed the wall phone. He needed to call the station, and then he needed to get Quinn the hell out of there.

* * * *

“You said I could go see Sean.” Quinn sounded whiney, even to herself, and hated it.

“Would you prefer to end up in the bed beside him?”

She crossed her arms over her chest and huffed as she slumped down in the seat of Zach’s pickup. “Where are we going?”

“We’re going to get a hotel a couple of towns over until I can figure out where to go from there.” Zach didn’t take his eyes off the road, but his hand snaked over Quinn’s leg to squeeze her thigh. “It’s just for a little while, Junebug.”

Quinn wished she had a nickel for every time she’d heard him say those words. “What about Chris?”

Zach shook his head. "I'm still waiting on the lab to get back to me. I know it doesn't look good for the guy, but I don't think it's him. Something just doesn't click."

"And the bimbo at the diner?"

Zach chuckled and shook his head. "They're going to bring her in for questioning."

"What if they're working together?"

Zach laughed again. "You watch too much crime TV, baby."

Wanting to avoid an argument, Quinn changed the subject. "And why is Sasha coming with us?" She looked over her shoulder at the sleeping woman in the back.

"Mom is going to stay with Aunt Judith for a couple of weeks in New Mexico. Once Sean is well enough to leave the hospital, Brody's going to take him out of town as well. I don't know who's doing this or why, but I'm not taking any chances."

Quinn agreed fully. "You're a good man, Zachary Jensen." She giggled a little at the pink tint in his cheeks.

"Knock it off," he grumbled.

A few miles later, Zach veered off the interstate and pulled into the parking lot of a shabby looking motel.

"You have got to be kidding."

"It's just for a few days," he reminded her as he exited the cab.

Visions of hideous seventies décor and the imagined scents of pork and incense assailed her, and she shuddered. What the hell did Zach have against the Holiday Inn?

Sasha sat up in the backseat with a yawn, stretching her arms over her head. "Oh, you have got to be kidding."

"Exactly what I said." Quinn wrinkled her nose in distaste. "I certainly didn't approve this rat hole."

Sasha groaned and leaned up between the seats. "So, now what?"

Quinn watched Zach's long legs eat up the pavement as he came back to the truck. "Ask the High Commander."

Her lover jumped into the driver's seat and grinned. He held up two keys, not the little plastic key cards, but real keys, and jingled them at her. "Your humble abode awaits."

Quinn echoed Sasha's groan. "Can I call Brody and check on Sean?"

Zach pointed at his cell phone in the cup holder. "Use my phone."

* * * *

"Absolutely not!" Sasha fisted her hands on her hips and shook her head. "I am not staying here!"

"So, this is what shag carpeting looks like." Quinn wrinkled her nose. The room permeated with the smell of ham, some nauseating incense, and stale cigar smoke. Just as she expected. "I didn't even realize carpet came in this particular shade of disgusting. However, it does seem to be the central theme."

Orange carpets, orange drapes, stained orange-and-green-striped comforters on the two tiny beds. The remote actually dangled from a metal wire that bolted to the nightstand. She felt a little disappointed that the beds didn't have a coin slot to make them vibrate.

"Stop being a bunch of divas. This place isn't so bad. There's cable." Zach waved at the small television bolted to the wall.

"Oh, goody." Sasha plopped down on the foot of the closest bed and grumbled under her breath.

"I'm hungry." Quinn sat beside her friend and pouted.

"I'll bring the bags in, then I'll go get you something." Zach kissed her forehead and then his sister's before hurrying out of the room.

"God, this place is depressing." Sasha sighed.

Quinn couldn't agree more. She wrapped an arm around Sasha's waist in solidarity.

"So, what did Brody say? Is Sean going to be okay?"

Sasha's total, though abrupt, attitude toward her brother's relationship pleased Quinn to pieces. "He's not awake yet, but his vitals look good. They're still giving him antibiotics, but so far, no signs of infection." She hesitated for a second before asking, "Why the sudden change of heart?"

Sasha closed her eyes and sagged against Quinn. "We may not be blood, but Brody's been my brother for a long time. You guys are all I have, and I don't want to tear our family apart. I hated not speaking to any of you."

She snuggled in closer, resting her head on Quinn's shoulder. "I still don't agree or condone his lifestyle, but I want him to be happy. If Sean makes him happy, then I'll deal with the rest."

"I'm proud of you, sister."

Sasha chuckled depreciatively and pulled out of Quinn's embrace. "I'm going to get a soda from the machine. If they even have one in this dump."

"Wait until Zach leaves. He'll have a holy conniption."

Sasha winked at her as Zach lugged their bags in through the door. "Good idea."

Chapter Sixteen

“Where are you going?” Quinn sat up in bed and rubbed her eyes sleepily.

“Shh.” Sasha flapped her hands as she inched closer to the door. “I met this really cute guy at the vending machine today, and I’m supposed to meet him at the little café across the street.”

“Do you really think that’s a good idea? We’re supposed to be hiding out.” Quinn peeked over her shoulder at her sleeping lover. “Zach is not going to like this.”

“Oh, phooey on Zach. I’m a grown woman. We’ll be in a public place. I’m not stupid, Quinn.”

Quinn nodded her head hesitantly. “Does this guy have a name?”

“Chris something or other.” Sasha flicked her fingers dismissively. “I promise to be careful.”

With a heavy sigh, Quinn nodded again. “Get back before Zach wakes up.”

Sasha beamed. “I love you. I’ll owe you big time for this.” She gave a perky wave and slipped quietly out the door.

Quinn lay awake for hours, staring at the cracks and water stains in the ceiling. She shouldn’t have let Sasha go. What kind of friend was she anyway? Maybe she should wake up Zach and send him after his sister. Sasha would be pissed, but at least she’d be alive.

She had just about made her mind up when a soft knock sounded at the door. Thank God! That had to be Sasha. The girl was such an airhead. She’d probably forgotten her key. Thankful that she wouldn’t have to rat out her friend, Quinn jumped out of bed and hurried to the door.

“Quinn!” Zach shouted as he bounced upright in bed. “Don’t open the door!”

Quinn looked over her shoulder as she turned the doorknob. “Don’t be ridiculous. It’s just—”

The door exploded inward, shoving Quinn backwards with enough force to lift her off of her feet. She sailed through the dingy room, screaming in pain when she landed on the floor and the door landed on *her*.

The first thing that raced through her mind was fear for Zach’s well-being. The second thought in her jumbled brain was that they had just lost their deposit on the room. The door had clearly been knocked off the hinges, and it had big, splintering holes in it. She knew because one of the mangled splinters currently resided in her lower abdomen.

“Quinn!” Zachary’s strangled sob flooded Quinn with relief. Her man was safe.

“Oh, fuck, Quinn, baby, are you okay?” Zach tried lifting the door off of her, and Quinn cried out in agony. “Oh god, oh fuck, don’t move, baby!”

Quinn heard the beeping of his phone, and then his deep voice, raw and emotional, speaking with the 911 dispatcher. When he finished the call, Zach knelt down under the door, his head close to hers.

“How bad is it, Junebug?”

“Bad,” she whispered. She didn’t have a medical degree, but the blood pouring in rivers from her body seemed to be a bad sign. It seeped up around the large piece of wood that looked more like a stake than anything. “I’m a vampire,” she gurgled.

“What?” Zach looked horrified. “Quinn, keep your eyes open. Talk to me. The ambulance is on the way, and you’re going to be okay.”

Quinn couldn’t bear to see her lover hurting. Big crocodile tears streamed down his face, and the look in his gorgeous blue eyes told

her more than any words could. She wouldn't make it through this. Already she felt the cold seeping into her bones, the numbness spreading through her body. Every sound seemed loud and distant at the same time.

"Where's Sasha?" He scanned the demolished room, his eyes huge and fearful.

"Not here. At the diner. She's safe."

"I'm sorry I've been such an asshole. I'm sorry I made you leave home and come to this shitty motel." He stroked her hair gently. "You can't leave me, Junebug."

"Sorry," she whispered. "So tired, Zach." She watched his face, despair eating at her soul. She didn't fear death, but she didn't want to leave Zach hurting. Quinn knew her man, and he would take her loss as a personal failure. "Don't grieve too long," she slurred.

"You are not going to die!" Zach growled vehemently.

"We both know I am." Each word became harder to push through her numb lips. "Promise me, Zachary Jensen."

"Shh, just rest."

"Promise," Quinn repeated, her voice barely louder than a breath.

"I can't," Zach choked. "Quinn! Open your eyes!"

Quinn tried, but her eyelids were just too heavy—her body too heavy. The darkness pulled at her, and she desperately wanted to follow it. An explorer at heart, she couldn't wait to begin the adventure.

"Quinn! Open your fucking eyes!" Zach screamed. "You are not going to die. I won't let you. Don't you love me? Don't you want to stay with me? Open your eyes!"

Zach had obviously gone insane. Of course she loved him. How could he doubt that? Through every other feeling and emotion, Quinn found herself getting pissed. Her eyes still wouldn't open, but she reached deep and found the energy to frown.

"That's it, baby. You can be mad at me all you want. Yell, scream, kick my ass, but don't you dare fucking leave me!"

That mind-over-matter crap everyone spewed was a big bunch of bullshit. Quinn didn't want to die, but she had no control over the limits of her body. Her body definitely couldn't function with the amount of blood that streamed from her abdomen. Zach would not like this.

Quinn grasped at the straggling remains of consciousness until she finally lost her grip and tumbled down into the dark void, silently screaming for Zach to forgive her.

* * * *

Zach woke, groggy and confused. He blinked his eyes against the harsh florescent light, trying to focus.

"Zach, oh, God, are you okay?"

Zach turned his head slowly, frowning up at his sister. She looked like she'd been crying.

"Sleepy," he mumbled. "Where am I?"

"Oh, honey, don't you remember? You had to be sedated." Sasha took his hand and petted it lovingly. "You kind of lost it when they tried to get to Quinn."

Flashes of Quinn's lifeless body, covered in blood, unresponsive, flashed through Zach's brain. He clutched at his sister's hand and squeezed his eyes closed, letting the tears flow. "Quinn," he whispered.

"Zach, honey, are you okay?"

"Do you think she knew how much I loved her?" God, he hoped so. He didn't know what he would do now. Quinn had been his entire life, everything that meant *anything* to him.

"I'm sure she does," Sasha soothed.

"I couldn't save her." Zach looked up at Sasha, pleading with his eyes for her to understand.

"You did everything you could."

"I didn't do anything!" he spat. "I let her fucking die!"

“Zach,” Sasha said, standing and fluttering around him. “Hush now or they’re going to sedate you again. Quinn’s going to have your ass when she hears about how you’ve behaved.”

“Let them sedate me.” Zach groaned, ignoring Sasha’s comment about Quinn. His beautiful little Junebug, he missed her so much already. “I hope I never wake up,” he whispered.

“Zachary Dane Jensen!” Sasha scolded. “Have you listened to anything I’ve said? Quinn is not dead!”

Zach’s eyes flew open, and he jerked upright in bed. “What? Junebug is okay? Where is she? I need to see her.”

Sasha pushed on his shoulders, trying to keep him on the hospital bed. “I wouldn’t say she’s okay, but she is alive. She just came out of surgery.” She bit her lip, and the tears welled up in her eyes. “They did everything they could, but...well...they’re not sure if she’ll survive the night.”

“Take me to her,” Zach demanded.

“Zach, honey, I don’t know if that’s a good—”

Zach snarled at his sister, rising from the bed and pushing past her. “She needs me!”

“She won’t even know you’re there,” Sasha scoffed. “I doubt she needs you.”

Zach wheeled around and gaped at his sister. “Where the hell were you?”

“That doesn’t matter right now. Why? Would you rather me be the one fighting for my life? Would you be so eager to rush to my side?”

Zach gaped at her. “What the fuck is your problem?”

“What is your problem?” she shot back. “Why would you do that to yourself?”

“Because I love her, you stupid, selfish—” Zach cut off when a strong hand landed on his shoulder.

“Come on, bro, I’ll take you to Quinn.” Brody wrapped an arm around his shoulders to lead him from the room. “She’s on the sixth floor in ICU.”

“Thank you,” Zach mumbled.

“I love her, too, ya know.” Brody stepped back and held up his hands at Zach’s growl. “Not like that, and you know it. She is important to me, though.”

Zach shook his head. “I know. I’m sorry. I can’t think straight right now.”

“Understandable. Let’s get you to your girl.”

“Brody, I don’t know what I’ll do if she doesn’t make it,” Zach admitted.

“Don’t think about it now. One day at a time, right, man?”

“What are you even doing here? You should be with Sean.”

“Dude, look around.” Brody gestured vaguely. “They had to life flight Quinn here to Salem. Sean’s still in ICU, but he’s awake now. His mom’s sitting with him.”

“I’m glad he’s okay.”

“Quinn will be, too, big brother. She will, too.”

Chapter Seventeen

When they arrived at the doors to the ICU, a severe-looking nurse stopped them. "I'm sorry, gentlemen, but visiting hours are over. You can come back at seven tomorrow morning."

"I'm Brody Jensen, and this is my brother, *Detective* Zachary Jensen. We are here to see Quinn Harper and speak with her doctor." Brody glared at the pint-sized bitch.

"That's nice. Come back tomorrow morning." She smiled, but it lacked warmth.

"Listen here, Nursezilla," Zach started.

Brody cut in. "No, she's right, man, we should come back. I would still like to speak to the doctor."

Zach wanted to strangle his brother. He needed to see Quinn, know that she still breathed, that she hadn't left him yet.

"I'm sorry, sir." The nurse shook her head.

"Okay." Brody nodded and pulled out his phone. He flipped it open, pushed a button, and held it to his ear. "Hello, sir, could you do me a little favor? We're having some problems with a certain nurse." Brody paused and looked at the woman expectantly.

"Shannon. Liz Shannon," she bit out.

"Yes, Ms. Liz Shannon. She refuses to let us speak with Dr. Ashby. Yes. Yes. Thank you, sir. I appreciate it. Yes, I'll wait here." Brody closed his phone and turned to Zach. "Wait for it."

"Who was that?"

"The hospital director...as well as Sean's father." Brody smirked.

It took only a couple of minutes for a small, familiar looking man in a white lab coat to pass through the double doors of the ICU. He walked right up to Brody and wrapped his arms around him.

“Good to see you, Brody. What can I do for you?”

Brody motioned toward Zach. “James, I would like for you to meet my brother, Detective Jensen.” He smirked at Zach. “Brother, this is Doctor James Ashby.”

“Ashby?” Zach frowned as he shook the doctor’s hand. “Are you related to Sean?”

Dr. Ashby chuckled. “So, I see you have met *my* baby brother. What seems to be the problem? You know it is after visiting hours.”

“We understand,” Brody jumped in before Zach could demand to see Quinn. “We just wanted to speak with you about Miss Harper’s condition.”

“You know Quinn Harper?” James’s eyebrows rose up to meet his hairline.

“This is her boyfriend, partner.” Brody waved a hand. “Whatever. This is the man that is in love with her.” He rested the same hand on Zach’s shoulder.

James nodded and stared at the floor near Zach’s feet. “She came through surgery, which is a miracle.” He looked up to meet Zach’s eyes. “She lost a lot of blood, Detective. They had to remove her spleen, and one of her kidneys. She sustained three broken ribs, one which splintered and punctured her lung, causing it to collapse.”

The doctor paused and took a deep breath. Obviously, he had more to say. How much worse could it be?

“Just say it,” Zachary said. “Whatever it is, we’ll deal with it.”

“Miss Harper’s chances for survival are slim. She was clinically dead when the paramedics arrived on the scene. It is amazing they were able to bring her back with the amount of blood loss. I’d be surprised if she survives the night. I’m sorry, Detective.”

“I want to see her.” It went far beyond want and into a clawing *need* to see Quinn. If someone didn’t let him through those doors in the next three seconds, things were going to get ugly.

James frowned at them, but blew out a breath and nodded. “Fine, but only one at a time.”

Brody smiled and motioned Zach ahead. “Go on, brother. I’ll come back during visiting hours. Tell her I love her, okay?”

He nodded and hurried to follow the doctor.

* * * *

Zach closed his eyes and breathed deeply, struggling to hold on to his emotions. Quinn looked so gorgeous, so peaceful. If not for the tubes and wires, she could have been merely sleeping.

Sitting in the chair beside her bed, Zach took her hand in his and stroked the knuckles with his thumb. He thought about ways to say goodbye to her, but couldn’t bring himself to do it. Dr. Ashby told him they needed a miracle for Quinn to make it through the night.

His Junebug was his miracle, so Zach decided he had probably used up his quota. That didn’t stop him from praying, though. He closed his eyes and whispered pledges and promises, willing to sacrifice anything for Quinn to live.

He kept up his string of whispered words far into the night, never relinquishing his hold on his lover’s hand. “Take me,” he finally offered. He didn’t want to be separated from Quinn, but he would gladly walk into the unknown for her. “Let me take her place. Spare her and take me instead—my last breath, my last heartbeat. Take me!” He growled, staring up at the ceiling.

Before he knew it, the sun peeked over the horizon, and golden rays floated into the small, sterile room. Quinn still slept, still made no movement other than the rise and fall of her chest, but she lived. She survived the night. Score one for miracles.

* * * *

“Then fire me!” Zach yelled into the phone. He paced outside of the hospital entrance, breathing like a wounded rhino. “The woman I love, the woman I intend to marry, is fighting for her life as we speak. If you think I’m going to just walk away from her and go on with my life then you are a fucking idiot!”

“Jensen, calm down. No one said anything about you leaving. I am simply suggesting that you take a leave of absence until you get things straightened out.” Zach’s chief spoke calmly, but with an underlying exasperation.

Zach sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I’ll be back to work when she wakes up. I can’t leave her right now. Just being downstairs is killing me. What if she wakes up, and I’m not there?”

“Son, I was married for thirty-two years before I lost my wife to cancer. I know what you’re going through. The devil himself wouldn’t have been able to pull me from her side in those last weeks.”

Zach swallowed hard. He felt about two inches tall. “I’m sorry, Chief. I had no right to speak to you that way.”

“Are you listening to me, boy?” Chief Haines chuckled. “I cussed out my own mother while Marcy was in the hospital. Told her to take her nurturing and shove it up her ass.” He paused, and Zach heard him sigh. “I got tough skin, and it ain’t nothing I haven’t heard before.”

“Thank you, Chief.”

“If you need anything, you know I’m here for you. I’ve known you half your life, Zachary. You’re a good kid and damn fine cop. Get your girl on her feet, then come back to work.”

Zach choked on his emotions. It took him several seconds to find his voice. “Thanks, Chief. Marcy was a damn fine woman. I miss her apple crumble.” He smiled fondly, though the man couldn’t see it. “I’ll keep you updated.”

“See that you do. I watched Quinn grow up in this town, same as you. She’s a sweet girl. Take care of her, and if God sees fit to give you another chance, you take it and hang on for dear life.”

“Yes, sir,” Zach managed to answer around the lump in his throat. “Did they find anything?”

“They found the remains of a homemade claymore bomb, but no fingerprints, footprints, or anything else useful.”

“Did someone track down Lucy Bennett?”

“Yeah. She’s a piece of work, I tell ya. She’s got an airtight alibi though.” Chief Haines snorted over the line. “Miss Bennett was hobnobbing with the rich and snobbish at the Governor’s Ball with her new sugar daddy last night.” He paused before adding, “Governor Peterson himself.”

It didn’t surprise him. Lucy Bennett had always had high ambitions.

“She’s not your biggest fan, judging by the choice names she had for you. I don’t think she did this, son.”

Zach sighed and nodded. “I didn’t think it would lead anywhere. Let me know if you find anything else.”

“You’ll be the first.”

“And Sine?”

“Nothing. He came into the shop today with a black eye and busted lip, but he’s squeaky clean as far as the case goes. Those boots of his didn’t match the marks on Mr. Ashby’s hand.”

Zach’s shoulders slumped in relief. “Good. Did he say where he got the shiner?”

“Nope, and I didn’t ask. I figure a man’s got a right to his privacy as long as it ain’t affecting his job.”

Zach had an idea where the bruise came from, and he made a mental note to talk to Sine about this ex of his. “Okay, I gotta go. I’ll let you know if anything changes.”

He flipped his phone closed and hurried back inside the hospital, damning the sluggish elevator all the way to the sixth floor. He

pushed through the ICU doors and froze. A nurse rushed into Quinn's room, only to hurry out within seconds, an unreadable expression on her face. The light over Quinn's door blinked.

Cold fear seized his heart. *No!* He had sat by Quinn's side, reading to her, talking to her, just holding her hand for five long and painful days. Every day he woke to her breathing, the beeping of the heart rate monitor, Zach sighed in relief.

It couldn't be over. He wouldn't accept it. He took off running down the hall, desperate to get to Quinn's room. He didn't even have a chance to say goodbye.

Zach barreled into the room and nearly crumbled to his knees. "Quinn," he whispered. She looked so pale, thinner than usual. She still took his breath away.

Quinn stared back at him, tears gathering in the corners of her eyes, and she smiled weakly. "Zachary," she breathed.

Zach rushed to the bed, his hands hovering over Quinn's body, frantic to touch her somewhere, anywhere, to feel her beneath his palms. His own tears blurred his vision, and he fell into the chair beside the bed, grabbing Quinn's hand and resting his forehead on it as he cried.

"I thought I lost you. I was so scared. I love you, Quinn. I love you. I love you." He repeated the words again and again until his vocal chords felt frayed.

"Love you," Quinn mumbled softly. "You 'kay?"

Zach lifted his head and wiped at his tears. He needed to be strong. "I'm fine, Junebug. Just a couple of scratches."

"Good," she sighed, closing her eyes.

"Quinn?" Zach grew alarmed again.

With effort, Quinn opened her eyes. "Jus' tire'," she slurred to him.

Zach kissed her forehead, squeezing his eyes shut and battling to rein in his emotions. "Wake up soon, Junebug. I miss you."

"M'kay." Then her body sagged, and she fell asleep.

Chapter Eighteen

“Hey!” Brody rushed into the room, breathing heavily, his eyes wide and shining. “Sean woke up. I mean like really woke up. I think you’re going to want to talk to him.”

Zach jumped to his feet immediately. “Does he remember anything?”

“Just come on! They moved him to the second floor, room two-nineteen.” Brody jerked his head and disappeared down the hall.

Zach looked back and forth between his girl and the empty doorway several times.

“Go, Zach. I’ll stay with Quinn. I’ll call you immediately if she wakes up again.”

He kissed the top of his sister’s head and grinned. “Thanks, pumpkin.” He used the nickname he’d given her as a child. “I love you.”

Sasha slapped at his chest. “I love you, too. Now get out of here and go catch some bad guys.” She said the last word with a little giggle.

Zach shrugged and winked at her before hurrying out of the ICU and down the hall to the elevators. He drummed his fingers against his thigh, tapping his foot impatiently on the short ride down the four floors.

He burst out of the elevator when the doors finally opened, following the wall markers to Sean’s room. He paused outside the door, took a deep breath, and knocked. The heavy wood swung open instantly, and Brody beamed at him. He motioned for Zach to enter, then resumed his seat beside his lover.

“Hey, man. Lookin’ good. How are you feeling?” Zach walked over and sat on the edge of the bed near Sean’s feet.

“Better. I stay tired a lot, but if I keep improving, they’re going to let me out of here at the end of the week.”

Zach patted the man’s exposed ankle. “Good to hear it.” He cleared his throat and pulled his hand back into his lap. “Brody said you wanted to talk to me? That you remembered something?”

Sean looked at Brody, then back to Zach, and nodded. “Just bits and pieces, but I’m hoping it will help.”

“Anything you can tell me would be great. Just go slow and try to remember as much as you can. Did you see what he looked like?”

Sean smirked. “Well, he wore a ski mask, if you can believe it. Although, I do remember that *he* had some nice-sized breasts.”

“It was a girl?” Zach’s eyes widened, his jaw unhinged.

Brody snorted and shook his head. “You got beat up by a girl?”

His snort turned to a huffed groan when Sean elbowed him in the ribs.

“Boys, can we focus here?” It was like dealing with a couple of preschoolers.

Both men gave him shy grins and nodded. “Yes, it was a woman. She didn’t speak, but even that black hoodie she wore couldn’t cover up those knockers.”

“Okay, so not to encourage my bratty brother, but...You got abducted by a girl?”

Brody laughed loudly, and Sean rolled his eyes. “She hit me in the damn head with a baseball bat!” He started to reach up, presumably to finger the stitches near his temple, but Brody’s hand around his wrist stopped him.

“Okay, then what happened?”

“I woke up on the ground. I don’t know where we were, but there were a lot of trees.” Sean scrunched his eyebrows together and pursed his lips. “There was a car. A sedan, I think. Dark, but I can’t be sure of the color.”

"You're doing great," Zach assured him. "Keep going. So, did she start hitting you then?"

"Yes. She might have been a girl, but she damn sure packed a punch." Sean grimaced, and Brody reached over to squeeze his hand in support. "I must have passed out because the next thing I remember, she was sitting on my arm. That's when this happened." He held up his bandaged hand with the missing finger.

Zach grimaced. "Anything identifiable about her? Piercings, tattoos, a ring maybe?"

"I think she had dark hair. I couldn't see it under the mask, but I could see part of her eyebrows. They were black." Sean paused and took a deep breath. "There was a bracelet."

"What kind? What did it look like?" Zach perked up immediately. Now they were getting somewhere.

"She had on gloves and a sweater, but the sleeve rode up on her left arm, and I saw the bracelet—silver with a charm on it."

"Did you see the charm? Did it have an initial on it or a word maybe?"

"Well, it looked like the Scooby-Doo logo to be honest."

Zach's blood froze, and his heart turned over in his chest. He looked at his brother, seeing his shock and fear mirrored on Brody's face.

"Quinn." Zach sprang off of the bed and bolted out of the door, running full speed all the way to the stairwell. He took them as fast as he dared on his shaking legs, up to the sixth floor.

He still remembered the day, twelve years ago, when he'd given his sister the little charm bracelet for her birthday. She still wore it every day.

* * * *

"This one? No, maybe this one? Screw it. I'll just use them all."

Quinn woke slowly to the muttered voice beside her bed. She dragged her eyelids back and blinked blearily. “Sasha, what are you doing?” She eyed the syringe in her friend’s hand, the long, wicked looking needle, and the four tiny vials lined up on the counter.

“Mixing up a little witch’s brew.” Sasha cackled quietly at her own joke. “I’m so glad you’re awake.”

“Where’s Zach?” Quinn’s heart beat faster at the manic look in Sasha’s eyes. “Sasha, where’s Zach?”

“Zachary is none of your concern,” Sasha snapped. “I really didn’t want to do this.” She picked up one of the glass bottles and pushed the needle through the rubber seal. “I do like you, Quinn, but you wouldn’t leave. It didn’t have to come to this if you had just gone back where you came from.” She frowned at Quinn as though the situation were entirely her fault.

“You? No, no...Sine—”

“That idiot? Please. It was so easy to push the blame to him.”

“But his handwriting...”

“Amazing what can be done with a writing sample and a little carbon paper.” Sasha placed the bottle back on the counter and picked up the next. “I’m not really sure what all of these do, but it’ll be fun to watch, huh?” She smiled brightly over her shoulder.

“What about Sean?”

“That fucking faggot deserved a lot more than a missing finger for corrupting my brother!” Sasha hissed and snarled under her breath as she picked up the third bottle of clear liquid and then the fourth.

“Okay, all set. This is really quite the hassle. Why couldn’t you just die in the hotel like you were supposed to?”

Quinn tried to pull her hand away, but Sasha gripped her wrist tightly. “I really do like you, Quinn. I just can’t let you take what’s mine.” She jerked on Quinn’s arm. “Now, be still.” She held the syringe between her first two fingers, her thumb hovering over the depressor.

“Drop the needle, Sasha.” Zach’s guttural command had Quinn and Sasha both whipping their heads toward the door.

“Don’t you see, Zachary?” Sasha shook her head almost sadly. “It has to be this way. It’s the only way we can be together.” She gripped Quinn’s wrist more securely, growling when Quinn tried to pull away again.

“Sasha.”

“You belong to me. You and me and Brody, we belong together. We were meant to be together.”

“Sasha, you’re my sister.” Zach spoke calmly, but Quinn could see the silent quaking of his body.

“No, not really I’m not. You’re mine! I love you, Zachary, just as much as I love Brody. I had you first! Don’t you see? You were sent to me. We are supposed to be together!”

Quinn’s heart climbed up her throat, beating heavily and cutting off her air supply. Never would she have imagined Sasha was such a crazy bitch.

“Okay, okay.” Zach held open his arms and nodded his head. “I’m sorry. Please, put down the needle. We can’t be together if you go to prison for murder. Put the needle down and come here.”

Sasha eyed him suspiciously. “Zach?”

“I love you, Sasha. Come here. We’ll figure it out. I’ll make sure Quinn goes where she belongs.”

“You mean it?” She still didn’t sound convinced.

“Why didn’t you ever tell me?” Zach asked. “All these years, you should have said something.” He wiggled his fingers for her to come to him. “Come on, pumpkin.”

Sasha hesitated a moment longer before dropping the syringe to the floor and hurrying across the room to throw herself into Zach’s arms. “Oh, Zachary! We need to go find Brody. I’ve waited so long.”

Zach tightened his arms around her, his eyes closing briefly. Quinn watched the siblings carefully. She didn’t know what to think, to feel, to do, so she just sat in numb silence.

“I love you,” Zach whispered into his sister’s hair. Quinn felt tears prickle the corners of her eyes at the pain that marred his handsome features.

He kissed the top of Sasha’s head, then spun her around quickly, pulling her wrists together behind her back.

“You’re under arrest for the attempted murder of Quinn Harper. You have the right to remain silent.”

Epilogue

Quinn sat beside Sean on the porch swing, watching Brody and Zach lug boxes and move furniture. Eight weeks since the explosion, and three weeks since she'd been released from the hospital, and Zach still wouldn't allow her to lift a finger to do more than pour coffee.

She still felt tired some days, but she was healing quickly, gaining a little more energy each day. Staring down at the ring on her left hand, she smiled fondly as it glittered in the sunlight.

The day she'd been released from the hospital, Zach had gotten down on one knee, right beside her hospital bed, and asked her to be his wife. She'd said yes immediately, and they'd been married in a small civil service two weeks later. She still couldn't believe she was Mrs. Zachary Jensen.

"Are you sure you really want to live in Salem?" Quinn turned a little in her seat to look at Sean. "I mean, I liked you living right down the street. I'm going to miss you guys."

Sean grinned indulgently. "Quinn, we're not that far away. You'll still see us all the time." His smile faded, and he sighed heavily. "I just can't live in Riverton anymore. I still have nightmares," he added softly.

Quinn's heart broke at the sadness in his voice. "I'm sorry this happened to you, Sean."

Sean waved his hand, the one with the missing digit, and shook his head. "It's not your fault, honey. Sasha's sick. She needed help. I'm just sorry no one saw it sooner."

Feeling the tears prick the corners of her eyes, Quinn leaned forward and placed a chaste kiss on his cheek. "You're a good man. Most wouldn't forgive so easily."

"I'm just glad the DA didn't push for a harsher sentence. Sasha needs help, not a prison cell. Briarwood will be good for her. James says it's one of the best psychiatric hospitals in the state."

Quinn nodded and frowned. "Zach still feels guilty about the whole thing."

Sean nodded his agreement. "Brody, too."

"So, when are you two planning to get hitched?" Quinn smiled brightly, trying to lighten the mood.

"I don't know." Sean looked away, not meeting her eyes. "We haven't even had sex since I came home."

"Oh, honey." Quinn rubbed his shoulder in comfort. "Give yourself a little time."

Sean finally turned to look at her. "It's not me. It's Brody. He barely touches me anymore. I've tried to talk to him about it, but he just says I need more time to heal."

"Hey." Quinn took his hands and gave them a gentle squeeze. "He'll come around. He loves you."

Sean gave her a little smile and dipped his head. "Yeah, he loves me. We'll get through this because I won't lose him."

Chuckling lightly, Quinn squeezed his hands again. "Go get 'em, tiger."

* * * *

Quinn sprinted into the bedroom and leapt onto the bed, bouncing on her knees. "Zach, Zach! It's here. It's here. It's here!"

Zach grinned lazily, rolling onto his back and locking his hands behind his head. "Well, let's see it."

Quinn shoved the paper into his face, jabbing at the article on top of the page. "Deliciously Reviewed, by Quinn Jensen, Food Critic,"

he read aloud. He continued down the column in silence, scowling occasionally.

Quinn watched his every expression, twirling her fingers together and chewing on her bottom lip. “Well?” she asked when he set the paper aside.

He frowned at her and sighed. “You are absolutely brilliant.” His frown slowly lifted until he beamed at her with pride. “I loved it.”

“Yay!” Quinn clapped her hands together and threw herself on top of him. She peppered kisses over his face, giggling like mad. “I love you!”

Zach chuckled and pushed her away playfully. “Quit it.” He kissed her nose and grinned. “I love you, too, Mrs. Jensen.”

He still couldn’t believe she’d agreed to marry him. He didn’t have much to offer her, but swore he’d love her every day until they died. Apparently, it had been enough. Saturday would mark four months since she’d taken his last name.

“Who would have imagined I’d find a way to combine my love for food and the written word into a lucrative venture?”

“I never had a doubt, baby.” Zach kissed her again and sighed. “You are an amazing woman, Junebug.”

“Aww.” She nipped his chin. “You’re a little biased, but thank you.”

Damn, his girl looked adorable when she smiled. Zach sat up quickly, flipping Quinn to her back and pinning her to the mattress. She opened right up for him, spreading her creamy thighs and locking her legs around his hips.

“And a good morning to you, too, Detective.”

He leaned down and claimed her mouth, effectively removing the smug smirk on those luscious lips. His cock perked up, filling and throbbing, rubbing against her saturated pussy. “Want you,” he murmured.

Quinn arched up into him, rubbing her hands over his chest and down his sides. Zach penetrated her slowly, moaning into her open

mouth at the divine feel of her silky heat surrounding him. He rocked into her, moving his hips in gentle waves. They made sweet, languid love—the type reserved especially for beautiful spring mornings.

Eventually, the need became too great, and he intensified his thrusts, plunging into her welcoming body with sweet abandon. They both cried out when release found them, hurling them over the edge and into euphoria.

Zach slumped over his wife, bracing himself on his elbows, panting against her temple, a small smile playing at the corner of his lips. “Mine.”

“Mine,” Quinn murmured back.

He rolled to the side, pulling her into his arms along the way, and cuddled her back to his chest. “So, tell me, Miss Critic.” He waited for her to turn her head and look at him. “Is this life out loud?”

She smiled mischievously and winked. “Oh, yeah.” She wiggled her rounded bottom against him until his prick began to sit up and take notice again. “And it’s about to get a whole lot louder.”

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gabrielle Evans grew up in a small town in southern Oklahoma. We're talking one red light that may or may not work depending on the day of the week. She married her high school sweetheart and the rest is pretty much history. They have two very active boys and one high-strung wiener dog that keeps her constantly on the go. For now, Gabrielle parks her car in north-central Texas, but who knows what tomorrow will bring.

Gabrielle believes in love at first sight and taking chances. She enjoys dreaming up and watching ideas come to life that push the boundaries of "normal" society. When she's not writing, she can usually be found testing those same boundaries.

Also by Gabrielle Evans

Ménage Amour: Wicked River 1: *Keeper of the Light*

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