

# **STAY**

Book 2 in the Tales of Dunham

by

Moriah Jovan

**Smashwords Edition**

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At 12, Vanessa defied her family to save 17-year-old bad boy Eric from wrongful imprisonment and, possibly, death. She'd hoped for a "thank you" from him, a kiss on the cheek, but before she could grow up and grow curves, he left town.

Fourteen years later, Vanessa is a celebrity chef at the 5-star Ozarks resort she built. Eric is the new Chouteau County prosecutor on his way to the White House.

Four hours apart and each tied to their own careers, their worlds have no reason to intersect until a funeral brings Vanessa back to Chouteau County, back to face the man for whom she'd risked so much, the only man she ever wanted—the only man she can't have.

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Stay  
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To my mom, who, in 1995, asked me,

***Why are you basing your goals  
on decisions someone else has to make?***

(She and I get along very well.)

\* \* \* \* \*

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**DECEMBER 14, 1994**

“People versus Eric Niccolò Cipriani. Charges of statutory rape, sexual assault in the first degree, and forcible rape in the first degree.”

“Ms. Leventen, how does the defendant plead?”

“Not guilty.”

“Hilliard?”

“Remand, your honor. The victim is thirteen.”

“So ordered.”

\* \* \* \* \*

*The Poor Get Their Ice in the Winter*

\* \* \* \* \*

## **1: SMELLS LIKE TEEN SPIRIT**

He laughed at the college girl as she scrambled for her clothes, half drunk and pissed. He tipped his head back and swallowed a mouthful of warm, flat beer from the bottle he’d left on the bedside table.

“You’re a prick, Eric,” the girl—he didn’t remember her name—

snarl-slurred as she misbuttoned her blouse.

“Yeah, you didn’t mind so much when I was fucking you with it, did you? What, did you think I was going to tell you I loved you?”

“No, but I didn’t expect to get insulted, either.”

“Whatever. You’re twenty. I’m seventeen. You came to a frat house looking for good college-boy sex and you got better than you expected. What’s the problem?” She curled her lip at him. He shifted to sit more comfortably in the bed, his back against the wall, and gestured at her midsection with the hand that held his bottle. “Didn’t you learn how to dress yourself when you were five?”

She screeched and threw her shoe at his head. She was too drunk to hit him, though, and he watched it land three feet away. He laughed harder. She opened her mouth to say something else equally scathing when the door burst open, startling them both—badly.

“What the fuck—”

“Shut up,” snarled a Chouteau County deputy, who hauled all six feet three inches of naked Eric out of the bed by his hair and shoved him up against the wall, his arms yanked behind his back.

He was too shocked, too suddenly terrified to make a sound when he heard more than felt his rotator cuff pop out, just drunk enough not to feel the pain of having his dick and face slammed against plaster and woodwork, and not drunk enough to be able to laugh it all off.

“You’re under arrest for statutory rape and sexual assault . . .”

His mind shut down immediately, completely unable to process the combined assaults on his body, his senses, or the college girl’s sudden hoots of delighted laughter, her taunts.

Statutory rape and sexual assault? Of *whom*?

His mind then spun to life, turbocharged in spite of the numbness he sought. How would he get out of this? He already had a juvie record with nothing to offset it but a 4.5 average in his Advanced Placement classes, and a job as a manager at a feed store.

He had no money and he’d never had good luck with the public defenders.

Statutory rape and sexual assault?! He couldn’t possibly have fucked a girl that young . . . could he? Whowhowho?

Still naked except for a ratty blanket, he got stuffed in the back of a squad car. Cold. So cold. The deep freeze of a Missouri December at two A.M. was just another insult. He saw the frat house from which he'd been dragged, alight but still and quiet, all its occupants clustered together on the sidewalk at the foot of the concrete stairs that led up to the house. Sober, clustered together, shivering in various states of undress, they tried to keep warm while they watched Eric hauled away so spectacularly. He blinked. Glanced away, unable to look back at the people he had blithely called "friends" for the night.

None of them would bail him out. They barely knew him, much less cared. He was just known to be a hard partier and a good fuck.

He gulped.

No one to call. His mother, out of the question. She would believe that he had fucked an underage girl and let him rot, not that he could blame her. She'd bailed him out enough.

Couldn't call old Jenkins. He'd told Eric that one slip-up would get him the boot straight out of the feed store.

Statutory rape and sexual assault.

*I didn't do it!*

Wouldn't matter. No one would believe him innocent.

They had no reason to.

The squad car finally began to move toward the courthouse. He knew the routine; he'd been through it enough times, but not for a year and a half now. He'd tangled with almost every one of the prosecutors in that office, Hicks more than most. He closed his eyes and collapsed in on himself. Please, no. Not Hicks.

The man was vicious and, unlike most of the attorneys in that office, was not on the take. Eric could only hope to get the new prosecutor, that fucker straight out of law school who'd offed the serial killer and skated. That was a man who'd appreciate a bundle of cash to overlook whatever bullshit Eric was said to have done.

Only . . . Eric had no money, so it didn't matter who ended up prosecuting him.

No money, no payoff.

And for this, he'd be tried as an adult.

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He regretted his wish for the newest, youngest prosecutor immediately upon staring into Knox Hilliard's cold, hard face—the face of a killer with nothing to lose and a raging thirst for justice.

“Simone Whittaker?!”

Eric shot to his feet, jolted out of his shocked numbness into a rage of his own when Hilliard told him his alleged victim.

“Siddown,” Hilliard snarled, so Eric sat.

“It can't be,” Eric said, desperate for him to understand. “She came on to me and I told her to get lost. I don't do little girls at all ever. Never. Second, even if I did—which I *don't*—I wouldn't have touched *her* with a ten-foot pole. She's a disgusting, lying little bitch and who the hell knows what diseases she's got.”

That was the wrong thing to say. He knew it by the chill in Hilliard's ice blue eyes, knew it even before his court-appointed attorney hissed, “Shut up, Eric.”

“I'm done with this asshole,” Hilliard murmured, calm and cold, staring Eric down until Eric had to look away. Cold. That was the only word Eric could apply to the man who'd murdered another man in cold—well, not so cold—blood, who sat there on the right side of the law like he had a right to be there.

Eric's attorney did manage to get him seen for his torn rotator cuff, but no one much cared beyond giving him a sling to wear in jail while he waited for his trial. His life was over, over before it had begun.

Simone Whittaker, thirteen going on twenty-three.

He knew at least two dudes in his class who'd fucked her, but Eric? No way. He'd been creeped out enough to look at a girl that young dressing, talking, acting like an oversexed college girl.

He resigned himself to his fate, although his attorney, a lady Hilliard's age, also straight out of law school, was actually doing a pretty decent job of defending him. He wouldn't get off, though, because he could clearly see Hilliard was better—and motivated.

Thirteen-year-old girls.

Even ones who looked and acted ten years older, who spread her legs for any male who'd have her. No matter Eric was smarter than his cohorts: valid picture ID and condoms. Always, every time, without fail.

Shit, yeah, Hilliard had made his opinion known loud and clear what he thought of that particular crime. The man had a roar that could be heard all the way to St. Joe. A lion, his attorney had called him; then, after Eric had caught her checking out Hilliard's ass, he wondered if she was fucking him on the sly.

"Lord, no," she breathed, aghast when he asked her point-blank. "Knox doesn't like blondes and he doesn't like women my age."

"Are you telling me he's a closet pedophile?" Eric asked slowly.

"No, Eric," she said dryly. "He's not letting loose any self-loathing on you. He likes women older than he is. And no, I wouldn't sleep with him while I'm defending you anyway. That's just a little too kinky for my taste. In any case, I doubt any prosecutor anywhere would go any lighter on you. These crimes are—"

Yes, he knew. Universally despised. "I didn't do it," he protested. Weak. It was weak. Nobody ever believed a defendant who said "I didn't do it" because they all said that.

She patted his hand. "I know you didn't. I'll do the best I can."

Apathy: The only emotion Eric could muster.

Except when . . . put in general population, at which point, he didn't hesitate to make his opinion known about some other inmate's assessment of him. For the first time, Eric cursed his looks. The term "hottie," applied by a male, didn't seem like such a compliment. It was a relief when he was thrown into solitary confinement for damn near killing the fucker with his bare hands.

"At this point, all I care about is managing to get myself in solitary for the rest of my life," he said to his attorney the next time he saw her.

She pursed her lips in commiseration.

She knew she was losing. Eric wouldn't live to see his nineteenth birthday.

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## 2: LAZY, LOUSY, LIZA JANE

April 1995

Vanessa squeezed tight into herself, watching from across the street, waiting for him. She sat on the sidewalk, her back against the stone wall of the café and furniture store, a small book hidden between her upraised knees and her chest.

There he was, striding purposefully into the courthouse like he owned it: tall, blond, hard, and very cruel. She could see it in his face. She knew what he'd done—the whole county knew. And trembled. She didn't know which was scarier: approaching the man who'd gotten away with the murder of her mother's boyfriend or going home to her mother after having done so.

She *could* just forget the whole thing and go back to school, but Laura would be disappointed in her if she left now, so Vanessa tried to screw up her courage and go see the man every person in the county feared.

"He could snap again," went the whispers. "Who knows what'll set that crazy bastard off now."

He had more than one reputation in town, for sure. Whenever Vanessa and the rest of the sixth graders ate lunch in the narrow quad between the elementary school and high school, she would overhear the older girls talking about him as if he were a rock star. Even a couple of teachers would whisper his name and giggle. She supposed he was kinda sorta good looking, but he was way old—like, twenty-five or something—and terrifying.

Her heart in her throat, she still couldn't make herself move.

*What would Laura do?*

Laura would march herself on in there and do the right thing no matter what. "Vanessa, that boy didn't rape Simone," she'd say, or so Vanessa imagined she might say. "You're the only person who knows that besides your mother and sister, so it's *your*

responsibility.”

Vanessa knew what would happen to her when LaVon and Simone found out she’d blown up their scheme—and they *would* find out.

Dirk, the only protector she had ever had, was gone all the way around the world to New Zealand, to talk to people about his church. She’d had no one to protect her for a year and this would seal her fate. Perhaps it was time she packed her bags and set out on her own.

The crowd of people going to work had thinned out quite a while ago and then only the intermittent flow of deputies coming and going kept her from entering. She supposed it was now or never if she was going to do this, because eventually someone would approach her to find out why she wasn’t at school.

Reluctantly she stood and shoved the book up her shirt, then hugged it to her tight. With leaden feet she crossed the street and headed up the long walk to the courthouse doors. Once inside, she didn’t know what to do. Everybody looked at her strangely but no one asked her her business.

She looked up at the building directory and looked for his name. There. Second floor. She stared up the very high, wide staircase and took a deep breath. One step at a time, one step at a time, one step at a time, and then she was in front of the door she sought:

## **PROSECUTOR’S OFFICE**

Her hand reached out for the doorknob as if it were on a string and she was a puppet—wait, no, a . . . She searched for the right word. Marionette. That’s right. A marionette. And while she’d been thinking of the right word, her feet had gone ahead and taken her through the door and into the office.

Ancient wood and metal desks were crammed into an open area any which way. Men stormed around the obstacles, cursing, yelling, and generally filling the air with much anger and lots of bad words. She swallowed. In front of her was another door:

**CLAUDE NOCEK**  
**PROSECUTOR**

A young black man stopped short and looked down at her. She stepped back, her eyes wide, because now she would actually have to talk to one of those men who were cursing and yelling and being angry.

She bit her lip.

Tightened her arms over her body, over the book, its vinyl cover stuck to her skin.

“Well, uh, hi,” he said after a long few seconds. “My name’s Richard. What can I do for you?”

She gulped. “I came to see Mr. Hilliard,” she whispered. “I have something for him.”

A bemused smile swept across his face and she knew then that he was nice and he’d help her. “Really? What would that be?”

“A book,” she breathed. “I really need to talk to him, please.”

He turned a bit and gestured that she should step ahead of him. She shrank from the curious glances of the other men as their conversation first lowered and then stilled in her presence. She felt Richard’s hand lightly on her back but didn’t pull away; she didn’t like strangers to touch her, but she had come here by herself for a reason. She tucked her head down and let her brown hair fall to cover her face. Finally, she took one step and then another, Richard’s hand guiding her across the floor to a dark corner in the back. Mr. Hilliard sat hunched over his desk, engrossed in his work. She blinked when he jotted a note. He was left-handed, like her. Somehow that made her think that maybe she didn’t have to be so afraid.

“Knox, this young lady says she has something for you.”

Mr. Hilliard raised his head and looked first at the man, then at her. She tried to hide how afraid she was but knew she couldn’t. Then the most amazing thing happened.

He smiled. And it was a nice smile.

“Hi. What’s your name?”

“Vanessa,” she whispered. She didn’t want to tell him her last name because his smile might go away and then he might not be nice to her anymore. Her mother badgered

him enough as it was and she was sure he was sorry he'd ever heard the Whittaker name.

"How old are you?"

"Twelve."

"Why aren't you in school?"

"I have to give you something. It's very important."

He looked up at Richard and nodded, which she figured meant he was to go away. Mr. Hilliard reached behind himself and pulled a wooden chair toward Vanessa, setting it next to his desk. He patted it. "Have a seat, Vanessa. What do you have for me?"

She approached warily because of what he'd done. It was wrong and bad and horrible. Yet . . . Vanessa felt safer at home because of what he had done (honestly, she was secretly *glad*, which Laura would say made her as evil as Mr. Hilliard) so she bit her lip again as she sat down on the chair. She slowly drew the book from under her shirt, making sure not to show any skin, and without a word, she handed it to him.

He took it from her gently, turning it over and over again. She knew that book by heart: pink plastic with a small lock that didn't seem to work very well. The key had been lost—she didn't know when. The book was decorated in pink, red, and white hearts, glitter, and silver flowers. She also knew every word in it, which was why she had come.

He opened it and looked at the beginning of it, where its owner's name was written, the "i"s dotted with hearts. Then his mouth tightened and he looked at her from the corners of his eyes. She didn't think that was a nice look.

Thankfully, he began to read. It wouldn't take him long to get to the important part, so she decided to make herself as small as she could. She curled into herself then, hooking her heels on the edge of the seat. She drew her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around them.

Her stomach rumbled loudly, earning her another, longer, glance.

She knew that look.

More than a few people had been mean enough to say it.

*When was the last time you ate?*

Then he tipped back his chair and, putting one foot on the edge of his desk, he read page after page with what seemed to Vanessa to be lightning speed.

Then he was done and he looked at her for a long time. He was chewing on the

inside of his mouth. She didn't know what that meant, either.

He threw the book on his desk and linked his fingers behind his head. "Why did you bring me that?" he asked. She still couldn't tell if he was mad or not.

"Because it's the truth," she whispered. "People were burned at the stake because no one told the truth."

Mr. Hilliard got a funny look on his face. "What people?"

"The witches. In Salem. A long time ago. People died because mean girls told a lie. I read about it."

"I see," he said slowly and looked down at the book. He pointed to it. "How do I know this is the truth?"

She hadn't thought about that. To her, it was so clear. Her forehead crinkled. "I guess— Well, I don't know."

"Now, you know I'm going to have to ask about this and that I'll have to say how I got it, right?"

Vanessa nodded. "Yes," she said, and gulped again. She began to tremble because now that Mr. Hilliard hadn't shot her in the head like he did Tom Parley, she knew her mother and her sister would make her wish he had.

He wiped a hand down his face and didn't talk for a long time. Finally, he handed her a pen and paper. "Write down your grade and teacher's name, Vanessa." She did, and then he took a business card, turned it over, and wrote on it. When he handed it to her, he said, "If anything happens to you, if you're afraid at home for any reason, you call me and I'll come get you, even if it's three o'clock in the morning."

"Where would you take me?"

"To my cousin Giselle's house until social services could come get you."

Foster people. That sounded worse than home, if that was possible. She bit her lip yet again in indecision.

"Well, okay. I can see that might not seem fun. Right now, I'm going to take you to school. Have you had anything to eat this morning?"

She shook her head again, understanding what he intended and that it would mean a ride in a car with a strange adult man, yet she was too hungry to let the possibility of a free meal pass her by.

So she went with him and she stood by his pretty dark green car while he unlocked and opened the door for her, then closed it once she had climbed in. She didn't think much of it until he parked at McDonald's and murmured, "Stay there." Now simply curious, she watched him get out of the car, walk around to her side, and open her door for her. He offered her his hand as if she were an adult! A real lady! And then he opened the door of McDonald's for her!

He let her pick whatever she wanted and eat at the picnic table (he didn't say much because he seemed to be busy thinking), bought her more (enough for dinner tonight, breakfast tomorrow, and possibly lunch too, if she hid it well enough), then took her to school. The high school girls were outside because it was their lunchtime and they could go off campus if they wanted. She was very conscious of them because they thought Mr. Hilliard was handsome and dangerous, and they had stopped to stare when they heard, then saw, his car.

*What would Laura do?*

Laura would hold her head high and ignore the people who stared.

They parked and she reached for the door handle. "Stay there," he reminded her, and again she waited, feeling very grown up and sophisticated. The senior girls watched Mr. Hilliard open her door for her and help her out the same way he had at McDonald's. A strange, nice feeling went through her, like how the word "dignity" might feel. They watched him walk her across the lawn away from the lunch quad to the entrance of the elementary school. They watched him hold the front door open for her, again, as if she were an adult and a lady.

The school secretaries gasped when they saw him walk in behind Vanessa and they shrank away from him. He seemed not to notice.

"Vanessa Whittaker's been at the courthouse for an interview," he said to the principal, who came out of his office to see what the commotion was all about. "I'm sure you won't put her down as tardy for today."

"Oh, of course not, Mr. Hilliard. Of course not."

Wow. She had never thought Mr. Roberg could be afraid of anything.

Mr. Hilliard stepped away from her then. He looked down at her and smiled again that really nice smile. "Thank you, Vanessa. You're probably the bravest person I've ever

met.”

Vanessa grinned back at him then, big enough she felt her eyes crinkle at the corners. Now she knew that everything would be okay. Her mother wouldn’t dare do anything to her as long as everyone knew that Knox Hilliard was Vanessa’s friend. He patted her shoulder before he left.

She was walking down the street toward her mobile home after school when the cop car whizzed by and stopped at her trailer. By the time she got there, her sister was being hauled out in handcuffs.

“You little bitch!” she screamed when she saw Vanessa. “You lying little bitch!” She lurched toward Vanessa and Vanessa instinctively stepped back, but the deputy hauled her back toward him, then shoved her in the back seat of the squad car, a hand on her head.

Her mother came out on the deck and looked straight at Vanessa, taking a puff of her cigarette. “So what’d that bastard do to you to get you to lie for that sonofabitch who raped your sister?”

“I didn’t lie,” she murmured as she climbed the steps, the deputy’s car pulling away from the curb and disappearing down the street. She pulled out Mr. Hilliard’s business card and showed her the back, where he had written the word “home” and his phone number. “Mr. Hilliard is my friend. He thinks I’m brave.”

*Laura was brave.*

Her mother stiffened, and after a long pause, she went back in the house without a word.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **3: BLACKSTONE’S FORMULATION**

Eric heard Hilliard’s voice in his head now, in his dreams—and he had nothing

better to do but sleep—accusing him of things he hadn't done, presenting evidence so clearly, so indubitably that now even Eric believed he'd done it. The clang of jail cell doors, ever present, didn't disturb his sleep

until he awoke in a panic, Hilliard standing over him in his cot . . .

Looking at him completely differently.

"What," Eric snapped, deeply offended that the asshole had invaded his meager space.

"You're free to go."

"Uh—" He looked at his attorney, who had a pleased smile on her face.

"Eric, we couldn't have asked for better."

He sat up slowly, looking back up at Hilliard suspiciously, certain this was a trick, some cruel thing Hilliard would do because Hilliard was cruel.

Perhaps he was just dreaming. There was nothing of the rage, the hatred in Hilliard's face now. A smile that bordered on—relieved?—threatened to ruin Eric's image of him, then he turned.

"Bring him to my office when he's ready to go," he finally said over his shoulder. "Make everything official. He doesn't belong here."

"Thanks, Knox."

"Don't thank me," he said as he maneuvered his way around Eric's attorney to leave the cell. "Thank one brave little girl."

Eric waited until Hilliard left, then looked up at his attorney. He knew his confusion showed and he didn't care. He was broken. At seventeen.

"Simone confessed?"

She smiled and shook her head, but would say nothing until Eric was attired in the suit she'd provided for him to wear for the trial. They were the only clothes he had that weren't neon orange.

"Don't worry about your hair now."

Eric knew he was vain. Vain enough to want to keep his hair long, vain enough to risk tucking it down his shirt collar for his trial so as not to give off the stink of half-breed-bastard-from-the-wrong-side-of-the-tracks, vain enough to fight for it.

When he was ushered into the Chouteau County prosecutor's private office, he was



shocked to see its six other occupants. He stopped and looked around, obeying his hard-won instincts for suspicion. Nocek, the head prosecutor, had disappeared. That really shook him up. Nocek ran the office and the county with an iron—albeit crooked—fist and without ever leaving his office. Was it possible Nocek himself was afraid of Hilliard?

His mother, tears in her eyes. Eric hadn't seen her since before he was arrested four months ago.

Jenkins, his boss, the owner of Chouteau County Feed and Tack. He hadn't bothered to show up at the courthouse, even to tell Eric he was fired.

Rayburn, the principal of Chouteau County High School.

Two of his advanced placement teachers, science and English.

Hilliard, leaning back against Nocek's desk relaxed, as relaxed and at ease in his boss's office as if it were his, his ankles crossed, his hands in his pockets. He had that same strange expression on his face that Eric didn't trust for a minute.

"I thought you said I was free to go," Eric finally muttered when no one seemed inclined to stop staring at him or to speak.

Hilliard inclined his head. "You are. But. I have a proposition for you."

Eric cast a wary glance at his attorney whose mouth crooked in a relieved smile, then back at Hilliard. "I'm not fucking you."

Hilliard laughed then—roared—his laugh no less deafening than his most enraged bellow. He finally wound down to a chuckle and wiped his mouth. "Ah, no. That's not what I had in mind. I want to send you to college."

Eric's mouth dropped open. College!

A vague hope before his arrest, one he had worked toward in spite of his unwillingness to let the hope gel into a dream or, even worse, a goal—the one he hadn't dared think about while he was in jail, on trial.

But Hilliard kept talking. "I've been watching you, looking through your record, wondering how a smart kid like you managed to fuck up so badly when what you want is crystal clear."

"Why am I here?" Eric demanded. "What happened? Something happened and I want to know what it was."

Hilliard's mouth pressed a bit, but not, apparently, in anger. In thought. As if he

didn't know whether to say or not.

"We found proof of your innocence," he finally said. "Someone who knew something came forward."

*Thank one brave little girl.*

For the life of him, Eric couldn't figure out who could do that other than Simone, and his attorney had already said she hadn't done so.

"College," Hilliard said, jerking Eric's attention back. "Mr. Rayburn and your teachers have vouched for your willingness to work, to improve your station in life. Mr. Jenkins has told me how you've managed his store for the last year, part-time, taking a heavy course load and getting straight A's. So. I'm willing to pay for your education provided you work as hard during your senior year as you have in the past and provided you go where I send you and obey their rules."

"Anything," Eric breathed, willing to go to all the way across the other side of the northland to William Jewell in Liberty, at least twenty-five miles.

"Don't you want to know what the rules are?"

"I don't care."

"Mmmm, you might. No drinking, no smoking, no drugs. No fucking around. At all. You'll have to get rid of the earrings, cut your hair. Short. Your course load will include religion classes." Eric blinked. "Those are their rules. You need an attitude adjustment and you need to learn some propriety. I don't have time to kick your ass constantly, so the deal is, you spend this year working on getting into Brigham Young University."

Eric had no idea what or where that was, and apparently his face showed it.

"Mormons. Utah. You go there, you do a good job, you follow their rules. You stay there until you graduate—and I don't give a shit what you study—then you stay another three years for grad school, because I think you can do it. That's the deal and I'll give you a free ride all the way through. Any scholarship money you come up with is fine, but your job is school and don't even think about working during the school year. I'll give you what you need."

Eric knew nothing about Mormons, though he knew where Utah was on a map. It was a long way away, but he sure as hell was not going to pass up this opportunity.

"Yes, sir," he breathed, wondering how his nemesis had turned into his mentor in

the blink of an eye.

“We’ll help you, Eric,” said his science teacher. Eric turned to the man who’d spent the last year torturing him with physics and who’d spend next year torturing him with chemistry. “BYU is a prestigious university and difficult to get into, especially for a non-Mormon who’s not an athlete.”

“But,” Hilliard murmured, “you’re half American Indian and that trumps everything else in that admissions office. With your grades and ACT score, there won’t be a question.”

“You’ll need an ecclesiastical endorsement,” added his English teacher, who was also his guidance counselor, “but I don’t think we’ll have a problem rounding up a preacher somewhere. Do you have a church?”

“He is Osage,” his mother said, her tone sharp, “as Mr. Hilliard just said. He doesn’t go to any white man’s church.”

“He won’t have to,” Jenkins said gruffly, the way he said everything. “My pastor owes me a favor. He’ll do it.”

Hilliard nodded then, satisfied. “Thank you, everyone,” he said, and Eric knew it was settled. Had settled. All around him. Like the snow in a snow globe. Eric felt as if he’d been inside it and gotten his head rattled around. “Eric, you stay.”

Everyone took this as their cue to file out. The door closed quietly after them.

Eric swallowed, not sure how to treat this man, only barely able to look at him, wondering what obeisance would be required, willing to walk away from the deal if Hilliard wanted . . .

“The Whittakers,” he said, low, and Eric snapped to attention, looking Hilliard square in the face. “You know the family?”

“I told you everything I know,” Eric replied, still wary, still suspicious of a trap. “Simone dresses up older than her age and puts out to anybody who’ll have her. I’ve seen her sister. Seen their mother here and there, shootin’ her mouth off, slappin’ the little girl around.” That woman was plain evil.

Hilliard nodded slowly, looking at the floor, his tongue stuck in his cheek. Eric knew that look by now. Thinking. Eric waited long moments before Hilliard decided to speak again; even so, it startled him.

“Simone had planned it to the last detail and was stupid enough to write it down. I don’t know if her mother was in on it, but I suspect so. Simone seems to get vindictive when she doesn’t get what she wants and what she wanted was *you*.”

Eric swallowed. For once in his life, he’d done the right thing, and it had nearly destroyed him.

“Vanessa. The little girl. Simone’s sister. She brought me Simone’s diary. It was all there. Not only did Simone not get you, she lost the rest of her playmates, too. She named names. I’m rounding them up right now.”

Eric’s breath stuck in his throat.

“Tell me something. Would *you* want to go back home to LaVon Whittaker, knowing you’d gone against her? Go back to school knowing that half a dozen *male* juniors and seniors, a teacher, and a couple other grown men with their own families are going to prison because you coughed up the evidence?”

“Fuck no,” he whispered, horrified. LaVon Whittaker, all Eric’s burly classmates and their fathers, the families of the other men who’d done Simone Whittaker—versus one little girl.

“Yeah, me neither. So you think about that. Think about what a twelve-year-old girl did for you just because it was the right thing to do. Don’t let her down, Eric. Don’t let what she did for you be in vain.”

\* \* \* \* \*

#### **4: YOUNG MR. WILDER**

May 1996

And there *he* was again. Tall, dark, and very dangerous.

The senior girls had always flocked around him because he was “hot.” They said he

knew things—things about girls and how to make them feel good.

Well, Vanessa felt good every time she looked at him.

She had watched him for the last year, since she'd gone to see Mr. Hilliard, silent, invisible, wondering when or even if he would see her and acknowledge her. Eric Cipriani would graduate in a month. After that, she would probably see him around town and in the feed store he managed, but she wouldn't see him all the time, like she did now. Every day, she woke up wondering, *hoping* that today would be the day he approached her to say:

“Thank you, Vanessa. You're probably the bravest person I know.” And then maybe he would kiss her. Maybe on the lips, even.

The thought made her catch her breath and get a funny little sensation in the pit of her belly, which always happened when she thought that maybe, just maybe he would like her a little bit more than just as a brave person. Maybe he would come to like her, you know, *that* way.

Because once he graduated, unless he had *that* reason to seek her out, she would have no such easy access to him as she did now, no reason to go to the feed store, no reason to cross his path at all. Vanessa was running out of time.

She stood behind a tree, peeking around it, to watch him. He and his friends sat on the picnic tables just off campus, drinking beer out of longneck bottles and smoking cigarettes while they watched the senior girls, and pointed at a few of them here and there, laughing. Although she didn't know what was funny about the senior girls, she loved his laugh. His smile made her want to smile, too, so she did.

At that moment, his gaze met hers, and he stopped laughing. Stopped smiling. Hurt began to blossom somewhere deep inside her chest and she bit her lip, hoping his expression didn't mean what she thought it meant.

He turned away from her then and his beautiful long black hair floated on the breeze. He didn't respond to the talk going on around him anymore and he took a long drink from his bottle. He threw his cigarette down on the ground and stubbed it out with his silver-tipped cowboy boots the high school girls said had retractable knives in the toes.

He walked away from his friends—away from Vanessa—without a word. Her

attention caught on the way his tight ripped jeans moved over his butt with every step, and there was that funny little feeling in the pit of her belly again.

No “thank you” for Vanessa today. No kiss. She whirled and, her back to the tree, she slid down its trunk to curl in on herself, tamping down the sharp pain in her chest. She managed not to cry about it for two whole months, until cheer camp that summer.

“Vanessa,” drawled Annie Franklin, captain of the squad. “Did you invite Knox to our camp closing exhibition?”

“Yes,” she lied. She hadn’t dared, though she knew very good and well that her access to “that hot prosecutor Knox Hilliard” was the only reason the cheerleaders, prodded by their mothers, had reluctantly recruited her for the varsity squad. Considering Vanessa wasn’t eligible to cheer varsity for two more years, their mothers had lobbied the Alumni Association for an exemption.

“Well? Is he coming?”

“He has a family thing.”

“Did you give him that note?”

“Yes,” she answered truthfully. That was why she hadn’t dared ask him anything else.

“What did he say?”

*Is she out of her fucking mind?!* “He was in a hurry. He just put it in his pocket.”

Annie looked through Vanessa, her mouth pursed. “Maybe he’s gay.”

*Uh, no.* “I don’t know.”

“Hey, Annie!” called the vice captain. “What happened to your Italian stallion?”

Annie’s face darkened and Vanessa’s heart beat a lot faster; she hadn’t seen *him* in almost two months. Anywhere.

“He left,” Annie snapped back.

“Left? Left where?”

“Left town.”

“Where’d he go?”

“Don’t know.”

“Ask his mom.”

“She’s gone, too. It’s like they disappeared off the face of the planet.”

\* \* \* \* \*

*And the Rich Have Their Ice in the Summer*

\* \* \* \* \*

## **5: PLATINUM LININGS**

January 5, 2009

The Chouteau County, Missouri prosecutor fought his way through the crowd of people lining the sidewalk to the courthouse. He shoved aside the cameras and booms, shouldered past disembodied hands holding out micro-recorders, and attempted to shield his eyes from the lights aimed ruthlessly at his face. Out of the din around him, he could understand only his name.

“Mr. Cipriani—!”

“Mr. Cipriani—!”

“Mr. Cipriani—!”

“No comment at this time,” he barked intermittently, trying not to grin. He’d worked and prepared and waited for this moment. He’d woven his web, caught his prey, and rolled them up in silk, right here in front of the courthouse.

Time to start eating.

He reached the steps that led up to the doors and turned to face the crowd of bloggers and reporters. At six A.M. in January, the sky didn’t show even a tinge of pink, making the bright lights from the cameras against the darkness blinding. He held his

hands up for silence and got it.

“Which part of ‘the press conference will be held at ten A.M.’ didn’t you all get?”

That accomplished nothing except to restart the shouting, as he had intended.

They were so easy, especially that prick Glenn Shinkle from the *Chouteau Recorder* who hadn’t realized that newsprint was dead. He’d kept his little twelve-page rag alive for years on Knox’s back, always striving to be the next Bob Woodward. He would have succeeded if he’d just realized that every bit of Knox’s reputed corruption was an elaborately constructed façade and had figured out a way to prove it.

Oh, yeah, Eric had plans for Shinkle.

He shook his head with a chuckle, turned, and opened the door to go in the courthouse. He jerked his head at the deputies on duty and they went out to control the crowd. He bounded up the grand walnut staircase to the second floor, then through the outer door of the prosecutor’s office—

—only to stop cold at the sign stuck on the closed door of the private office toward the back of the bullpen.

**ERIC CIPRIANI**  
**PROSECUTOR**

Knox must have had that placed as a surprise for him, his last act.

He flinched when the lights flickered on and a hand clapped him on the back. “Congrats,” Patrick Davidson said as he brushed in behind Eric, walked to his desk and dropped into the chair to rifle through his files.

“Don’t congratulate me yet,” Eric said over his shoulder. “I still have to get through the press conference this morning.”

Davidson shrugged. “Just keep your eye on that,” he said, pointing to the white board hanging on the wall behind Eric’s old desk, its to-do list printed in Knox’s precise block lettering:

~~GRADUATE FROM COLLEGE 5/99~~  
~~GRADUATE FROM LAW SCHOOL 5/02~~



~~TAKE OVER PROSECUTOR'S OFFICE 1/09~~  
START CAMPAIGN FOR CC PROSECUTOR 1/09  
START CAMPAIGN FOR MO AG 4/10  
MO AG 2012 - 2016  
MO GOVERNOR 2016 - 2024  
1600 PENNSYLVANIA AVE 2024

GET A MOVE ON!!

Eric felt a deep growl of satisfaction welling in his chest. If he stayed on track, he'd be forty-seven when he hit the White House, the perfect age—old enough to quash credibility murmurs and young enough to avoid questions of senility.

As for the public scrutiny that had begun the minute Eric had abruptly taken over as interim prosecutor the month before, well, it'd take him a while and some savvy PR to sort that out. His refusal to distance himself from Knox would make the task more difficult, but Annie had hired a top-notch firm to help. On the other hand, Knox's relatively powerful family had already put its political and financial wheels in motion to get Eric where he wanted to go—and where they wanted him.

Richard Connelly huffed and puffed his way into the office, then to his desk. "Why the long face? You still worried about your juvie record?"

Well, yeah, he was, and Connelly interpreted Eric's silence correctly.

"Nobody cares," he said flatly, "as long as you keep hanging it out there for everyone to see. You *are* the American dream." Davidson made a noise of agreement.

"I got lucky," Eric muttered, ever mindful of the fact that he *couldn't* have done it on his own because he wouldn't have known where to start. "Knox just . . . handed it to me."

"No, he gave you help and guidance," he said. "*You* did the rest. You set your goals and you've worked at them. More importantly, you've kept yourself squeaky clean. Nobody did that for you. You have an impeccable education from a religious university. Your politics are consistent, even though you're as full of shit as Justice is." Eric laughed. "You have an extremely photogenic fiancée who's as well educated and smart as you are."

Future First Lady as of a year from now.”

“The next President and Mrs. Obama, Republican version,” Davidson intoned.

“Not Republican.”

“Yeah, you’re not planning to run on a Libertarian ticket, I bet.”

“I might.”

“You’ll split the conservatives right down the middle.”

“Libertarian does not equal conservative,” Eric reminded him. “I’m not on board with the entire Libertarian party platform, either.”

Connelly grunted. “The Republican leadership’s dying. You could take all the conservatives with you and win as a Libertarian if you make sure to clarify where you differ from the party.”

“And they know that,” Davidson added. “All other conservative issues being equal, they might vote for a candidate who’d decriminalize marijuana and prostitution, but they’ll never go for an isolationist.”

“Which I am not, which is why I haven’t decided yet.”

“But it means the Republicans need you more than you need them.”

Eric didn’t bother to respond to that because it was true. The political landscape was shifting like quicksand underneath the old guard’s feet. Eric was young, outspoken, and had a growing nationwide blog audience. He represented real change, and he intended to capitalize on it. “I have a meeting with Tye Afton next week in Jefferson City.”

Davidson looked at him warily. “You better watch out for him,” he said soberly. “He’s a snake in the grass.”

Eric blinked.

He turned to Connelly. “Do you remember? About fifteen years ago? Afton was involved in some coverup of real estate acquisition and funding when he was on the state House appropriations committee? The governor was livid because he couldn’t prove it, and then that was about the time Knox went nuts, so he had to deal with that, too? Two scandals going at the same time and he couldn’t nail Afton *or* Knox.”

“Really,” Eric drawled.

“Really,” Connelly said. “Missouri’s version of Whitewater. And then he went to Washington. He’s been chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee for so long, it’s

like nothing can touch him.”

“I guess it’s a good thing the FBI likes me, huh?”

“Keep your friends close and your enemies closer,” Connelly said. “I refuse to vote for you for anything but attorney general, but if I wanted to sabotage you, I’d tell you to get on his bandwagon. Afton’s not your friend and I don’t care how powerful he is.”

Justice Hilliard dragged in unexpectedly, dark circles under her eyes and a can of Red Bull in her hand.

Eric, Davidson, and Connelly all stared at her, shocked on two levels. “Uh, Justice, aren’t you supposed to be in the Ozarks tending to Knox?”

“He said I was getting too bossy,” she growled. She thunked the can down on her desk and turned to face them, her hand on her hip. “It’s not like he *died* last month or anything, right?”

All three of the men burst out laughing, but Justice scowled. Her sense of humor usually didn’t show up until after lunch, but that didn’t keep her from being funny by default.

“So . . . you’re here on time.”

“Early, even.”

“By an hour and a half. What’s the occasion?”

She plopped down in her chair and folded her arms across her chest. Glared. “For your information, I can’t sleep without Knox, okay?”

“Justice,” Connelly said. “You can sleep standing up with your eyes open. When did that get to be a problem?”

“Since my house was broken into, my baby was shot at, my home was burnt to the ground, and my husband was killed,” she snapped, wiping her nose with the back of her hand. “All of which I would’ve slept through if Knox hadn’t been there.”

Eric reflected that now might not be the time to tease his predecessor’s wife, all things considered. Nobody wanted to think about the details of *why* Eric had had to take over as Chouteau County prosecutor a month sooner than anybody planned.

Knox’s death and resurrection was still too fresh for gallows humor.

“Sorry,” Connelly finally muttered when he spotted the moisture on her cheek.

She sighed. “Me, too, Richard. I’m just—” She raised a hand helplessly and

dropped it on her desk. “I’m kind of lost right now, you know? Too many changes in too short a time, too many things to think about, too many plans to make. This whole last year, being pregnant and planning a wedding— Having a *baby*, for God’s sake. Then Knox getting shot— Leaving Mercy with Giselle this morning just killed me. She’s three months old and it’s the first time I’ve been away from her since I had her. And we’re supposed to be moving to Utah in May—not like I *want* to go, but it’s important to Knox—and I just don’t know how . . . ”

“You don’t have anything to move, Justice,” Davidson murmured. “It’s a lining. Not much of one and fairly tarnished, but Knox and Mercy *are* alive.”

“Don’t forget the cat,” Eric teased to see if he could get a smile out of her. It worked. Barely.

“I swear, I’ve done nothing but cry for a month,” she muttered, and pulled a box of Kleenex out of her desk drawer.

Eric figured she was perfectly entitled, but he had his doubts about her ability to remain cool and collected in front of a judge today. Or any time in the near future. If he had to send her home, he would.

But he kept his mouth shut about that for the time being. “I’m assuming you left Knox with a bunch of nurses and physical therapists?”

Justice huffed and blew her nose. “Yes. But he wouldn’t let me stick around to supervise them.”

“Terrorize them, you mean.”

“That’s what he said, but it’s so not true.”

Her cell phone rang and she snatched it open without looking at the caller ID. “What,” she snapped, but then her pixie face lit up. “Okay. I love you, too.” She clapped it shut and stuffed it in her purse, picked up her things and scampered out the door, a hurried, “He can’t sleep without me, either,” floating back to them. “Be back later.”

Davidson chuckled. “Later meaning in a couple of months.”

“If ever,” Eric muttered, staring at Justice’s desk, and wondering if she’d ever be back and how fast he could get some new lawyers hired. He was down to four at this point, not including himself, and their docket was full to bursting. Discussing political strategy with his staff wouldn’t get the business at hand done, and the business at hand

was his ticket to the next step of his master plan.

"I'll tell you something," he said, pointing from Connelly to Davidson and back again. "We're getting some secretaries in here. And no more Chouteau County residency program. I'm hiring experienced attorneys from now on."

He took in their amazed stares. "Oh, is that right," Davidson said, and Eric grinned when he heard the approval in that.

"I— *We* are done training newbs. If I hire any new grads, they're going to have to pass the Justice McKinley Hilliard test."

"Oh, hell, *I* wouldn't pass that test," Davidson grumbled, and turned his attention to his latest case. Connelly chuckled.

"Well, boy," said another deep voice from the doorway of the common area. Eric looked up to see Judge Wilson. "You've finally come into your own. Congratulations."

"Thanks."

"I remember when you were standing in front of me in shackles." Eric's mouth tightened a bit. "How long ago was that, anyway?"

*Suck it up, princess. Hold your head high. Face 'em all down and dare 'em to find fault. You aren't going to get anywhere in politics if you let that drag your ass.*

He couldn't count the number of times Knox had said that to him.

"I don't know. Twelve, thirteen years."

"That long! Well, I'm telling you now. If you pull anything like what Knox pulled, I'll have you disbarred. I'm tired of all that bullshit and you know every one of his tricks."

"Aw, Wilson, that's not fair. I don't know every trick."

He pointed his age-gnarled finger at Eric. "Don't push me or you're going to find out what it's like to have your political career go up in smoke before you really catch fire." He looked at Justice's desk, which was as clean as it had been when she left for maternity leave four months before. Adam and Lesley hadn't come in yet, but it was early. "I'm really gonna miss that crafty bastard," Wilson muttered, a catch in his voice, as he left.

Eric turned and opened the door to the office that Knox had occupied for fourteen years after he'd deposed *his* predecessor at gunpoint. Now it belonged to Eric. It seemed

so . . . lifeless . . . without Knox's overpowering personality, but it was his now. He would turn it upside down and pull it inside out, starting today at ten o'clock.

He had a nasty past that had caught up to him and a brilliant future within his grasp.

He meant to meet them both head-on.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **6: TOO BIG TO CRY**

The only television Vanessa "Granny" Whittaker had ever bought for her inn hung in the kitchen for the staff. She had no time for pleasure viewing and she got her news from the internet, but her chief financial officer had had a TV installed in his suite the day before. He'd already read everything in the Whittaker House library, and his own library had gone up in flames last month.

His doctors had restricted him from most of the inn's chores, his love-struck nurses all made sure he complied, his unsympathetic physical therapist controlled nearly every move he made, and he'd sent his wife home because she ran roughshod over his medical team. Since he couldn't carry anything as heavy as a baby, the wife had taken their daughter with her; since he wasn't allowed to drive, he couldn't go anywhere because no one at Whittaker House had the time or inclination to take him.

In the five days since he'd moved into Whittaker House, he'd caught up on all the accounting, sent all the quarterly reports to their corporate partner, compiled the financial data they needed to embark on Whittaker House's next expansion, sent the paperwork to the county for zoning permissions, and filed and paid their taxes. Daily bookkeeping only took an hour if he was caught up, so he had to wait until tomorrow to do anything further.

One possibility for his entertainment, the Mormon missionaries who lived in one of Whittaker House's cottages, were always busy. At the moment, they were doing their laundry and wouldn't have time to talk to him until after lunch, if even then. The rest of

their week was booked solid, which left them no time to indulge him in the deep theological discourse he enjoyed.

Ol' Curtis Lowe wanted no truck with him; in Curtis's opinion, any man who refused to fish and hunt was completely immoral.

Two of Whittaker House's permanent residents had their own routines, which did not include him, and the third one, his chess partner, was in a meeting.

The production crew for Vanessa's cooking show, *Vittles: Gourmet Weeds and Roadkill*, wouldn't arrive until Saturday, which meant he had to wait almost a week for something different to occupy his mind and time.

So he was bored.

Vanessa didn't think there existed anything more dangerous to her peace of mind than a wounded and bored, spouseless and childless, inn-bound Knox Hilliard roaming around Whittaker House with nothing to do and no one to talk to.

She'd warned him against fiddling with the food; normally, he wouldn't dare, but today . . . Alain, Whittaker House's executive chef, had already blown up at him once for being in the way and a second time for daring to suggest that a delicate gooseberry curd needed pepper.

And it was only ten o'clock in the morning.

"Sister Whittaker?"

She looked up from a half-butchered animal to see the pair of elders clad only in jeans and sweatshirts shivering in the doorway of her butcher shop. Knox thought it funny to request that the missionaries address her in that manner and, being simpatico with Knox, they obliged.

Obnoxious bastard.

"What's he done this time?"

"Alain said to tell you to get him out of the kitchen before he goes on strike."

"Oh, shit," she breathed. She dropped her knife, ripped off her paper coverall and surgical gloves, and ran to the mansion to keep her normally even-tempered chef from leaving for the day or, worse, quitting altogether. She burst through the back door into the kitchen, but stopped when she noticed the stillness amongst the skeleton kitchen staff, who had all stopped to watch television. Knox leaned against a stainless steel table, his

attention as riveted as everyone else's.

She looked up at the screen, then stiffened when she saw a face she hadn't seen in thirteen years, and could have gone the rest of her life without seeing—the face of the man she'd spent the last several months thinking about.

Couldn't stop thinking about.

Wrapped up in a fine black wool coat, he stood on the top step of the Chouteau County courthouse while snow fell around him, onto his broad shoulders and into his short black hair. Mr. Connelly and Mr. Davidson, looking much older and grayer than she remembered, flanked him, and two very young attorneys stood off to the side. None of the prosecutors held any papers or hid behind a pedestal of any sort.

He had a narrow, closely trimmed line of black facial hair along the sharp edges of his jaw and chin from sideburn to sideburn. His dark expression was tinged with the slight arrogance of success and power. Her breath caught in her throat at the changes time had wrought in his features, the changes that made him more beautiful than she remembered, than she could have imagined.

\*

*"Yes, Mr. Shinkle?"*

*"Mr. Cipriani, since you started your political blogging alongside Justice McKinley Hilliard, you've gathered quite a following of self-proclaimed libertarians. Do you see yourself as the man capable of making the Libertarian party a threat to the Republican party?"*

*"Capable of it? Yes. Do I want to? I don't know yet. I'm meeting with Republican leaders at their invitation so I can find out if they can change enough to rebuild its base—the conservative right and libertarians—or even if they want to. But I'm not sure that the conservative right will abandon Republicans for the Libertarian party once they understand the sheer diversity of libertarian thought. A lot of people who live their lives by libertarian philosophy don't like parts or all of the Libertarian party platform."*

*"So you would be open to an alliance with the Republican party?"*

*"I'm open to it, but don't count your chickens."*



*“Would you classify your viewpoints as socially liberal and fiscally conservative then?”*

*“I classify them as common sense.”*

*“Then—”*

*“Glenn, give somebody else a chance to ask a question. You can read my blog or walk into my office and talk to me any time you want, which you do anyway. Yes?”*

*“Mr. Cipriani, two questions. You came to blog popularity on Ms. McKinley’s coattails. First, did you hire her specifically to help further your own political ambitions and second, does she influence your viewpoints?”*

*“First, I wasn’t going to hire her at all. Knox did. Even if I had hired her, it wouldn’t have been for her influence, but it sure as hell doesn’t hurt to have her on my side. Second, my opinions were formed well before I began reading her work, before I ever met her, before she began working for me. When she figured out what my opinions were, then she started nagging me to blog.”*

*“You’ve opened your criminal record to the public with almost nothing redacted. Why?”*

*“At this point in my career and with where I want to go, I can’t afford not to. I’m ushering in a new era in this office, which begins with total transparency. I’m able and willing to put my cards on the table for you and the voters to see that my juvenile criminal record isn’t indicative of my career in this office, nor is it harmful to the office. My conviction rate is eighty-two percent. For the last six and a half years, I’ve managed the office itself as well as having a half-time trial schedule. For the last month, I’ve been acting prosecutor while Knox recovered from his gunshot wounds. If people believe in me and want to vote for me, the least I can do is respect them by telling them everything there is to know about me.*

*“The press kit we’ve prepared contains my CV, full disclosure of my personal and business finances along with tax returns, and my connection to everybody of import in the metro. Dirk Jelarde, one of the county’s public defenders, is my business partner; his CV and financial records are also included. You’re free to compare and contrast my criminal history with my academic performance, and my service to Chouteau County and the state of Missouri to date. Copies of the transcript of my trial up to and including the*

*dismissal are available for purchase in the clerk's office."*

*"So you're not willing to be that transparent."*

*"I'm not using taxpayer money to do it, no. If you want it, you pay for copying."*

*"And Simone Whittaker is still part of your life?"*

*"She will always be part of my life and I am grateful to her every day for what she did for me."*

\*

Vanessa clapped both her hands over her mouth, her eyes wide, feeling as if her chest had been kicked in, unable to breathe. She sprinted across the kitchen and up the stairs to her office. She knew Knox watched her go, but he wouldn't follow. She dropped in her plush office chair and whirled to stare blankly out the fourteen-foot floor-to-ceiling diamond-mullioned Palladian windows, a knot so deep in her soul she didn't know how to untangle it.

"What about what *I* did for you, Eric?" she whispered. "Simone took your life away from you, but *I* gave it back."

But really, Vanessa knew she should have no need for Eric Cipriani to be grateful to her for what she had done; she lived in her reward:

Acres and acres of rolling hills currently covered in brownish lawn and stripped trees that would grow emerald and lush come spring,

A large lake with a manicured island and lacy white gazebo in the middle of it connected to the shore by an arched concrete gothic revival bridge,

A collection of little gothic revival brick cottages arranged in an artfully scattered pattern and connected by cobblestone walking paths interspersed with random flower beds,

A carefully camouflaged playground and swimming pool toward the southwest edge of the property, and

Decorative placement of peach, apple, and cherry trees, and more strategically arranged flower beds.

Though she couldn't see it from the office, across the highway lay the construction

site for another collection of gothic revival buildings: shops for the selling of local handcrafted goods and food, hunting and fishing gear, and other high-end goods and services, including a spa.

In Vanessa's office hung a bona fide Dalí. On another wall hung Whittaker House itself in oils-on-canvas, painted by the architect who'd built it and had risen to prominence in her field by doing so. Downstairs in the grand parlor hung another valuable painting done by superstar artist Ford, whose day gig consisted of raiding corporations. Owning those paintings gave her a great deal of cachet and somewhat of a nest egg should she need to sell.

*I am grateful to her every day for what she did for me.*

So Vanessa should also be grateful for what her sister had done, but she couldn't muster it at the moment.

"Vanessa?"

She sighed at the soft female voice from the threshold behind her. "I should've locked the door," Vanessa muttered.

"I'm sorry. Um, Knox said . . ."

Oh, how Vanessa hoped Knox didn't know or suspect. She'd taken his inability to read body language for granted so long that it surprised her when she caught flashes of insight in his expression. "I didn't know you were coming back."

Vanessa heard the footsteps, the snick of the door closing, the poof of the leather sofa as Justice settled in, and the snuffs of an infant warm and safe in her mother's arms.

"He never thanked me," Vanessa whispered, hoping Justice couldn't hear her, but she couldn't not say it aloud. Her eyes blurred with moisture and her nose stung. "He'll publicly thank Simone, but what about me?"

"He can't," Justice said carefully. "You were a minor and you testified in a closed courtroom for a reason. Your name and all identifying information were redacted from the transcripts to keep you safe."

Indeed. Simone's diary had destroyed many men's lives that day—except for the only life Simone and LaVon had intended to destroy. With only one simple goal in Vanessa's twelve-year-old mind, it had never occurred to her what could happen to her, and without Knox to protect her both legally and physically, she may not have lived this

long.

But that didn't make her feel any better. Eric could have referred to her anonymously.

"Is there something you haven't told me?" Justice asked after a moment. "About Eric and you, I mean?"

Only the one pertinent detail she didn't want *anyone* to know, which Knox would probably be able to deduce from her shocked reaction and melodramatic exit.

Vanessa drew a deep breath. "Does he remember me?"

Another pause. "I don't see how he couldn't. He has to deal with your mother and your sister nearly every day."

Vanessa thought about that a minute, unable to discern what that might mean. "You know," she said after clearing her throat, forcing herself to sound halfway normal. "Until you started planning your wedding last year, I hadn't thought about him in years."

That was the absolute truth; she only wished it could have remained so.

"I'm sorry."

"I mean, I should have at least gone to see Knox in the hospital. It's not every day your dad dies and then wakes up right before his autopsy."

"So . . . your real reason for not coming to the wedding was so you wouldn't have to see Eric."

It sounded so damned stupid—and selfish—when someone else said it aloud, but . . .

"No. I couldn't possibly have come," she murmured. "It was just another reason to say no. I'm sorry."

Justice sighed. "Oh, Vanessa, don't. You have no idea how much Knox depends on you, Whittaker House, to be here, solid. No drama. He needs to know there's one thing in his life that's always status quo. You being *here* running Whittaker House, not at the hospital hovering and crying— It gave him a sense of security, like there was one normal thing in his life he could count on."

Vanessa looked around her chair at Justice then. "Are you serious?"

"Vanessa!" she said with an irritated scowl. "I wouldn't lie about something like that just to make you feel better. If I thought you were being a bitch about it, I'd tell you."

She would, too.

“I already suspected,” Justice grumbled. “I wasn’t sure why or how deep it ran. He’s never said anything about you. You’ve never said anything about him. Simone and LaVon don’t even mention your name because they’re so terrified of Knox.”

*LaVon, you or Simone open your mouths, I got a bullet with your name on it and already nineteen reasons to use it. Vanessa knows to come to me immediately for any reason.*

“It’s like none of them know you, like it never happened, like you have no connection to Eric or to LaVon or Simone Whittaker. I’m not even sure any of them have ever seen *Vittles* or even know about it.”

Vanessa’s mouth tightened.

A brisk rap on the thick wooden door made Vanessa sigh again, even as it opened to admit the one man she didn’t want to see right now. “Good morning, *Mister Thompson*.”

“Mornin’, Vanessa. Justice.” Vanessa’s third permanent resident sauntered in with the languid grace of a man accustomed to prancing around on stage in front of thousands of screaming fans, then sat on her desk. “Did I interrupt somethin’?”

“You always interrupt something, Nash,” Vanessa returned dryly. “Go find somewhere else to stay.”

“See, this is why I like you. You’re prickly.”

“Only to you.”

“An’ why is that?”

“I don’t like you. Never have.”

“If you hated me that much, you’d either rat me out to the tabloids or kick me out and you ain’t done either yet. Gives me hope I can weasel my way into your heart.”

“I don’t rat you out because I don’t want the paparazzi down here any more than you do. Which you know. I haven’t kicked you out yet because I charge you three times what I’d charge anyone else. And yet, you stay. More dollars than sense.”

“Aw, c’mon, Vanessa. Tons o’ women want my attention.”

“Prepubescent girls and old ladies, you mean.” And no wonder. Nash Piper—*Mister John Thompson*—was striking: black hair, hazel eyes, ruddy skin, and carved features mostly hidden by the full mustache and beard he wore in an effort to render himself

unrecognizable. He had a sinfully seductive voice and an otherworldly talent on any stringed instrument ever made—particularly a banjo. “Go play chess with Knox. He’s as bored as you are.”

“Not in the mood for *chess*.”

Ah.

Nash looked over at Justice speculatively. “Ya know,” he said, “lately, I’ve been thinkin’ about both of you at the same time, all naked and on me. An’ each other.” He shivered. “The way I look at it is it’s y’all’s duty to arrange that for me, seein’ as how you’re all about givin’ the guests what they want.”

Justice began to laugh and Vanessa couldn’t help her reluctant chuckle. No matter how annoying Nash could be, his outrageous behavior did seem to cheer her up when she least expected it.

“C’mon, neither one of you can tell me you wouldn’t like to be able to say you had sex with Nash Piper. An’ Justice, I’m a helluva lot cuter than that old man you married for his money.”

“That ‘old man’ is forty. You’re thirty-seven. *He* gets me hot and bothered. You . . . don’t.”

Nash curled his lip at her, then cast Vanessa an expectant look. She waved toward the door. “Not interested in being another notch in your bedpost. Get lost, Studmuffin.”

He got to his feet and sauntered to the door. “You know what? That’s it. You ladies have insulted me for the last time. Vanessa, I’m gonna go sit in the grand parlor in front of your paintin’ and jack off in front of everybody.”

“Okay. Don’t get your thing caught in your zipper.”

He flipped her off and slammed the door behind him.

“Feel better?” Justice asked, still chuckling.

Vanessa nodded.

“Kinda makes you wonder why you’re sitting here pining over a small-time prosecutor when you could be sleeping with a smart, funny, handsome man who happens to be a country legend, huh?”

Vanessa blinked. Glanced at the door Nash had just exited. Pursed her lips.

“I’m not pining,” she finally said.

“Uh huh.”

“I have no reason to pine. I mean, we’ve never even *spoken* to each other.”

“And that appears to be the problem, right there.”

Vanessa sighed, unable to understand it herself, much less find a way to explain it. “Look, it just— It caught me off guard, okay? Knox has always wanted to keep his Kansas City life separate from his Mansfield life. Since I don’t want to hear about my family it’s never been a problem. I don’t ask. He doesn’t tell. It works for us. But then—”

“But then I asked you to be a bridesmaid and told you Eric would be your escort . . .”

“And found out that he works for Knox and has for—” She waved a hand. “—years. I—”

“Freaked out.”

Vanessa took a deep breath. “Bad. My watches melted. I mean, he left town when he was eighteen and I never— He just— He left.”

“I . . . don’t understand.”

Vanessa sighed. “Never mind. It’s stupid. Least said, soonest mended.”

Leather creaked. The baby snuffed. Justice arose from the couch and went to the door. “Well, time to go put the husband down for his nap and bolt him to the bed in case he starts channeling Emeril again.” Justice paused at the threshold. “I’ll lock the office door. If you want to talk . . .”

No, she didn’t. She’d pretty much spilled her guts, and whatever she hadn’t spilled, Justice would be able to deduce anyway.

Dammit.

“Thanks.”

The door closed quietly.

“He doesn’t remember,” she whispered, as if staring at her holdings, her wealth, her dream that she’d built here in the heart of the Ozark Mountains, could make that all better for her. “*How* can he not remember?”

Perhaps she would go visit Laura today as she always did when her spirit flagged and Nash couldn’t tease her out of it.

She hauled herself out of her chair and went to immerse herself in her to-do list

before she completely broke down.

Vanessa finished butchering the porcupines, cleaned the butchery, and headed to the back of the property, where her cottage sat a little away from the others. A fragrant bouquet of pink flowers on the counter in her kitchenette surprised her and she buried her nose in them briefly.

She went up the stairs to her bedroom, not surprised to see Nash sprawled over her bed, playing Tetris on a cheap hand-held. Naked. She went right past him, entered her enormous walk-in closet, dug out her whites.

“What’s got your knickers in a twist, doll?”

“Nothing,” she muttered, not sure if he could hear her through the wall, amongst the clothes. “Thank you for the flowers. How’d your meeting go?”

“Oh, fuck that. You don’t care. C’mere and lemme love on ya.”

She pursed her lips as she held one of many double-breasted chef coats in her hands and stared at it blankly. It wouldn’t help. It hadn’t helped. Not for the last eight months.

“Nash, how long have we been sleeping together?”

“I dunno,” he answered absently as the tinny music from his Tetris game got faster and faster. “When’d I crash my plane? Two years ago? Took me almost two months to get here, so . . . Yeah. Not quite two years.”

“You want to get married?” she blurted, startling herself even as the Tetris game blipped off abruptly. She heard the rustle of her bedclothes and the pad of bare feet on Persian rug, then that hippie face atop that ripped and cut rodeo body appeared in the threshold of the closet. She noted his rugged beauty absently, the habit of a longstanding, comfortable relationship where nothing was a surprise.

She preferred him this way, with carefully dyed shoulder-length black hair instead of his natural—and all-too-recognizable—dark blond hair, immaculately cut, and clean-shaven face.

“What’s wrong with you?” he asked quietly. “You been spacin’ out on me for months and now you’re wantin’ to get married?”

She flinched.

“*Hell*, no, I don’t wanna get married,” he said. “Particularly to *you*. An’ *you* don’t wanna get married. Particularly to *me*. What if I’d said yes?”



“I don’t know,” she murmured. “I just—”

Nash reached into the closet and caught her hand, tugging her out and sitting on the edge of the bed. He pulled her down onto his lap so she straddled his hips. He wrapped his arms around her and stroked her back. “What happened? Somethin’s had you all knotted up for months.”

Vanessa’s mouth tightened because she wanted to cry again, but how low had she sunk that she’d cry over a man—a boy—she’d never spoken to, while being held by her lover?

“Um, the— Let’s just call it the fish that got away.”

He started. “Taight?”

She huffed. “No! Not Sebastian. With him, it was like— Well, like you and me. Only shorter. And public.”

“Then—”

“I don’t want to talk about it, Nash.”

He pursed his lips. “Does this mean I’m not gettin’ laid right now?”

“I’m going to Laura’s, so I need to make some cookies.”

He said nothing for a moment, then, “You been doin’ an awful lot of that lately.” Yes, she had. The ladies over at Laura’s house were beginning to worry and wonder, too. He sighed. “Then I guess it’s back to chess, but damn, Hilliard’s beginnin’ to bore me stupid.”

That was a lie. He was waiting for Knox to wake up from his nap so they could get back to the game they’d had going for days—

“Oh. Your Raumschach boards came in today’s delivery.”

Nash’s face lit up and he practically dumped Vanessa off his lap to jump into his clothes. “He know yet?”

That made Vanessa chuckle in spite of herself. Two years now, any weekend when Knox could spare a minute away from inn business, they’d played chess, both men on equal footing, neither able to get the advantage of the other. At first, Knox had thought playing chess with an uneducated country music stud from the wilds of Montana would waste all of five minutes. Nash had never found a casual player who could beat him, so he’d assumed Knox had no more skill than any other opponent he’d ever had. They were

brilliant, perfectly matched, very competitive—and they were both happy to have an equal to play without getting involved with chess clubs.

“Going out to Rocky Ridge?” Knox asked an hour later, shuffling into the kitchen as she pulled the last cookie sheet from the oven, dodging her scurrying kitchen and waitstaff like the pro she was.

Vanessa didn’t bother to answer; she only made peanut butter cookies for one reason.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him wipe his hand across his mouth, as if troubled. “Ah, Vanessa. About this morning— Eric didn’t mean—”

“Did you see your chess boards?”

“Yeah, thanks but—”

“Probably better go find *Mister Thompson* before he has a fit.”

“Vanessa, he only meant—”

Her mouth tightened.

“It’s just that your mother and sister—”

“Stop. Just stop talking. Right now.”

“But he—”

“Knox! Shut up! You can go on back to Justice and gossip and theorize all you want, but I don’t want to hear it. I don’t want to know. And don’t make Alain yell at you again or I’ll kick you out of the kitchen completely.”

Knox sighed, but then winced in pain when he took a step. She looked at him fully then and for the first time since he’d taken up temporary permanent residence to recuperate from his injuries, she noticed how pale, how thin and gaunt he looked.

“I am apparently not feeding you well enough.”

His mouth twitched. “I don’t dare get corn-fed around you and your knives. As far as I know, human is the only meat you haven’t put on the table yet and you’re as likely to serve *me* for dinner as porcupine.”

“With a dandelion and mustard greens salad under a rose-petal and blackberry vinaigrette. I think Granny Clampett would approve.”

“And Hannibal Lecter.”

“And *why* is he the bad guy? He’s just *epicurious*.”

Knox snorted.

She handed him a breadbasket and he piled a dozen cookies in it. “Orange juice?” she asked sarcastically.

“Is there any other drink in the world? No, there is not.”

“Your doctor told you to lay off the sauce a while back.”

“You know what? As long as Justice doesn’t know and you keep your mouth shut, what my doctor wants doesn’t matter.”

Vanessa pursed her lips. “Don’t you think the suicide-by-sugar plan’s kind of stupid now that you got your inheritance and that family you always wanted?”

“Well, you’re probably right about that, but until I decide to get on the wagon, you don’t breathe a word.”

She signaled a server to take the food out to the grand parlor so Knox wouldn’t try to carry it himself. “So. *Dad*. You think you can handle the phones and play chess at the same time?”

He smirked. “Yeah, I think so. Give my love to Laura.”

“Sure thing.”

\* \* \* \* \*

## 7: LOW-RENT RENDEZVOUS

By mid-afternoon, the office teemed and thrummed with the comings and goings of attorneys, county deputies, Kansas City cops, state troopers, criminals, and witnesses—  
—just another day in a prosecutor’s office.

Eric sat at Knox’s—*his*—desk sorting through a handful of very old résumés and wondered if he should try to get in touch with any of these people.

A state trooper burst through his door, dragging a blond twelve-year-old boy who turned the air blue with profanities he’d learned direct from his mother and grandmother.

Eric sighed and pointed to one of the wooden chairs in front of his desk.

The officer snarled at the boy and cuffed him to the chair without having to be told. With one slap upside the kid's head, he stalked out, his dignity offended by having to wrestle with the brat.

The boy spat at Eric, but it missed his mark; it was an old tactic and every cop knew to park the kid far enough away from any available human target.

"What'd you do this time, Junior?"

His nostrils flared. "Fuck you, Cipriani," he returned. As usual.

What a waste of skin, doomed from birth. It wasn't the kid's fault; he hadn't chosen his family. When he still wouldn't answer the question, Eric went back to reading résumés, knowing his phone would ring at any moment—

"Cipriani."

"I want to file charges on that boy of yours."

Eric sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose, not bothering to correct the assertion, considering "that boy of yours" was county shorthand for "Simone Whittaker's kid, you know, the kid with the same name as the prosecutor."

*Yes, it is true that Simone Whittaker had a son approximately nine months after I left for college and claims that I am his father. DNA testing has confirmed that I am not. Your press kit includes copies of the lab tests and all court documents, including his original and amended birth certificates.*

"Do something with him. That's the fifth time in two months he's taken off with something he could pawn."

"What was it this time?"

"Brand new CB radio."

"They still make those?"

"Eric!"

"Sam, I don't even know why you bother calling. Just send me the damned bill. As usual."

He hung up and looked at the boy, who stared off to his left, out the window at the bleakness of winter. He did that a lot, Eric had noticed, as if he were far away, perhaps on a pirate ship or the space shuttle on his way to Mars. Maybe in a car running two hundred

on a NASCAR track or pumping a bicycle in France, a hundred other cyclists on his tail. He remembered those fantasies, the escape, the need to get away from his life. Too bad the kid couldn't read; there were whole libraries available to lose himself in.

Thirty-two-year-old Eric Cipriani looked at the twelve-year-old Eric Cipriani, wondering how many more Whittaker-spawned issues would crop up today.

"I hate your mother," Eric said matter-of-factly. That got the kid's attention and his eyes narrowed at him. "Look, tell me what you need. I'll give it to you. Food? Money? Clothes? A place to stay besides juvie? What? Just tell me."

He stared at Eric stonily.

"Dammit. What do I have to do to get you to act like a normal human being? You *cannot* keep stealing shit to pawn, and I'm about this close to getting social services out to your house."

The kid swallowed, but otherwise showed no reaction.

Eric sighed. "Better the devil you know, eh?"

Eric Junior still wouldn't answer, but Eric knew. Living with Simone and LaVon had to be hell, but at least it was familiar. And Eric Senior had to tread lightly; his life was inextricably woven with those women's lives. Any action he took against them, legal or otherwise, could be seen as retaliatory—and he was in the power position in a county with a corrupt reputation.

It would look bad and for the sake of his career, Eric couldn't allow himself to get caught up in their drama any more than they forced him to.

"Deputy!" he bellowed finally, and a deputy showed up in a moment or two. He gestured to Junior, and the deputy unlocked the bracelets to haul him off to the juvenile facility, not a word between them.

None were necessary, but the baleful glance the boy shot back at Eric made him catch his breath with the memory of a little girl who had looked at him that way long ago. Her eyes were just that color of brilliant turquoise and told him everything that was in her heart.

*Please talk to me. Please don't make me go back home to my mother and my sister with nothing to show for what I did for you.*

Guilt hit him in the same place it always did, low in his gut, sharp, a white-hot fire

poker piked into his belly.

He hated dealing with Simone's kid. Two or three times a week, he lived through the day he had walked away from his savior, the little girl who'd begged for some acknowledgment from the big badass of Chouteau High. He owed her so much, not the least of which a simple "thank you," but he'd turned his back on her, too humiliated that a twelve-year-old girl had done what no one else could or would, too afraid to talk to her in case someone accused him of rape again, too aware that she had saved his life—

It never went away, that vile concoction of shame and regret, humiliation and fervent gratitude that had pooled in the bottom of his soul for the last thirteen years.

That kid needed something from him or he wouldn't go to such lengths to get his attention, but Eric couldn't figure it out. Apparently, he continued to fail whatever test the boy kept giving him and it frustrated Eric to no end, but if he wouldn't speak . . .

Eric's phone rang again. He didn't have to wonder who would call so soon after his namesake's arrest, but he checked the name on the display anyway.

"LaVon, good afternoon," he said, affecting a cheer he didn't feel. "Why are you up so early? Shouldn't you be hung over or something?"

"You half-breed bastard," she snarled at him.

"Have I thanked you yet today, LaVon?"

Nothing else drove Simone and LaVon Whittaker madder than when he rubbed their noses in the fact that their machinations had only served to make him fairly powerful.

"Oh, fuck you."

"So are you calling about the press conference or Satanette's spawn?"

"What'd you do with him?"

"You know where he is and you know I'm going to keep him at least overnight."

"You think he can suck you off *all* night?"

Eric yawned.

"Simone's on her way up there to get him and you better have him ready."

"LaVon, you know the drill. He stays until I say he can go."

He hung up in the middle of one of her tirades questioning his parentage, which wasn't an entirely unreasonable thing for her to question. He questioned it often enough himself.

Another knock at his door and Eric looked up to see his youngest prosecutor poke her head in his door. “Simone’s here.”

*No shit.* “Get rid of her.”

“Eric, let me get a restraining order on her and be done with it.”

Eric cocked an eyebrow at her. She sighed and disappeared, closing the door behind her. Poor Lesley, always having to deal with Simone and LaVon Whittaker since Justice had passed that chore onto Adam, who had passed it on as soon as he could get away with it. It’d always been the low man’s job.

He heard Lesley’s stern voice, then the inevitable screeching. She had little patience for the entire business and would have Simone dragged out by a deputy the minute Simone dropped the first F-bomb, which usually took under ten seconds.

Eric shook his head and wondered what it would take to get Simone Whittaker out of his life, then decided that nothing short of her death could solve the problem.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **8: NEEDS MUST, WHEN THE DEVIL DRIVES**

April 2009

Vanessa looked at the printout of the obituary Knox had sent to her via email with the entire message in the subject line:

### **GO TO THIS**

There were very few things in which he brooked no argument and she knew from experience that this would be one of them. She nearly told him where to shove it, but his head would explode and that would not be pretty.

Knox's motives bothered her. He never had just one reason for anything he did and he almost never explained himself beforehand, so she could only assume he had put some scheme into motion that involved more than simply attending a funeral.

Well. If he had any bright ideas about using Simone's death to force Vanessa back to Chouteau County so Eric could conveniently run into her, then she would make sure that backfired on him.

There were ways around Knox Hilliard.

When she'd finished packing a duffle and garment bag, she clattered down the stairs and out the front door of her cottage. She had packed carefully, as she had very little trunk room and absolutely nowhere to hang her garment bag. She briefly considered hitching the trailer to her car, but then decided that wouldn't be necessary for a short stay in a town where she wouldn't be socializing.

Had to be on a weekend, too.

Dammit.

Well, better now, in April, than June, she supposed. Whittaker House had no guests other than her permanent residents. Nash had holed himself up in his suite for the past week "to work," he said (whatever that meant), and would not tolerate disruptions other than room service. Her only concern was for Friday and Saturday dinner and how her absence would affect the mood of the diners who came as much for Vanessa's celebrity as her food.

She went to her office to make a to-do list for Knox, hoping he could plow through some of it.

"Damn," she muttered when she checked her calendar. "He'll have to go to that zoning meeting by himself if I'm not back." That wouldn't earn her any points with the zoning board, considering a special meeting of the county government had to be called every time Vanessa wanted to do so much as plant a daisy. Everyone loved Knox, true, but Vanessa was the face of and driving force behind Whittaker House; the next thing she wanted to do would affect a lot of people—and a lot of those people didn't want things to change.

"Shit."

At the end of the drive, she waited for traffic to clear off the highway. Looking in



her rearview mirror, she was struck again with the stately, elegant beauty of her home, her life's work, her vision come to thriving and prospering life.

*She will always be part of my life and I am grateful to her every day for what she did for me.*

Vanessa clenched her teeth. "So help me, if this is about what happened in January . . ." she muttered as she pulled off her property.

Chouteau City, Missouri, the Chouteau County seat.

She'd left it at sixteen, emancipated, graduated, matriculated, and headed for Indiana. She hadn't been back to it in years and would never have gone back but for Knox's imperious command.

Vanessa's mood did not improve during the four-hour drive northward. She made phone calls to her allies on the county commission to warn them that she might not be able to make the zoning hearing Wednesday. She couldn't estimate how long she'd be gone, but there were going to be a lot of unhappy people around the Ozarks, and she would hear every syllable of it, loudly and with much repetition.

"I might as well have gone to the wedding," she snarled at no one. Her jaw clenched tighter and tighter as she neared her exit and then there it was: Chouteau City.

She sucked in a tortured breath as she zipped through town to a motel close to the courthouse. Once she'd parked and sat for a moment, hearing her engine click as it cooled, she allowed one moment of indulgence to wonder what *he* was doing right this very minute.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **9: TIPPING POINT**

"I think I'm going to lose my mind, right this very minute," Eric muttered to himself as he surveyed the chaos of his dojo, crammed with students and their parents. How had

he lost control of his life so fast? Knox had been gone a mere four months, and already Eric was in over his

head. He looked at the clock; only half an hour to go before it would be time to close up shop and go back to the courthouse for the rest of the evening.

“EricEricEric!” squealed six little girls as they scrambled toward him. Dressed identically in white karate gis, their waists wrapped with little white and yellow belts, they jockeyed for position around him, which was kinda cute in a kitten sort of way.

“Yes, ladies?” he asked gravely, giving them his full attention. Kids. What a mess.

Too bad teaching kids’ karate was as close as he would ever get to being a father. He regretted that a bit.

“Will you come see us in our school program Saturday night?”

He pretended to consider that and watched them get antsy and antsy as he dragged his thinking out. “Well,” he said, wondering if Annie would blow her top, “I’ll have to check my calendar, but it’s a possibility.”

They all bounced up and down and squealed yet again. He supposed that in the world of ten-year-old girls, that was as good as a yes. Which, in this case, it was, and they knew that as well as he did. The six of them damn near knocked him on his ass with their enthusiastic hugs, then they bolted off to tell their parents that Sensei Eric would grace the hallowed halls of Chouteau Elementary with his presence come Saturday.

“Dude, you can’t keep this up,” said his partner as he brushed past Eric with gloves, foot pads, and other assorted equipment on his way to the back room.

Eric said nothing. His business was going to go down the tubes if he didn’t change something and fast. “Hey,” he called finally as he followed Dirk into the back. “What if we changed up our hours?”

“To what? Sunday between one and one-thirty in the morning? Because that’s about how much time you seem to have.”

Dirk tossed foot pads in their bin. Once that was done, they began working together to put the rest of the equipment away.

“I’ve only been in that office for three months. Four if you count the interim. It’ll shake out.”

“That’s all it takes for some of these kids’ parents to get nasty. Too bad you can’t

quit your job.”

Eric grunted.

“How did Knox do it?”

“Knox had a bad case of insomnia, that’s how he did it. Well. Until he started sleeping with Justice, that is; after that, things started slipping. And *I* don’t have a photographic memory.”

“How did you do it when Knox was in the hospital?”

“Dirk, think about that a minute. It was December. How much does *your* office have to do between Thanksgiving and New Year’s, especially considering county government pretty much shut down waiting for news on Knox?”

Dirk stopped what he was doing and looked at Eric as he wiped the sweat from his dark brown brow. “Point taken. But now it’s April and you’re drowning and it’s time to figure something out. It might not matter so much if the economy weren’t kicking our butts, but it is and these people pay for *you*.”

Eric’s lips pressed together. “You know, maybe they’re going to have to deal with it. Twelve classes, six classes each kids and adults—and every one of those people knows where I work. Why should any reasonable person expect me to teach every single one of them *and* do my job?”

“Yeah, but we both have staff—and they know that, too. They expect the bosses to be able to cut and run when they need to.”

“You’re fully staffed. I have exactly six attorneys—one of whom is a new grad and another who is moving to Provo in a month. I should have ten attorneys and I *still* don’t have any secretaries. I just don’t have time, Dirk. I’m too busy hauling water to dig a well.” He paused, then grumbled, “I barely have time to kiss Annie goodnight.”

Dirk very pointedly said nothing, which said everything. Eric sighed. “Well. I *do* have one trick up my sleeve. If she’ll agree to it.”

“Who?”

“Giselle Kenard. She’s a black belt and she trained with Mill, same as us.”

Dirk grunted and walked back out to the dojo floor. “Won’t make a bit of difference, though, if you’re not here—and that’s the bottom line.”

Eric said nothing. Dirk directed his two oldest children to start on their dojo chores,

then Eric and Dirk went to take their places in front of the class of adults who were just finishing up. Their highest-ranking student had taught the entire class (no one seemed to mind who taught as long as Eric was actually *in* the building during class), but stepped aside to allow the owners to close the session. Eric and Dirk dropped into meditation stance, at which point, so did everyone else. Finally, they straightened, stood at attention and Eric bellowed, “What style are we?!”

“Kenpo!” The roar of twenty adults reverberated through the studio. Eric and Dirk bowed.

Class dismissed. Eric had to get back to work—and he had a lot of it to get done.

“Oh, hey,” Dirk said once he’d corralled his kids and locked up, heading out into the chill of an early spring night. “You going to Simone Whittaker’s funeral?”

“What the hell do you think?”

“You might want to go just to make sure she’s really dead.”

He’d seriously considered that. “Trust Simone to get herself killed in a bar brawl in Raytown. Are you going?”

“Haven’t decided yet,” Dirk said. “I might go just to make LaVon mad, because you know, a black man crashing *that* redneck party . . .”

“A *Mormon* one. Take your wife with you. That’d be hilarious.”

“Funny thing is, I’ve defended half those blockheads.”

“And the other half knows you’ll end up defending them eventually, too.”

Dirk burst out laughing.

“Speaking of that,” Eric said. “If you do decide to go, be sure to ask Wilson for a recess on the Blakely case.”

“Yeah, I’m winning and you know it. You’d love that extra day.”

That was the truth.

“Well,” Dirk said when Eric didn’t answer. His voice, laced with humor, floated back from the dark as he walked off to his car, one tired child in his arms and the other dragging against him. “Tempted as I am, I guess that’s one funeral I’m *not* going to—just so you can’t have your extra day.”

It was, at times, inconvenient to be business partners with a public defender.

Eric jogged across the street and into the courthouse, up the stairs, and into the

office he'd practically lived in for the last three months. He dropped in his chair and dug out a pile of résumés.

He was not having a good time.

Eric had assumed that with no façade to keep up, no elaborate schemes going on, no FBI making extra work for him, and no extra legal work to do for Knox, he would have a lighter schedule than he'd had as executive. Considering his managerial style and the fact that he'd been managing the prosecutor's office since he'd graduated from law school, it should have been a piece of cake.

Oh, it was a piece of something, all right.

Knox had never had any patience with bureaucratic paperwork and no compunction about tossing everything in the shred bin; he'd figured if it was that important, someone would come bug him until it got done. He could afford to do that: Nobody was going to walk into Knox Hilliard's office to tell him to sign this or that or some other thing—except Eric, which was why Knox had hired him, only . . . after about a year of trying to manage Knox with one hand tied behind his back, Eric had finally decided he'd had enough of Knox's pigheaded bullshit and had started signing Knox's name to everything himself, daring Knox to say a word about it.

Knox had smirked and Eric went about doing his boss's job—except for the massive amounts of paperwork Knox hadn't bothered to pass along to him at all, thus fell on top of Eric the minute Knox wasn't around to field it.

Eric couldn't count how many times a day in the last three months someone had come to him for help or a signature, but ended the conversation with, "Well, that's not how Knox did it."

Of course it wasn't. Knox hadn't done it at all.

Eric's resolve not to allow the office to maintain its reputation as a trainer of baby litigators proved difficult, since the law school advisors had disregarded his memo and metro area attorneys either didn't believe he wanted to hire experienced personnel or didn't believe Knox had not, in fact, been on the take. More than once he'd heard, "Are you sure there was never anything crooked going on up there?"

"Not since Knox ousted Nocek, no. Don't you pay attention to the news?"

As far as Eric could see, the taint of corruption in Chouteau County might never go

away, no matter what he did.

The Justice McKinley Hilliard test hadn't worked completely on the sole attorney he'd managed to hire—a new grad—who had correctly answered all of Eric's pointed questions designed to determine if she could do everything she was given the first day without help.

Either Eric's test was flawed or the woman misunderstood how much work he expected her to get through the first day; she hadn't done badly, really, but she hadn't performed the way Justice had. As one of her last duties before she left for good, Justice made sure Eric knew she found his expectations unreasonable.

"You did not assign me that much work my first day."

"I did, too. You have selective amnesia."

"If *you* had lived through my first eight weeks in this office, wouldn't you develop amnesia, too?"

Eric had to concede that point and took a third of the new attorney's assigned work off the top. He could breathe a lot easier when she plowed through it with quality work.

Which also meant Lesley got to pass the "Whittaker Problem" off on the new person, too—

—until Simone had died Sunday, whose funeral Eric was only too happy to pay for over his mother's objections.

"Mom, all the better to plant her as fast as possible, in a casket she can't get out of. If I have to hot rivet that fucker closed myself, I'll do that, too."

Eric suspected it was a revenge killing for one of the men she'd named in her diary, but he didn't give a fat rat's ass if she'd been stabbed on accident, on purpose, or by whom. It was the Jackson County prosecutor's problem and Eric was just glad she was permanently out of his life.

He briefly wondered if Simone's sister would be at the wake tonight or the funeral tomorrow, but then dismissed that. If she hadn't come back before now, she probably never would, which was fine with him. He didn't want to look at her or talk to her, especially through the filter of his guilt, embarrassment, regret—whatever it was.

"Gah."

His phone rang then and he looked at the ID. Annie. "Hey, baby," he said when he

answered.

“Where are you?”

“Courthouse. Sifting through résumés. Where are you?”

“In bed, reading. Got a ton of review copies today and I have about four reviews to write and post. Plus, you have not serviced me in days. One more day, and I turn from bitch to überbitch.”

True enough, and Eric had an equally dire need for some good sex. He looked at his desk and decided work could wait another day. “Okay, let me—”

“*Mister Cipriani!*”

Eric groaned at the sound of *that* voice from the doorway.

“Don’t tell me,” Annie said in his ear. “Glenn.”

“Glenn, I was about to go home and fuck my future First Lady. Can it wait until tomorrow?”

“No. I have a paper to put to bed.”

“Shit, Eric, just talk to the little cocksucker. You can service me later.”

Eric sighed. “All right. Night.”

“So,” Glenn whined smugly as he settled into the chair across from Eric’s desk.

“Tell me about Simone Whittaker.”

“Are you going to the wake?”

“Of course. So?”

“And the funeral?”

“Eric!”

“What about her?”

“I want to know who ratted her out and got you off the hook.”

“You know I can’t tell you that.”

“You said you were going to be transparent. Simone’s dead. LaVon’s still not talking. It’s been fifteen years. What could it hurt?”

Eric pursed his lips and stared at the little toad, still unable, after all these years, to reconcile himself to looking at a living, breathing stereotype of the Greasy Newspaperman.

“You covered Knox for fifteen years,” Eric finally said. “You were the one who

outed him as the most likely suspect in Parley's murder. You were the one who broke the story that Knox kicked Nocek's ass out." Glenn preened in his chair. "You were the one who found all the 'evidence' that Knox was on the take, but you could never prove it. Oh, look. You weren't any smarter than anybody else was, but you kept your paper alive off him. Bye bye Pulitzer for not catching on to the scam."

Glenn's smugness turned into irritation. "The FBI couldn't do it and they had all the access in the world. Why would you hold me to a higher standard?"

Eric grunted. "Well, okay. You got me there. But you have the answer to this problem right under your nose, buried in your own morgue. All you need is about a week, a shitload of caffeine, and some better deductive reasoning skills. I'm sure as hell not doing your job for you, especially on this. Your cash cow went on his merry way smelling like a rose. You can't dig any more dirt up on me because it doesn't exist. You've turned Annie's life inside and out and came up with bupkis besides her crazy-ass mother. You better find something pretty sensational to wank over or your little rag's going to die like the rest of newsprint. I'd politely request that you not reveal this person's identity just for his or her own safety, but I highly doubt you can figure it out."

The man stood with a huff and went to the door, then stopped. "You don't give me enough credit for what I know versus what I don't print. I'm a *responsible* journalist. I back up my facts and then I print them."

"With a little editorial spin on the side."

"I know Knox murdered Parley, but I never printed that because I couldn't prove it. What I printed was that he was caught on video at Texaco at 1:17 A.M. on June 9, 1994. I also printed that the videotape mysteriously disappeared from the property room, because it did. That's a fact. I printed it. I can't help the conclusions people draw from the *facts* that I print."

Eric had to concede that point, too, but that still didn't make him any less of a tool.

"Get lost, Glenn."

The outer office door slammed hard enough to rattle the glass, but Eric only rolled his eyes and checked the clock: 9:45. It was still civilized to call people at 9:45 at night, wasn't it?

"Giselle? Hi, it's Eric. Didn't you tell me you trained with Miller Evanston when



you were at BYU? And you're a first black belt, right? . . . Uh huh. I know you just had a baby, but I'm calling because I'm in a bit of a bind since Knox left and I wanted to ask you if you'd be interested in a part-time job . . . ”

An hour later, with memory lane having been well trod, he got to cross that thing off his to-do list, making his burden seem a little bit lighter.

Next thing on his list: a secretary or two. Eric knew the value of good administrative assistants and he was going to get a couple or die trying. He picked up a pile of résumés and began to sort through them again.

Too much to do and too little time to do it in.

Too few resources.

Too little sleep.

*Eric, you need to ditch your life for a couple of hours and go do whatever it is you do when you get all wound up. Meditate or whatever and then re-prioritize your to-do list. I've never seen you scattered like this. You're losing it and we haven't even started officially campaigning yet.*

Annie's voice rang in his head. Between the court docket, regular office business, his dojo, campaign tasks, and all the meetings he'd had with the Republican and Libertarian leaders who vied for his attention, he hadn't had a chance to turn around twice in the same spot. But . . .

Annie had taken it upon herself to deal with quite a few campaign details.

Giselle had agreed to a meeting to see if she would care to take over some of Eric's karate class load.

He did have one new lawyer, but one fresh grad didn't hope to meet demand, and he'd stalled out on hiring administrative assistants.

If he couldn't get everything under control, he wouldn't have time to start actively campaigning for attorney general.

“Hell, I won't deserve the job,” he muttered, then looked at the résumés in his hand. “Screw that. I'll call a temp agency tomorrow.”

Eric trudged through the sheriff's office and walked home. It was twelve-thirty when he climbed into bed. Annie was asleep, so he wouldn't be getting laid tonight even if he weren't completely exhausted.

Still, he lay awake, churning through his to-do list, nagged by his inability to prioritize effectively. Then his mind rolled back around to Glenn's visit, and Eric felt a little bit of unease that perhaps the man could suss out the identity of the little girl who'd given Eric everything he had.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **10: MORE DOWN CELLAR IN A TEACUP**

Vanessa showed up at the wake, attracting every eye and dropping every jaw as she strutted by with purpose, feigning obliviousness to the looks. She'd known this would happen. She'd wanted it to happen; it was a power play and she'd learned about power from the best.

Her mother raked her with her gaze, head to toe and back again. "Well, aren't we uppity?"

"Yes, I certainly am. You could use a little class yourself."

A snicker caught her attention and she saw a blond boy, not much shorter than Vanessa, standing next to Vanessa's mother. She flinched when her mother cuffed the boy in the back of the head.

"What'd you do to your hair?" LaVon demanded. "You look like a zebra."

"I went out in the sun to do productive things. What did you do to yours? Mix four different brands of discount bleach?"

The boy snickered again, and again her mother cuffed him.

Vanessa's eyes narrowed and she was no longer amused, remembering how little a child had to do to earn one of those incredibly frequent painful slaps. "Ma, if you do that again, I'll have you arrested."

LaVon's jaw worked, but she said nothing and Vanessa felt free to leave her there

and find a seat where she could watch people in relative peace. She did have to admit that being here, not forced to be gracious, being able to let loose, was fabulously cathartic.

Knox had finally explained why he demanded she go to her sister's funeral. "You're in the power position now and you need that closure."

"So it's not about Simone?"

*It's not about Eric?*

"No. It's about your mother. Trust me. My mother was a bitch, too, and I want you to go give her hell."

Vanessa hated it when he was right, which, well, he was *always* right. Besides, she knew how much Knox had hated his mother and that put her fears about any other motives he might have to rest.

Vaguely wondering who the boy was, she started to watch him. It only took a few seconds to figure out he was Simone's son. Possibly twelve years old and Vanessa had not known of his existence. He didn't seem too terribly heartbroken over his mother's death and she couldn't blame him.

She felt the first stirrings of pity for the child; she had had protectors in Dirk, then Knox, who'd kept LaVon off her back. Vanessa couldn't begin to imagine how miserable this boy must be with both LaVon and Simone over him.

Vanessa refused to stand in the family line at the wake that night, refused to sit with the family up front during mass the next day, and refused to drive to the cemetery at the front of the line after the funeral. She stood about fifty feet away from the tented gravesite, observing the whole mess, and wondered how LaVon had managed to come up with the money for the funeral and grave, much less the nice casket.

Somebody else must have paid for it. LaVon would have left Simone to be buried in a potter's field.

"Hi."

Vanessa looked at the stranger who had sidled up next to her, an otherwise smallish man but for a little bit of a pot belly. He seemed . . . dapper. That was the word. His clothes—straight out of film noir—weren't expensive, but they were of good quality material and they'd been altered to fit him well. He removed his fedora to reveal a regrettable comb-over of mixed brown and gray strands, and his eyes bugged a little

behind his stylish glasses. He wore a decent cologne, not overwhelming and not so thin as to be considered cheap.

“Hello,” she murmured, wondering which way he would approach this and how fast she’d be tomorrow’s headline.

“You’re Vanessa Whittaker.”

“Last time I checked.”

“You’re Simone’s little sister?”

“Yes.”

“And you’re the TV chef. *Vittles*, right?”

Vanessa sighed.

“I’m Glenn Shinkle, from the *Chouteau Recorder*, and I was wondering if I could get an interview? Apparently,” he said wryly, “no one here knows who you are, except me.”

“That does seem to be the case, doesn’t it?”

He pursed his lips. “Or at least of your mother’s crowd. Why is that, do you think?”

She laughed for the first time since she’d hit the county line.

If LaVon *didn’t* know about Vanessa’s life, it would be a result of her complete disinterest in computers or the internet, even if she could afford such, and a complete disinterest in Vanessa’s whereabouts or doings. While LaVon had always lived and breathed celebrity gossip, Vanessa didn’t occupy the realms of celebrity LaVon would follow. LaVon had never cooked, so Vanessa couldn’t imagine she’d watch cooking shows.

If LaVon *did* know about Vanessa’s little corner of fame or anything about Whittaker House, she’d have kept it to herself, ever mindful that any misstep would bring the wrath of Knox Hilliard down upon her head.

Vanessa suspected the latter. After all, LaVon could keep a secret better than a dead man if she had sufficient motivation.

Finally, she cast a vague gesture toward all the people gathered under and around the tent set up over Simone’s grave and said, “I have no idea.”

His eyes narrowed slightly. “Miss Whitta—”

“Mr. Shinkle,” she murmured, laying her hand gently on his arm. “I’m at my sister’s

funeral.”

As a reproof, it was a gentle one, but he seemed the sort to understand and respect it. He flushed a little, but nodded and put his fedora back on his head before trotting off.

Vanessa sighed and crossed her arms over her chest. She turned back to watch the mourners gather and chat and disperse in small, ever-moving clusters, then glanced at her watch. Noon. If she left now instead of staying for the family meal, she could make it home for dinner with more than an hour to spare.

But. When Nephew approached her with some stealth and muttered, “Aunt Vanessa, will you come to my school tomorrow night? There’s a program and I’m in it . . . ” she hadn’t the heart to refuse him. He’d spoken to her as if she were a regular, sympathetic part of his life, not a random relative he’d just met.

A whole lot of people Vanessa didn’t know spoke to her that way, which meant he’d watched her on TV enough to feel as if he knew her.

“Sure, kid. What time do you want me to pick you up?” He told her, then scampered off before she could ask him his name, in case LaVon caught him talking to the family traitor. She knew exactly how much he’d risked to do so. He probably saw her as his protector now simply because she’d stood down his grandmother.

Very few women and only a handful more men could make LaVon Whittaker back down, and now Nephew knew Vanessa was powerful enough to do that. LaVon wouldn’t dare do anything to that boy while she was in town.

Too bad she’d start in on him again once Vanessa left.

Thus, Vanessa decided to go back to the mobile home after the burial just to see if she could get a few licks in at her mother, but the conversation she’d imagined didn’t come to pass the way she’d intended. Instead, she saw her father in a broken-down wheelchair, on oxygen, trying to wheel his way through a fog of cigarette smoke and people who didn’t notice he existed, much less make room for him to pass by.

She shoved through the tight cliques, trying to go to him and wheel him out to the deck.

“Ma,” she snapped when she realized LaVon was right in front of her father, ignoring his distress. “Why don’t you get Pops an electric wheelchair?”

LaVon flushed and her jaw worked. Vanessa had embarrassed her in front of her

friends. Good.

“‘Cause we don’t have the money for it, Vanessa,” she finally said, nasty as always.

“Oh, hey, here’s a thought: Quit smoking and maybe A—Pops wouldn’t have to have so much oxygen and B—you’d have the money.”

LaVon slapped her face.

The entire assemblage fell silent and stepped back to watch this. Nephew observed Vanessa warily, as if he were afraid her power over LaVon was just an illusion.

“How do you like that, Vanessa?” she sneered. “Ain’t no Knox Hilliard in town to protect you no more.”

“Well, that’s true enough,” Vanessa drawled. “What, exactly, do you think the *new* prosecutor would do with you if I went to him to have you charged with assault?”

The tension was suffocating.

“And wouldn’t Dirk laugh his butt off when you needed an attorney?”

LaVon’s mouth tightened.

“That’s what I thought.”

Then Vanessa turned and continued with her self-appointed task of getting her father outside for some fresh air. LaVon didn’t wait until she was out the door before starting in on the new prosecutor.

That was a show for Vanessa’s benefit, to drive home the point that LaVon had not forgotten her betrayal, much less forgiven her for it. Vanessa still wanted to curl up in a little ball of humiliation whenever she remembered watching Eric, waiting and hoping for some kind word, some sign that he knew what she’d done and felt some gratitude. A mere “thank you” would have thrilled her thirteen-year-old heart beyond reason.

But he’d given her *that* look and walked away.

“ . . . ting married to that bitch Annie Franklin.”

“When’s the wedding again?”

“December something.”

Vanessa didn’t stop, didn’t betray in any way how unexpectedly hard that news hit her behind her breastbone. She wasn’t sure her mother actually knew of her little-girl crush of so long ago, but it didn’t matter. Any news about the prosecutor that could be used to trash him would get the point across to Vanessa.

She wasn't sure why she cared. After all, she was sleeping with a man half the women in the country had wanted—including LaVon, judging by the Nash Piper shrine that covered the main wall of the trailer's living room. The wreckage of Nash's plane deep in the Smoky Mountains had been found readily enough, but his body had never been recovered. Yet here was LaVon, still keeping vigil two and a half years later.

*Why* didn't it surprise her LaVon would have built a shrine to a dead man?

"Typical," Vanessa muttered.

With great determination, she finally got her father out on the deck, where he hacked and choked, and she pulled up a dilapidated lawn chair to sit next to him and look at the twilight sky.

"Nessie," he rasped once his coughing fit had wound down. "I want you to know how glad I am you came back for your sister's funeral."

"I didn't have a choice, Pops. My business partner made me."

"Oh?" he asked, his forehead wrinkled. "If she's your *partner*, how does she make you?"

"He. And he's got a bit of a temper. It gets nasty."

"Why did he make you come?"

"To make sure Simone was really dead. In case you didn't notice, I don't care about Simone. She got what she deserved. Live by the sword, die by the sword. And LaVon's even worse."

Her father's nostrils flared, but since she had no investment in being warm and gracious at this moment, she had no qualms about stating her opinion. That harshness, that refusal to be cowed or apologize, which she'd learned from a master, was something she very rarely needed to break out. Today, with her family, she felt not only justified but obligated to push the envelope, shred it, and set it on fire.

Not Laura's *modus operandi*.

"If it's the truth, it should be spoken. If it's not the truth, may I rot in hell. Pops, really. Let me take you home with me. I have a good setup. Fresh air, good food, pretty land. You can have your own little cottage or live in the main house, whatever you want. I can find things for you to do—one of my tenants is going to be a fly-tying shop and there's a sharecropper on the back of my property who'd like to chew the fat with

someone his age. I have a big lake with bass and channel cats and bluegill, and a clear stream with plenty of trout. You could fish all day long if you wanted.”

He looked at her, his face ancient, his turquoise eyes cloudy and bloodshot. He was only fifty-two, but he wouldn’t live much longer. Vanessa sighed and tried to hold back unexpected tears.

“I won’t leave your mother, Vanessa,” he murmured, a note of reproof in his voice. She didn’t know when he’d divorced himself from reality, but she couldn’t remember a time he hadn’t stood by her mother.

She didn’t know if that was admirable or pathetic.

“And I don’t like the way you’re talking about her.”

A wave of resentment hit her when, in a flash, she remembered all the times he could have rescued her from her mother’s cruelty but had turned a blind eye, always leaving it for someone else to do. Granted, he had attempted to assuage the pain once LaVon had finished with her, to kiss her and hug her and sing to her, but he couldn’t or wouldn’t stand up to LaVon.

“Okay, Pops,” she said quietly, before she said something she’d regret to this kind but weak man. “I’m leaving now. Here’s my number—” She wrote her number on the back of an old to-do list she found in her purse, and tucked it inside his shirt pocket. “Call me if you need anything.”

He caught her hand. “I watch you on the television, Nessie,” he whispered, surprising her. “The boy, too. I’m proud of you.”

She stared at him in wonder. “You— But Ma—”

“She don’t know about *Vittles*, about Whittaker House. It’s my own little secret,” he confided. “You an’ me. I can . . . pretend . . . I had a hand in raisin’ you, but I know who really raised you an’ I’m ashamed o’ that. I wouldn’t take your charity now ’cause I don’t deserve it.”

“You don’t deserve to be abused the rest of your life, either.”

“Won’t be much longer,” he said matter-of-factly. “I’m just waitin’ to find out if heaven’s as purty as that place you got. Just to know you—my little girl—*built* that. It’s all I need to die happy, Nessie.”

She found herself walking around the town square at midnight because she couldn’t



sleep with her father's fatalism echoing around her head, and she couldn't get the cigarette smoke out of her expensive clothes. *How* had she forgotten that little detail?

Sunday. She'd leave Sunday. She would've left the next day and been home in time for dinner if she hadn't promised Nephew—dammit, what *was* that kid's name, anyway?—she'd go to his program. None of the rest of his family would be there.

Her attention was caught by the glint of glass panes reflecting the street lamps when the courthouse doors opened. A tall man with short black hair, in black pants and a loose black kimono-type jacket locked the door behind him. He rolled his head one way, then another. He rolled his shoulders over and under, then cracked his neck. He seemed to have some sort of black strap slung around his neck. He turned and walked slowly, rather bowleggedly, across the lawn—away from her.

Again.

And she wouldn't go begging for . . . what? Exactly? A “thank you”?

*Kinda makes you wonder why you're sitting here pining over a small-time prosecutor when you could be sleeping with a funny, handsome man who happens to be a country star, huh?*

With a choked sigh and a shake of her head, she went back to her motel room and stripped off her smoke-saturated clothes, stuffed them into a plastic bag, wondered if her housekeeping staff could get out the stink—the same stink that wafted from her hair. She got under a stream of hot water as fast as she could and scrubbed her zebra hair until her scalp was raw.

Her hand swept down her chest, over her breast, and stopped, her thumb playing with her hard nipple and she closed her eyes, caught her breath, wondering how and why she had let so many years pass before taking a second lover.

Had she been that busy? That focused?

*Let's just call it the fish that got away.*

Or had she simply been pining?

It was easy to say that her first lover had spoiled her for other men, because it was true; no one else had approached his level of sheer sensuality. Unfortunately, the kinds of men who attracted her were intimidated by the fact that she had been a famous artist's model—with the nude proof hanging in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It was easy to

refuse those who couldn't match Sebastian and even easier to ignore those who let their intimidation get the better of them.

It was easy to claim that she was busy and she was young yet, because it was true. Knox had set her up for early success and financial independence for a reason. Sebastian had calculated his grand unveiling of *Wild, Wild West* to coincide with her last four months of culinary school to make Vanessa a hot commodity the minute she graduated. Still, she hadn't yet reached that point in the process where she could just let go for a while. She had a grand vision for Whittaker House and not only was she far from attaining that, she'd just gone into a heap of debt to effect the next phase in her plan. If all went well, she'd have to go to the bank next summer for the final phase and it would take her years to climb out of that hole.

It was easy to fall back on years of religious training, both Catholic and Mormon, catechism class and Young Women's. Giselle—the closest thing Vanessa had ever had to a real mother—had lectured her endlessly on the pragmatism of being, if not chaste, then savvy and discriminating. She'd warned Vanessa about strangers, about the emotional tricks men used, about getting drunk to lose her inhibitions, about disease and abuse and coercion and rape and drugs designed to enable rape. Giselle had taken Vanessa to the doctor to get her on birth control. Vanessa had had time to observe and learn without undue pressure, and years of watching her roommates at Notre Dame succumb to one or more of those had only reinforced Giselle's opinions as truth.

*Frat boys are pigs. Just don't be stupid. If you want to have sex, wait and be very careful about who you choose. Do it sober, while you have your head on straight. Whatever you do, don't have sex without a condom and don't forget to take your pill. Ever. Remember this: Men use love to get sex and women use sex to get love. Don't ever mistake sex for love because that's when girls start getting stupid. And whatever else you do, don't lie about your age. That should be enough to put most men off until you're eighteen, and it's not like you don't know what happens to men who fuck underage girls, right?*

With Giselle's warnings in Vanessa's ears and a ton of bad examples in front of her eyes that validated every word, it was easy to refuse. Without the temperament or taste for hookups, without a man as fascinating as Sebastian to tempt her into an affair, with a

cornucopia of ideas crowding her head and a constantly rotating laundry list of things to do, it had been easy to refuse—until a well-disguised country star on the run from his management, his fans, and his career had shown up at Whittaker House alone.

When *Mister Thompson* had imperiously informed her upon check-in that he expected her to bring his dinner to his suite *personally* at *precisely* ten p.m., she had done so as a matter of course. Personal service by the celebrity chef owner was one of her gimmicks, and though she had not expected to become the entrée, he'd made her eager enough to serve herself up.

Now, two years into a discreet, comfortable, monogamous affair with another famous man, Vanessa knew she was spoiled: Her dream had blossomed under her and Knox's careful nurturing, and it continued to gain momentum. She also had an intelligent, low-maintenance, and fabulous lover to scratch her itch with no expectations on either side.

*. . . ting married to that bitch Annie Franklin.*

But still . . . possibly . . . pining.

For a *thank you*?!

"Screw that," she muttered, furious with herself and making a mental note to call a therapist when she got home. "Small-time prosecutor. Bite me."

\* \* \* \* \*

## 11: WEB OF KNOWLEDGE

*This could work.*

Eric and Dirk sat on the floor putting Giselle Kenard through her paces, watching her, refreshing her memory, teaching her, updating her.

"I warn you," she said, "I haven't had a lesson or class since I left Utah, and I know

Mill is constantly refining his curriculum. It's probably changed several times since then."

Neither of them had ever taught a black belt before, and it was as challenging for them as it was for her, especially considering she'd had a C-section four months ago.

"I'm still kind of stiff and sore," she apologized, as if she had anything to apologize for.

Giselle's husband Bryce had come, curious, he said, because he'd only seen her do this once. It was a very, very brief once, a twenty-year-old memory that had made his expression flash with pain and regret. "But then she converted to the gospel of Glock," he muttered wryly.

Their son was a cute little devil, squiggly, jolly, inching and rolling his way here and there, a mop of bright orange curls bobbing around.

After two hours, Eric called a stop. He and Dirk could have watched more because her old training intrigued them, but—

"Annie and I have a date with six ten-year-old girls," he pronounced, and the Kenards laughed. "Is this something you think you'd like to do, Giselle?"

"Oh, I would *love* to. Thank you."

The four of them gathered in a huddle on the floor, the baby gleefully rolling over crossed knees from one adult to another like a glass pop bottle. Once Giselle snuggled up against her husband and he draped his arm around her shoulders, Eric got down to business.

"Would you rather teach adults or children?"

"Where do you need the most help?"

"The problem," Dirk interrupted, casting a glare at Eric, who rolled his eyes, "is that people pay for Eric to teach them. It's his name, his brand."

"What we need help with is the six-thirty to nine-thirty time slots on the weekdays," Eric said finally, tired of this, tired of being reminded of his life of relative leisure before he became the Chouteau County prosecutor. "I began building this dojo when I came home from Utah. When Dirk figured out he couldn't make a living in Provo and he came back, it was a perfect setup for both of us, but—"

"But now Dirk's trapped by your brand," she finished. "And because you have to be

here so he won't take the hit, you don't have time to start on the next step in your career."

"Right and I have the same problem with the prosecutor's office. Not enough lawyers and my new one needs to be trained. I have a couple of temporary secretaries coming Monday, but since we've never had any, I'll have to start training them from scratch."

Eric could feel the chaos and fatigue settling over all of them at once, because lately, he spread exhaustion like a disease everywhere he went.

"Eric," Bryce rumbled. "You know most of my attorneys are from your office, right? Would you like me to see if one or two of them would be willing to come back up here for a while to help you out until you can get some more attorneys hired?"

Eric felt hope surge through him. "Are you kidding me? Absolutely!"

Bryce shrugged. "Now, it's up to them. I pay them four times what they made here—and I won't pay them if they're not working for me—so I can't promise anything. But they may like to get back in the game since, well . . ."

"Nobody in that firm goes to court anymore," Giselle muttered with a smirk. Bryce chuckled and tugged gently at her braid.

Eric blinked. Stared.

The way Bryce Kenard looked at his wife was . . . unreal.

And Giselle returned his look with a shy smile, communing with her husband in a way that suddenly made Eric wonder if he were missing something.

He'd never had a reason to look at a woman that way—and he knew for a fact Annie didn't look at him like that: love, lust, trust, and respect all rolled up into one lingering glance.

Six years navigating the dating waters and religious culture of BYU had convinced Eric that "soul mate" was a myth, that there was no such thing as fate. He'd learned that a marriage based on shared goals, intellectual and sexual attraction, and a commitment to working on the partnership—not "romantic" love—was far more desirable than bashing one's head over finding The One.

Eric didn't fear marriage. He never had. He'd left BYU without a wife, although he'd dated seriously and twice nearly popped the question. Then he'd come home to find a grown-up Annie, who had a grand plan. Being his wife would get her where she wanted

to go, and with more prestige than she could get on her own. And Eric—well, he couldn't ask for a better partner to walk his career path with him. Ambitious and pragmatic to her core, brilliant and street savvy, beautiful and good in bed, Annie also shared his politics, more or less, if she deigned to think about it.

Neither of them had ever pretended their relationship was anything but an efficient way to pool resources and strengths until they'd each achieved their goals, at which point they'd part company. They were the epitome of the sexy power couple; the voting public loved nothing better, and they intended to exploit it without mercy.

Eric had never had a reason to question his view of marriage.

Until now.

Watching a husband and wife share . . . something . . . he didn't understand or know how to get.

Giselle's voice shook him out of his reverie. "I can commit to two nights a week, your kids and adults. I'm staying home with Dunc now and it'd be nice to get out and back into something I love." She grabbed the little boy and blew raspberries in his belly, making him giggle. After a moment or two of play, she cuddled the baby and said, "I want to raise this kid up properly—in a gi. How you handle marketing is up to you."

Eric nodded and Dirk looked pleased. "Now, about pay—"

"Don't," she said. "You'll be teaching me as much as I teach the students. You've each got five stripes on your belts and I've only got one. I've been out of it for years and I'm still recovering from getting Dunc here in one piece, so . . . I'll teach in exchange for being taught. How 'bout that?"

"It's a sixty-mile round trip for you. At least let us pay for your gas and mileage."

She shrugged. "We can talk about it later."

Eric could feel his burdens lightening even as he sat there chatting with the Kenards and he couldn't believe his good fortune. Two good attorneys (maybe) who knew him and Chouteau County inside out because he'd hired them and Knox had trained them, *and* a new karate teacher who could take over four classes a week. Of course, Dirk-plus-Giselle still wasn't *Eric*, but campaigning had to become his next priority; he couldn't do that and teach six classes a week, too. With Giselle on board, he could begin to phase himself out without upsetting everyone at once, while conditioning everyone in the

county that he'd be gone to Jefferson City in three years. Hopefully, he could do it so subtly the citizenry would take his absence for granted.

Dirk took care of outfitting Giselle with a gi, belt, patches, front door keys, and scheduling her for Mondays and Tuesdays, while Eric thanked Bryce over and over again for the possible loan of attorneys he didn't have to train until Bryce finally laughed and held up his hands. "It's okay, Eric. I get it, I get it. You golf?"

"Absolutely."

Bryce grinned. "The Deuce at National next Saturday morning, then. Six-thirty tee time. It'll give you a chance to plead your case to a couple of my buddies, get the word out about what kind of labor you need. Let the city know you're not Knox and you're serious about what you want to do up here. Get a start on collecting cash for your next few elections."

Golf. With Bryce Kenard and two of his rich friends who could help Eric do what he needed to do: flip Chouteau County's reputation upright, find experienced attorneys, and make connections that mattered to an up-and-coming politician.

Eric figured his luck had finally turned around . . .

. . . until he saw the Kenards walking to their car hand-in-hand, their baby lying quietly against Bryce's shoulder, murmuring together as they rounded the opposite side of the vehicle to put Dunc in his carrier. He didn't realize how much he'd missed seeing such sweet, innocent relationships like that since leaving BYU.

Being in one.

He didn't have that with Annie, but he had exactly what he wanted with Annie, so why had he turned melancholy all of a sudden?

"You won't get that with Annie," Dirk muttered as he walked up to Eric after handing a set of keys to his oldest child and instructing him to take his sister around the corner to the office.

"Oh, fuck you." Eric's jaw ground, then it dropped as, through the windows and over the top of the Kenards' SUV, he saw the Kenards' gentility vanish: The man lifted his wife and slammed her against the truck, kissing her brutally—and she responded in kind, wrapping her legs around him so tight she would've broken a smaller man in half.

"*Well,*" Dirk breathed, "that goes a long way toward explaining the bruises around

his wrists.”

Eric blinked. Shuddered. “Too kinky for me.”

Dirk grunted and turned to catch up with his kids at his office. Eric dropped into step beside him but he wasn’t sure why, since he knew that what had been brewing for a while was coming. “I wasn’t going to say anything,” Dirk began, “but I saw the way you looked at Bryce and Giselle. It’s like you’ve never seen people in love before.”

He had, but he didn’t remember it looking so . . . genuine.

“Now, you know Annie and I are friends, so I’m not slamming her. But you’re both deluding yourselves by thinking you can have a marriage like a business arrangement that’ll last long enough for you to do what you need it for.”

“Jelarde, you have no room to talk. You and your wife function like a well-oiled machine, just like me and Annie. Shit, you’re a fucking bishop and you can still do your job and teach class. You couldn’t do that without her. You work well together, you’re committed, none of that sappy shit I can’t stand.”

“Then you aren’t paying attention. Ten years Steffie and I have been married, okay? Four kids and one on the way, okay? I love her. I’m *in* love with her. But all you see is the ‘well-oiled machine,’ and you admire that so much you miss the rest of it. You don’t see what there is underpinning it. You don’t see the spontaneity and fun and laughter. You don’t see the sex. You don’t see the fights. You don’t see the crying. You don’t see us wrangling our kids constantly until we’re too tired to have sex at all. You don’t see how much time we spend apart because I’m always at church when I’m not here. You don’t see how much we miss each other, and I’m here to tell you—being *in* love is the sugar that makes *that* medicine go down. We couldn’t do it if we weren’t *in* love. You aren’t seeing how it all works together.”

“We don’t want all that drama,” Eric insisted. “No fights, no crying. That’s why we’re together. That’s why it works.”

“You know what?” Dirk said, exasperated. “You’ve never been in love so you have no idea what I’m talking about.”

“Apparently, I paid more attention at BYU than you did. It’s *your* church leaders saying there’s more than one person you can be compatible with and make a life with. I didn’t come up with that, but it makes a whole lot of sense to me.”



“More than one person who is compatible with you that you can also *fall in love with*,” Dirk corrected. “There’s a big difference. I bet some time before or after you marry Annie, you’ll meet a woman who’ll knock your socks off. Then you’ll understand, but it might be too late.”

“Not possible. If it didn’t happen at BYU, it’s not going to happen.”

“Yeah, you know, there’s a reason it didn’t happen for you at BYU, and it wasn’t because you aren’t a member of the church.”

“Oh, it is, too. Heather told me that outright.”

“Heather had your number from the get-go. Why do you think you couldn’t get her out of the library, much less on a date? The girls you bought rings for didn’t dump you because you weren’t a member of the church. They dumped you because you weren’t *in love* with them the way they were with you.”

“That’s the biggest crock of shit I ever heard.”

“Do you know how many times *your* girlfriends came crying their hearts out to *me*?”

“And you got plenty of dates out of it. You’re welcome.” With that, Eric turned and jogged home to get ready for his date.

“Annie,” he said when he opened the door to their apartment. “Did you get the flowers?”

Annie, in her favorite set of navy lingerie, her blonde hair clipped up on top of her head haphazardly, sat on the couch, her feet propped on the coffee table, a romance novel in one hand and a glass of Scotch in the other. Jill Scott purred from the sound system.

She turned to look up at him over the rim of her glasses. “What flowers?”

He looked around. The rolling suitcase she used to cart her drug samples around to doctors’ offices was nowhere in sight. She had the bottle of Scotch and a stack of novels on the table between her feet. Obviously, she’d settled in for a weekend of well-deserved relaxation.

*Oh, shit.*

He’d obviously forgotten to tell her. He carefully explained about the school program— “You know, kind of an end-of-the-year exhibition to justify the arts budget.” —and that he had wanted to take flowers for the girls.

She stared at him stonily for a long time after he'd stopped speaking. Finally, she said, "You'd rather go spend two hours watching a bunch of little kids singing and playing instruments off key, looking at their bad art, than spend a quiet evening at home?"

When she put it that way . . .

"No, I wouldn't *rather*, but it's good politics and every opportunity counts. We can be quiet at home after."

"Ah, I see. This is your way of poking at me about having kids."

He sighed. "No, it's not. I promised them I'd come."

Her mouth pursed. "All right, Eric." Then her eyebrow cocked. "Fuck me first."

Eric's mouth stretched in a slow grin. "Yes, *ma'am*."

After a brief stop at the store for a bouquet of pink daisies, Eric and Annie strode into Chouteau Elementary that evening like the power couple they were. Seeing as how half these kids' parents kept his dojo in the black, and three quarters of them might actually vote for him come his first election next year, he felt it was wise to schmooze whenever he got the chance.

The program was an agonizing affair, that was for sure, but the auditorium was dark and cool, so he dozed through most of it (time well spent, all things considered). The girls liked the flowers he handed out amongst them and the boys preened with Eric's effusive praise. He spoke with parents either as their kids' karate teacher and/or the Chouteau County prosecutor, as he and Annie strolled around looking at all the bad art.

Constant schmoozing kept him in the citizenry's good graces. Most of those who knew his history liked the romance of his reformation, and those who didn't know the story got it from Eric's mouth.

It didn't hurt that he'd been handpicked and trained for the job by the same man who'd tried him for Simone Whittaker's rape.

\* \* \* \* \*

## 12: LONG-LEGGED SNIPE

If Vanessa had known *he* would be at Nephew's exhibition—and *why?*—she would have flat refused. She saw him in the lobby between the auditorium and the gym, and her heart thudded in her chest and ears. She couldn't catch her breath. She hadn't seen him so clearly since the televised press conference in January and not at all in the thirteen years before that, give or take. He was more beautiful in person than on TV.

Tall. Six foot three on a short day.

Lean. A body hardened by karate and whatever other sports he was into.

Dark. Equal parts Italian and Osage. Black eyes. Silky black hair that lost nothing for being excruciatingly short instead of halfway down his back. Thin, close-cropped, elegant Donegal beard that emphasized the sharp angles of his chin and jaw.

*Very* expensively dressed. If she had to guess, she'd peg that as Ralph Lauren; not too flashy for a school event. Just flashy enough to call attention to his status in this county. He certainly had come up in the world, especially with the gorgeous blonde on his arm, dressed just as expensively.

Vanessa turned away when she saw him flash a smile at whatever Annie had said. Vanessa could barely look at him at all, much less see him snuggling with a woman she'd semi-idolized, the cheer captain, four years older than Vanessa and unfailingly kind to her. Eric and Annie very graciously chatted up his constituency.

Smart man, that one.

And Annie, well, she'd always been practical about her education and her future, wanting to make her own way in the world without depending on a man. Annie's relentless and very vocal ambition had molded Vanessa's outlook on her own future as much as Knox's benevolent tyranny had, as much as Giselle's pragmatic philosophies had, as much as Sister Jelarde's kindness had.

Vanessa needed to get out of here. Fast. Before she puked.

Out of Chouteau Elementary, out of Chouteau County, back to the Ozarks where she belonged—and in bed with Nash *immediately*.

*. . . small-time prosecutor . . . country star . . .*

“Shit,” she muttered.

“Aunt Vanessa?”

Nephew’s mutter startled her. She looked over her shoulder to see him hunched over, his head down and his hands shoved in his pockets.

“Hi, Nephew,” she said, because she still didn’t know his name.

When she’d picked him up at her parents’ house, only her father had been home, naturally. Pops had been asleep in his decrepit wheelchair in front of the TV and she hadn’t had the heart to wake him. It was probably the only moment of peace he got.

She’d nosed her way into Nephew’s room, which was surreally filthy. Cat shit. Mouse shit. Clothes everywhere, none clean. And he’d stunk.

“Go take a shower. Now.”

The boy had taken one look at her face and obeyed without a word. She rummaged around his room holding her nose, looking for something fairly clean and found it on the floor, protected by the mounds of relatively clean items on top of it.

She’d opened the bathroom door and tossed the clothes in, not particularly caring that he squeaked with outraged modesty.

And while he did as instructed, she’d picked her way back into the living room to that ridiculous shrine, the largest uninterrupted wall in the house covered in glossies and magazine shots and newspaper clippings, over which a large hand-lettered banner proclaimed:

### **R.I.P. NASH PIPER 3/15/72 – 1/1/07**

Under the banner hung a spiral-bound deck of three-by-five cards that served as a primitive counter for how many months, weeks, and days it had been since Nash Piper had disappeared. With a wicked chuckle, she’d whipped out her BlackBerry, taken a picture, and sent it to the enshrined.

Once Nephew had finished showering and was dressed presentably with minimal odor (she’d made him use the deodorant), they’d left.

Now, in the middle of a school hall teeming with vivacious children chattering at their parents, Vanessa looked at this twelve-year-old boy who was Simone’s legacy to the

world. Turquoise eyes, olive complexion. Except for the blond hair—and who knew where that had come from—he was a mini-Simone, complete with shattered ego.

Suddenly she wondered if she would go to hell for leaving him here with her mother.

“Did you— Uh, how’d you like it?”

“You did really well,” Vanessa lied, and was rewarded with a cautiously hopeful expression. She didn’t really know how well he’d done; he’d been buried somewhere in the middle of the sixth-grade “tenor” section. Such as it was. “I’m very proud of you.”

His shoulders came up a bit. “Do you— Uh, you wanna go into the gym and see what I did in art class?”

*Oh, hell no.*

“Sure, after you tell me your name,” Vanessa said. “’Cause I sure don’t know.”

“Oh. Um, it’s Eric,” he muttered and looked down at the floor.

Vanessa’s throat stopped up. “Simone named you Eric?”

“Cipriani,” he added, low enough that she thought she’d misheard, then he sighed and she knew she hadn’t misheard.

Vanessa closed her eyes and took a deep breath, feeling as if she’d just stepped back into the trailer park. She would definitely go to hell if she left this child here with her mother. She couldn’t repay Dirk or Knox for their protection, but she could—and should—pay it down the line.

“You want to come home with me and live?”

His head popped up and his eyes sparkled like Fourth of July fireworks. “For real?”

“You understand I’m not your mother or your grandmother, and I’ll ride your ass if you screw up, right?”

She could see the sudden doubt in his expression.

“Uh huh. That’s the way it is with me. You won’t be able to get away with anything, much less whatever it is you do here. But. I also won’t slap you upside the head for no reason and you won’t live in filth and you won’t go hungry.”

Nephew stared at her for a moment, as if wondering how much worse his life could get with Vanessa demanding decent behavior. “I guess I could try it out for a while,” he finally said.

Vanessa shook her head. “Nope. No tryouts. You stay or you come with me, but whichever you choose, it’s a done deal.”

He was silent for a moment, then, decisively, “Okay, yeah. Why not?”

“Because she’s not your guardian, that’s why not.”

Nephew groaned at that stern male voice, and Vanessa stiffened. She hadn’t heard it since January. Real, not out of a speaker system, it was deeper, richer.

She slowly turned to face the Chouteau County prosecutor and Annie.

His eyes widened and he gulped. “Vanessa.” It was a whisper, a caress, and she felt it all the way to the depths of her soul.

She looked at an equally stunned Annie and nodded slightly in polite acknowledgment of her presence before turning back to *him*. “Eric.” She *would* remain calm and collected—no joy, no bitterness. Pride. Keep the chin up. Don’t think about the trailer park. “What would I have to do to become his guardian?”

Eric hesitated for a moment, his expression of astonishment changing slowly to one of assessment, as if her motives might not be pure, then he looked down at his namesake. She wished she could tell what he was thinking. She was sure he knew how she’d felt about him way back when; after all, she’d been just thirteen. He’d been eighteen and laid half the girls in town by that time. He’d have known all the signs.

Now she could only hope to hide her emotions as an adult woman who was looking at an incredibly handsome, successful man who had a knockout fiancée on his arm, a woman Vanessa had always respected.

“Junior,” he said. “Do you want Vanessa to be your guardian?”

“Anything to get away from *you*,” the boy grumbled. “And grandma.”

Eric Original Recipe pursed his lips, then looked back at Vanessa. She could feel the familiar heat gather within her, as it had done from the first moment she had ever seen him—but now she knew what it was: desire.

She couldn’t afford that and she flashed a politely apologetic smile at Annie to ground herself. Unlike Eric, who seemed oblivious to Vanessa’s distress, Annie appeared to know exactly what was going on and simply watched, waiting patiently to see how it would all shake out.

Annie was probably used to watching women drool over her fiancé, anyway, and

Vanessa couldn't hope to compete with her classic Scandinavian beauty.

Even if she wanted to.

Which she didn't.

"I can't see your mother letting him leave," Eric said finally. "She uses him like a knife against me and he suffers more for it than I do."

Yes, Vanessa knew very well how her mother reveled in such nastiness. "She smacks him around. His room is disgusting and he hasn't had laundry done for him in— Well, I couldn't say. Months, maybe. He's probably malnourished. I was at that age."

She felt, rather than saw, Annie's start of surprise. No, Annie wouldn't have known how miserable Vanessa's home life had been. Four years older than Vanessa and immersed in her ruthless pursuit of her goals, Annie would've had no reason to know or care how her youngest cheerleader fared at home.

"You know how Simone was," Vanessa continued calmly, refusing to allow the toxic stew of emotion inside her to bubble up. "My mother'll turn him into Simone, Boy Version. Probably sooner than later."

Eric nodded. "You're right about that. When are you leaving?"

"Tomorrow morning. I would have left this morning, but he asked me to come tonight, so I stayed."

She felt Nephew move closer to her when she said that, and, surprised, she looked at him, then wrapped her arm around his shoulders to pull him into her.

Eric had not missed the gesture and said, "Listen, can you stick around a few days? I may be able to whip something up for you. Get it fast-tracked through family court."

Wow. Not only were they actually having an adult conversation, he was offering to help a boy who had to be a thorn in his side. It was remarkable they were having any kind of conversation at all. She wondered what difference it might make if Annie weren't there listening, observing.

But she had to know. "Um— Is he—?" Vanessa could feel herself blush. "Eric Two, is he—?"

"No," Eric snapped, his face suddenly hard, his nostrils flaring. "He's not, and *you* should know that better than anybody."

Vanessa gasped, feeling as if her chest had caved in.

Annie stared at Eric in shock. “Oh. My. God.”

His mouth tightened and he looked at the floor, shoved his hand in his pocket. He took a deep breath. Held it. Let it go. “I’m sorry,” he muttered. “You have a right to know if the court grants your request.”

It was all Vanessa could do to keep her composure, though her nose stung and she wanted to curl up into a ball in some dark corner somewhere. But she couldn’t.

*Hi. I’m Chef Granny Whittaker and it’s time to whip up some Vittles.*

Her alter ego wouldn’t let her.

“I’m sorry,” he said again. “It’s nothing he and I both haven’t heard *ad nauseam* since I started working in the prosecutor’s office and it’s just gotten worse in the last four months or so. I’m sick of hearing it.”

*Especially from you.*

Vanessa started when her phone buzzed. “Excuse me,” she murmured, and pulled out her BlackBerry to check the text message:

**I GOTCHA SHRINE RIGHT HERE DOLL—CUM SUCK IT.**

Still fighting tears, it took her a long moment of staring to process it, but once she had, she began to laugh, feeling a strange combination of relief and irony and affection wash over her.

Trust Nash to make her laugh right when she needed it. She quickly thumbed a smart-ass reply, then put her gadget back in her pocket, but her smile faded when she looked up at Eric again.

“I have a meeting Wednesday afternoon I *must* go to,” Vanessa said, trying to stay on some sort of emotional level. “Can we get this done by end of business Tuesday or so? Or will I need to come back to get him?”

“I hope so, yeah,” he replied, clearly chagrined. He swallowed, then said with forced decisiveness, “So, uh, yeah. All right. Yeah. Uh, come on up to my office Monday morning. I’ll send a deputy out for your mother and Eric, Ju—uh, Two.”

“Thank you.”

Eric cast Vanessa a short nod without actually looking at her and turned, his hand



splayed out over Annie's back.

But Nephew reached out hesitantly to touch Original Recipe, halting him. "Thanks, Eric," he said quietly.

Eric One finally smiled as he looked at the boy—that genuine, wonderful smile that had always made Vanessa catch her breath and want to smile, too. "You're welcome, kid. Now you won't have to get yourself arrested to get a hot meal."

Vanessa saw Nephew's face redden, and she bit her lip. Looked down. Blinkered away the tears.

"Nice to see you again, Vanessa," Annie said with the exactly appropriate tone of voice to extricate all of them as gracefully as possible from this tangled moment in time.

"You, too, Annie." Again polite nods between Vanessa and Annie. Again Vanessa feeling like she'd just crawled back into the Darwinian goo of the trailer park.

. . . you *should know that better than anybody*.

She hadn't felt that low, that inferior—that *classless*—since she'd left this godforsaken town.

\* \* \* \* \*

### 13: NOT A MOMENT TOO SOON

*Damn Simone.*

Eric escorted Annie toward the exit, which was where they'd been headed when he'd stumbled into that conversation. Eric hadn't recognized the woman from behind, and had only meant to head off a possible abduction. *Damn Simone to hell.*

And damn Vanessa for having turned into the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen.

Eric slid a look at Annie, whose demeanor confused him. He didn't think he'd ever seen Annie so positively livid—and never at him.

"All right, Annie, which part pissed you off the most?" he sighed.

She grabbed a handful of his lapel and dragged him off the school's sidewalk and across the lawn toward the parking lot. Once they were alone in a copse of trees, she stopped, planted her hands on her hips and started to pace, her head down. Eric waited, because whatever she had to say, he deserved. Finally she stopped, held up a hand, and said, "I want to make something very clear right up front. I like Vanessa. I've always liked her. I have no quarrel with her. *Per se*."

"Okay," Eric said warily.

"You and me," she said pointing between them. "We don't love each other."

"Right."

"We get along and live together without fighting. We have good sex. We think alike and we're both very well educated. We have history."

"Right."

"You need a trophy wife to get elected, and I need to be First Lady so I can get a head start on my early globetrotting retirement." She stopped. Thought. He braced himself for whatever she meant to throw at him. "All this time," she said, "you never said a word. I knew you had issues about whoever it was that proved you were innocent, mostly because of that fucking guilt trip Knox put you on to make sure you did something with your life. But I never thought— And you never told me— What, did you think I was going to go to Glenn and give him her name?"

"So that's what you're pissed about?" he demanded, immediately incensed. "That I kept it to myself? Because I was obligated to? *Legally*?"

"No, I'm upset that you kept from me that it was *Vanessa*."

Eric stared at her, suddenly confused. "Okay . . . ?"

Her nostrils flared and her voice was tight with anger when she spoke. "I want," she ground out, "something of *my own* without having to take the crumbs off Vanessa Whittaker's table."

Eric's head spun. A—it wasn't what he'd expected her to say and B—it seemed she was talking about a lot more than the fact that he'd wanted to kiss Vanessa in front of Annie and Junior and God and everybody.

"So she's pretty," he began, trying to sort out what the hell Annie was getting at. "I haven't seen her since I left for college and she surprised me. That shouldn't make any

difference between you and me.”

“*Surprised* you?” Annie screeched. “What the fuck? You know, I wouldn’t even care if it weren’t Vanessa.”

“You’re *jealous* of her?” he asked, incredulous. Jealousy wasn’t part of Annie’s emotional repertoire.

“Yes! Yes, I am. But not because of this. This is just another in a long line of reasons, and then I find out she’s the one who— That you of all the people in my life—” She took a deep breath and then began. “My entire adolescence was spent listening to my mother talk about how to cozy up to Vanessa Whittaker so she could have an in with Knox.”

Eric’s jaw dropped. “Vanessa? How was *Vanessa* your mom’s key to Knox?”

She stared at him. “You don’t know?”

“Know *what*?”

“Oh, my God,” she whispered, covering her mouth with her fingertips, incredulous. “He never told you. You don’t know anything about her, do you?”

“No. I haven’t— I have no reason to. She’s just—” He spread his arms wide, unable to make sense of this conversation. “She’s the girl who— Yeah, saved my ass. What else am I supposed to know?”

She took a deep breath. “Everyone in town knew that if they so much as looked at Vanessa wrong, they’d have to answer to Knox. He also made sure Vanessa showed up at the prosecutor’s office after school or practice and stayed until she had her homework done—to his satisfaction. If she didn’t show up on time, he went looking for her. You know how Knox collects people and makes projects out of them? Because it’s his fucked-up way of atoning for his sins? That’s what everybody thought it was with Vanessa, and who could blame him? With a mother like LaVon?

“Well. My mother decided that the easiest way to get to Knox was through Vanessa. She made me recruit Vanessa for the varsity cheerleading squad when she was *thirteen*— because she thought Vanessa would be so grateful to me that she’d bend over backward to hook her up with him. When that didn’t work, she went out of her way to make Vanessa late for Knox’s version of study hall as often as possible just to get his attention.”

Eric's mind blew all to hell.

All this time. Knox had never said a word.

But Annie recommenced pacing and muttering to herself. "Of course, it's all *my* fault that he never asked her out and she still can't shut up about it. And what's worse—She's pissed at *me* that after all the older women in Knox's life, he ends up marrying a woman four years younger than me. And she still dyes her hair red in case his marriage doesn't work out."

"So that's why Knox hates your mother? Because she was using Vanessa to get to him?"

She stopped pacing and glared at him. "Yes. Which I thought you knew."

But no. Quite a few of the older women in the county had done ridiculous things to get Knox's attention. It was just a way of life in Chouteau County. It wouldn't have occurred to Eric that Knox's aversion to Donna Franklin had any more depth than his aversion to the rest of the women who'd thrown themselves at him.

"So is this really about Knox and your mom?" Eric asked carefully.

"No. It's about the fact that not only have I been hearing about Vanessa nonstop for the last fifteen years, but the minute she reappears, my *fiancé*—Mr. Pragmatic—takes one look at her and falls head over heels in love. One shot. Boom, done."

"What the fuck?!"

"Don't yell at me. I'm not mad at you. I'm not mad at Vanessa. I'm mad at my mother and the situation. Besides my job, you were the only thing in my life that had nothing to do with Vanessa Whittaker. As far as I knew, you didn't even know Simone had a little sister, and now I find out that not only is that not true, you probably wouldn't even be alive without her."

Eric flinched.

She threw one hand in the air. "You are so messed up. It was all you could do in there not to get on your knees and kiss her feet. Gratitude. Hero worship. Whatever you want to call it, but you've got some other neuroses mixed up in there besides a hard-on and being—" She made air quotes, which he hated. "'—in love.'"

"Annie," Eric growled.

"Shut up. That—" She stabbed a finger in the direction of the school. "—kicked me

in the teeth, watching you get all flustered so much you were mean to her. I cannot believe I never saw it before. *You* are a romantic. What, did you catch that disease at BYU, and it's just been in remission all this time?" She paused. "By the way, why *were* you mean to her? You only get that way when you know you've screwed up."

His jaw tightened and he looked away. Annie threw up a hand. "Of course! What did you do?"

"I never thanked her," he muttered reluctantly. "I've never spoken to her before."

"No wonder she looked like you'd just killed her dog."

Eric said nothing while he stared at the ground and worried a twig with his foot. "Okay, Annie," he murmured, guilt-ridden. "I'm *not* in love with her, but I get your point and I'm sorry. What do you want to do?"

Silence stretched between them. "I was offered a promotion yesterday, up in Omaha," she said finally, low, her voice full of what Eric heard as resignation. Regret. "Regional director of sales. I didn't get a chance to turn it down before my boss had to go, but now I think . . . I don't know. I need to think about this, with you and me."

"What about globetrotting and collecting cabana boys?" Eric asked, grasping at straws.

"Look, the only thing being a former—*divorced*—First Lady will get me is prestige and swag and freebies along the way, but my privacy'll be history. And you know I think it's a shit job anyway. So it'll take me a little longer to get to financial independence, but at least I won't be obligated or accountable to anybody."

Eric nodded slowly, seeing half his life crumble in front of his eyes, but strangely detached from it, as if it didn't really matter.

That disturbed him.

Neither spoke while Annie breathed deeply to calm herself. After a moment, she said, "I liked Vanessa way back when. I think I'd still like her because she's obviously successful at whatever the hell she does, and you know how much I like hanging out with powerful women who know what's what. But I'm tired of being compared to her and coming out second best. You've spent the last fifteen years horsewhipping yourself over her and I really don't want to know you're thinking about what could have been with her when you're married to me."

“I understand.” He did, and he couldn’t promise he wouldn’t do exactly what she’d predicted. Annie knew him too well.

“I’ll walk home,” she murmured, taking his hand for balance while she pulled her shoes off. “I need time to think. Whichever way this goes, it isn’t going to be easy for either one of us.”

Eric sighed and dug his Glock out of the back of his waistband and traded it for her shoes. She checked the gun carefully, then stuck it in the waistband of her skirt.

“Be careful,” was the only thing he could muster.

She strode off then, gorgeous as always, he noted absently, all that blonde hair and blue eyes, that tall, lissome supermodel body: the quintessential country beauty complete with cheerleading, 4H, and barrel racing credentials, and oh, by the way, an Ivy League education and a bank account far bigger than his.

Eric ambled toward his Corvette, his head low, one hand stuffed in his pocket and the other absently swinging Annie’s shoes. He dropped into the bucket seat. Sliding down, he let his head fall back and he couldn’t help the thought that breaking up with Annie might be . . . a relief.

That shocked the hell out of him, but what shocked him more—

It didn’t surprise him that she’d instantly deduced his Vanessa-related angst. It was the “in love” part that killed him.

In love? No, but Annie knew less about love than Eric did and dismissed it just as easily. However, Annie did know his tastes and his history and his habits, so he could see where she’d interpret an instant hard-on as falling in love.

Vanessa Whittaker, all grown up with curves worthy of a Varga pinup.

Average height, maybe five feet six, seven inches, much shorter than Annie’s five-eleven. Thick, professionally cut mid-back-length chestnut hair randomly streaked with blonde. Slight tan to her golden skin, even this early in the spring.

She had an air of primitive sexuality about her that her expensive grooming couldn’t camouflage. Her voice was husky, her perfume sultry and . . . *dark*, earthy. She had those piercing turquoise eyes that held the same deep hurt they’d held when she was thirteen and had only deepened when he’d snapped at her. But before he’d “killed her dog,” he’d seen . . .

Desire.

And now . . .

Eric might be free.

Vanessa was an adult.

Those facts seeped into Eric's brain and he wondered if he had any competition, but decided it didn't matter. Boyfriend or lover or husband be damned, Eric knew she wanted to get him in bed.

But she was still hurt, still wary, and she couldn't hide that any better than she could hide her blatant sexuality.

And he'd hurt her feelings. Again.

"God, Vanessa," he whispered into the dark, his hand over his arousal, pressing, rubbing until he forced himself to stop. It really wouldn't do for the Chouteau County prosecutor to fog up his windows and get caught jacking off in front of Chouteau Elementary.

And another thing . . . where the hell did she live?

Really, the last thing he needed in this town was to be involved sexually with a Whittaker girl. He'd already been punished for *not* being involved sexually with a Whittaker girl.

On the other hand, between Simone and LaVon's scheming and Vanessa's rescue, Eric had a life he had never hoped for. At seventeen, he'd been desperate to hide his course load and grades from his party pals, desperate to hide his dreams from everyone, including himself. If the Whittakers had not happened to him, he would still be managing the Chouteau County Feed and Tack, probably with kids by a few different women and no way to pay child support, his wispy aspirations dissipated with the first garnishment on his paycheck.

And Vanessa . . .

. . . willing to take in "his" kid, the kid he hadn't known how to help, except to pay for whatever he stole.

. . . the way the kid had snuggled up against her at the slightest kindness.

. . . the way she had overcome her surprise instantly to pull the boy close and give him comfort.

Eric found that incredibly attractive.

Annie would've never done that, and he wondered . . .

No. He couldn't go down that road no matter how much he wanted to. Too many issues, too many problems, too much water that had passed under that particular bridge.

With those depressing thoughts, he heaved a sigh of great disappointment and drove home to await Annie's verdict.

"Where've you been?" he asked when Annie came in the front door at three A.M. "I was about to go looking for you."

"I," Annie said calmly as she put the gun in its place and began to undress, "have been at my mother's."

His eyebrows rose. "Voluntarily?"

She was down to her lingerie when she dropped on the couch beside him. "Well, you know," she said matter-of-factly, "it was an experiment. By the time I got there, I'd decided it was no big deal, your thing about Vanessa. I mean, therapy's always an option and shit, I don't care if you fuck her as long as you're discreet."

"Uh . . ."

"Or, hey! All three of us could have a little party, if she's into that. She's hot. I'd do her."

"Uh . . ." His mind shut down.

"Yes, Eric, I have."

"Why don't I know that?"

"I didn't find it interesting enough to tell you."

His curiosity took over. "So, girls . . .?"

"A couple of times," she replied airily. "It just isn't the same without a real penis. But for her? Yeah. So my mother," she went on, "hit me up about Knox the minute I walked in the door, and I'm listening to her going on and on and on, thinking about all the times Knox told me to cut her off, wondering why I'm sitting there like a naughty little girl allowing myself to be yelled at over a fifteen-year-old situation that's not my doing and not in my power to fix, even if I wanted to."

"And?"

"And I decided she's too toxic and I can't take it anymore. I got up and walked out."



“Just like that?”

“Just like that. Just like I’m going to walk on up to Omaha to take that promotion because I’m not going to live that way, caught between her obsession and your angst. I’ll sleep in the other bedroom tonight and pack up tomorrow. I would suggest that you talk to Vanessa as soon as you can and apologize for killing her dog. Poor girl.”

Eric sighed. “Monday, I guess. She’ll have to talk to me then.”

Thus, he wasn’t sure why he found himself at Vanessa’s motel room door early the next morning to ask her out for breakfast. She answered the door in a thick robe, shocked to see him there. He grimaced when her shock gave way to contempt and bitterness, no trace of desire to be found.

He knew he’d gone down in flames just by showing up, but he made his request anyway and almost flinched at her sneer. And then—

“Are you out of your *fucking* mind?!” she growled just before slamming the door in his face.

Though deeply embarrassed and feeling his confusion, his guilt, even more heavily than usual, it did actually occur to him that at the moment she’d spoken, she’d looked and sounded exactly like a female brunette version of Knox Hilliard.

And no wonder.

*Everyone in town knew that if they so much as looked at Vanessa wrong, they’d have to answer to Knox. He also made sure Vanessa showed up at the prosecutor’s office after school or practice and stayed until she had her homework done—to his satisfaction.*

Eric went home to find half-packed boxes strewn about the place, but Annie sitting on the couch with her laptop in her lap, her mouth agape. “Eric, you’ve got to see this.”

And it was like nothing had changed, like he and Annie hadn’t broken up. He plopped down beside her, intending to autopsy their relationship a bit more, but his attention caught when Annie turned her screen toward him.

Then *his* mouth dropped open.

Vanessa Whittaker, on the cover of *Esquire*’s “Women We Love” issue, bending toward the camera, her glossy pink lips in a pouty kiss, eyes half closed. Her long, thick, blonde-streaked chestnut hair floated out behind her.

She clutched an unbuttoned chef’s coat to her sternum with her left hand to keep it

from blowing off completely, leaving the lower curve of her breasts exposed. With her right hand, she held a chef's hat over her lower abdomen, but left none of the rest of her golden skin and magnificently lush curves to the imagination.

*America's hottest chef  
serves up gourmet  
roadkill and weeds  
in the Missouri Ozarks*

"Oh, my God," Eric breathed.

"Yummy," Annie purred.

"This is too fucking surreal," he muttered, rubbing his forehead. "Turn the page." With a couple of touches, she found the feature article.

"Ford muse catapulted to food stardom, then left New York glamour for Ozark simplicity to build a five-star resort," Annie read. "Ford, shit. She had an affair with Sebastian? He turned me down flat; said I was too skinny."

"Annie!"

"What? He's gorgeous. That was before he was outed as Ford, mind you. If I'd known, I would've tried harder because he *has* painted skinny women and everybody knows he loves blondes. Let me see if I can find that painting."

Eric didn't know what was worse: finding out that his financial advisor had had an affair with and painted Vanessa Whittaker (he didn't have to see the painting to know she'd be nude) or that his fiancée (*ex-fiancée*, he reminded himself) had propositioned same financial advisor.

*Are you out of your fucking mind?!*

"I think I'm going to puke."

Pause. Key clicks. "Woah," she breathed.

Eric thought he might have a heart attack, but he couldn't look away.

Vanessa lounged nude on a magenta velveteen chaise in a classic odalisque pose, her back to the viewer, looking over her shoulder with one eyebrow raised cockily. Her skin was flushed and she wore a self-satisfied, heavy-lidded gaze that made no secret of

her relationship to the artist. Eric barely kept himself from reaching out to touch the screen over her bare buttocks. Her long streaked chestnut hair fell in tiny haphazard braids and dreadlocks to pool on the floor. An enormous gray long-haired cat crouched on the chaise by her feet.

“That’s Knox’s cat,” Eric croaked, feeling betrayed.

Crowding the chaise was a vast array of paraphernalia more suited to the lair of a voodoo priestess brewing up potions and assembling gris gris bags than to a celebrity chef with an obscure specialty.

They both stared in stunned silence. Looked at each other in disbelief. Looked back at the painting.

It was titled *Wild, Wild West*, “an homage to the stereotypical American frontier saloon paintings,” according to Wikipedia.

“That resort she’s got, Whittaker House,” Annie said slowly, unsympathetic with Eric’s misery, “do you s’pose that’s the inn Knox owns?”

Eric had his cell out, speed dialed, and on speaker before she finished her question.

“Yes or no,” he barked as soon as Knox answered. “Whittaker House is yours.”

“Half,” Knox corrected with alacrity. Annie chortled.

“Why didn’t you ever tell me that?”

“Why should I have?”

“Because I’m your lawyer.”

“Being my lawyer doesn’t entitle you to know every single detail about my life,” Knox retorted. “I have a whole ’nother life at Whittaker House, which I like a whole lot, and I wasn’t about to mix that one with this one, which sucked a big fat cock about ninety-five percent of the time. And I sure as hell wasn’t going to expose her to my taint and all the financial scrutiny I’ve had to deal with for the last fifteen years.”

“Wait a minute. Why didn’t Whittaker House show up in any of the financial records we turned over to the FBI?”

“Funneled it through my cousin Morgan.”

“Your family is the fucking Mormon Mafia,” Eric grumbled.

“So what’s with the sudden interest?”

“We ran into Vanessa last night,” Annie offered, “and he had an instant hard-on, so

I dumped his ass. He went to ask her to breakfast this morning and since he's back in record time, I'll assume she shot him down cold."

Eric slouched and glared at Annie, but Knox began to chuckle, which turned into a rolling guffaw. "Shit. That's the funniest thing I've heard in a long time."

"She's on the cover of *Esquire*," Annie said.

"Yeah, and *Maxim*."

Annie immediately turned back to the computer.

"And Sebastian painted her."

"He sure did."

"Which means he fucked her."

"Yes. She was his last lover before he met Eilis. By the way, both of them think I'm too stupid and/or oblivious to have figured that out, so I allow them to continue to think that."

Annie sat back and began to laugh in earnest and Eric thought this must be the next-to-worst day of his life.

"You're taking this awfully well, Annie," Knox said politely.

"Little bump in my road, is all. Does Vanessa switch hit possibly? Say yes."

"I'd really rather not think about those things, but I don't believe so, no."

"Damn."

"So, uh, Eric, do you have anything to contribute to this conversation or am I stuck with trying to fix Annie and Vanessa up?"

"Fuck you," Eric muttered. "She wouldn't even talk to me this morning."

"Well, no wonder," Annie said, "after what you said to her last night. Damn near made her cry."

"What did you say to her, Eric?" Knox asked calmly, although that sudden edge to his voice meant he'd gone into protective mode.

Eric reluctantly began to relay the conversation—

"She's taking Junior home with her?" Knox asked incredulously. "Why didn't I think of that? It's the perfect solution for everybody."

"And then he insulted her when she asked if Junior really was his kid."

Knox groaned intermittently throughout Annie's recitation. Eric had never felt like

such a bastard in his life, but it had all been so sudden—

“You know, Hilliard,” he burst out, angry and frustrated beyond bearing, “this bites. The girl saves my life and you just . . . never tell me any of this?”

“Look,” Knox said, “I don’t know why you’re mad at *me*. You never said a word about her, so I assumed you didn’t want to dig up old history. I was respecting your privacy. If you’d told me you had something you wanted to get squared away with her and would I grease the wheels a little bit, I’d’ve helped you. But you didn’t. You’ve got deputies and troopers and the FBI available as your personal Google and you know how to work a computer. And it’s not like she’s a nobody. She’s fucking famous and if you’d googled just *once*, you’d have found all this out on your own, so I thought you were deliberately avoiding her. But then you got an eyeful. Don’t call me up on a Sunday morning to yell at me for not reading your mind and anticipating your needs.”

“Yeah, that’s on you,” Annie agreed, now staring at the cover of *Maxim* that Vanessa graced, lying on wet grass, her eyes closed, her hair—again in those braids and dreadlocks—all her most interesting parts covered by pink and white blossoms . . .

. . . her pouty mouth around a hot pink popsicle.

Sucking it.

“Why wasn’t she at the wedding?” Eric demanded.

There was a slight pause. “We, uh, put on a masquerade on New Year’s Eve,” Knox said almost reluctantly. “It brings in a third of our yearly revenue. Celebrities go, the überwealthy. They go for her, so she has to be there. Part of what makes Whittaker House so popular is that a famous chef—who also happens to be a Ford model—meets and greets, serves personally, parties with everyone else. Her fame was about half our collateral when we started out. The painting itself was the other half.”

“Yeah, okay, I’ll buy that, but there’s something you’re not telling me.”

Deep breath. “Justice wanted her to be her third bridesmaid and I wanted you to be my groomsman,” he said quietly.

Annie gasped. “That would’ve put her and Eric together.”

“Yes. And she declined.”

Eric felt pain slice through him and he closed his eyes. Now, the only version of Vanessa he saw in his mind was the little girl who’d saved his life, who’d only wanted a

little attention from the bad boy of Chouteau High.

The look of devastation on her little face.

The hurt in her turquoise eyes last night.

The anger this morning.

“Well, could you—”

“No, I couldn’t. I’m not going to. You’re going to have to figure out what you want to do about it and how. If anything. And good luck with that if you try. She’s not the most accessible woman who ever lived. If she has a love life at all, nobody knows about it.”

“But—”

“Shut it, Eric. You’re pissed ’cause you got caught with your pants down and your dick in your hand.”

Click.

“Eric,” Annie said with a chuckle, arising to continue packing. “I don’t know what you’ve been doing with women all these years besides putting it in and pulling it out, but you better get a clue before you can’t even do that anymore.”

\* \* \* \* \*

## 14: LAST CALL

Monday morning saw two of Bryce’s attorneys on Eric’s doorstep, salivating for the chance to get back into a courtroom. He divvied up the caseload as he always had and saw the top of his desk for the first time in almost four months, which

enabled him to start the paperwork for Vanessa’s guardianship of Junior.

Eric had spent the night on YouTube watching episodes of *Vittles: Gourmet Weeds and Roadkill*, featuring Vanessa “Granny” Whittaker in her own studio kitchen in the Ozarks, preparing all sorts of wild vegetation and exotic animals. On her premiere episode, she’d made a third of the outrageously disgusting dishes mentioned in *The*

*Beverly Hillbillies.*

Utterly telegenic, her smoky voice cheerful, her hair clipped haphazardly on top of her head, clad in jeans and a pink tee shirt, she walked around her kitchen barefoot while she chopped, mixed, baked, and did what television chefs did—only with weeds.

And raccoon.

And skunk.

And 'possum.

And coyote.

“‘Possums are mean things,” she tossed out conversationally as she cubed the meat in front of the camera for a stew. “So don’t shed any tears. And coyotes eat cats, but they tend to be rangy. We have a whole coyote episode coming up, and we’ll make a couple of terrific marinades you can use for cheap cuts of domestic meat, too.”

Eric dressed for work with a combination of dread and anticipation.

“Oh, hey, Eric,” Annie had called to him on his way out the door. “Give her my phone number, ‘kay?” She’d laughed when he flipped her off over his shoulder.

At nine, Vanessa strutted into the courthouse dressed in an ankle-length pale pink linen skirt that emphasized the generous curve of her hips. The long slit up the back showed off the beautiful curve of her legs, made more so by the pink suede sandals on her feet. She wore a nicely tailored white linen button-down blouse with fine white embroidery and French cuffs.

Her streaked hair was in a prim twist at the back of her head and studded with pearls — businesslike enough to be taken seriously; flashy enough to let everyone know they were dealing with wealth and class and that yes, she *would* get her way.

In his mind, all her personae began to blend and morph into a repeating loop: The hurt little girl. The angry woman. The cover girl chef. The television personality. The regal businesswoman.

The nice, pretty lady he’d met at Chouteau Elementary.

LaVon had been subpoenaed to present Junior immediately with a deputy escort in case she felt like thumbing her nose at Eric. Dirk volunteered to be appointed the boy’s guardian ad litem. Considering Dirk had grown up in the same trailer park with Vanessa, occasionally serving as her bodyguard when things got a little rough with LaVon or

various neighborhood thugs, he was eager to argue Vanessa's case once again.

That was something else Eric hadn't known until Dirk gave him a rundown of his own history with the Whittakers.

"Why didn't you motherfuckers ever tell me any of this?"

"By 'em-effers,' *plural*," Dirk drawled, "I'm taking that to mean Knox, as well?"

Vanessa didn't deign to speak to or look at Eric, preferring instead to communicate through Dirk, but Eric surreptitiously watched her as much as he could and got caught by Dirk's sharp eye more than once. He would make sure to wipe that smug grin off his face the next time they sparred.

Vanessa was exquisitely gracious with everyone to whom she spoke, though it seemed few people in the courthouse knew what she'd done with her life. Every one of the few who did worked in the county clerk's office, where Vanessa signed autographs with a smile, and happily wrote down a couple of her recipes. She answered questions about everything from cooking to television to New York to the Ozarks, and never once lost that charm. Judge Wilson would damn near trip over his warm-and-fuzzy old heart to give her anything she wanted.

Glenn Shinkle had, of course, caught wind of this turn of events. When Eric saw him approach Vanessa, he expected to see her send the little weasel on his way, but instead . . .

"Hi, Glenn," she said, her voice warm and her expression patient, pleasant.

"You're taking Eric home with you then?"

"The small one," she said, her mouth twitching. "Yes."

Glenn, seeming a bit troubled, hesitated. He opened his mouth, shut it. Opened it again. "It's been nice meeting you, Vanessa," he murmured, as if bemused by his own hesitance. He turned to leave her where he'd found her, but she touched his arm. Surprised, Glenn looked at her warily.

"If you really want to talk to me," Vanessa said gently, "you're free to come to Whittaker House, stay awhile. See what I do, how I work."

The man stared at Vanessa for a full half minute, probably trying to figure out why she was being nice to him. Eric wouldn't mind knowing that, either.

"Okay," he said slowly, and suddenly Eric realized that Glenn didn't know how to



respond to someone—anyone—who had taken time to speak to him kindly. “Thank you, Vanessa.”

She smiled at him and said, “You’re welcome.” Then she glanced up and caught Eric watching her, listening to the exchange, and her smile faded. She turned away with a final, absentminded pat on Glenn’s arm.

Eric had had the wind knocked out of him before, but this . . .

All those years, carrying his gratitude around like a punishment, his humiliation keeping him from finding her and doing what he should’ve done immediately—and he was the *only* person in the county she wouldn’t speak to.

. . . you *should know that better than anybody*.

“What was that about?” Glenn asked snidely, snapping Eric out of his agony.

“What?”

“That look. You two have some bad blood between you?”

Not on Eric’s part. Glenn might not be able to put the last piece of any given puzzle in place, but he could get uncomfortably close. Every response that flooded Eric’s mind would indict him, so he simply stared Glenn down until the man left. “Karma’s a bitch,” Eric growled at no one.

. . . you *better get a clue before you can’t even do that anymore*.

Eric decided to stay in his office and close the door.

He was in a foul mood that night when he sat down by Dirk to watch their new karate teacher in action, so he was mad at Giselle by default. Knox wasn’t there to take the blame for keeping the facts of Vanessa’s existence from him, so *someone* in that mafia family had to.

Once he got immersed in Giselle’s teaching, though, a don’t-fuck-with-me wall around her not mitigated in the least bit by her easy humor, it occurred to Eric that perhaps he’d just rather tussle with Knox than her. Knox barked a lot but rarely bit. Eric could clearly see Giselle wouldn’t bother to bark before she took a chunk out of somebody’s ass.

*She converted to the gospel of Glock some time ago.*

Yeah. That. Exactly.

Eric and Dirk knew what she’d done, gotten arrested and investigated for. Cleared

of. Eric suspected her of having much darker secrets, but didn't dare ask.

And he could see why she'd converted to the gospel of Glock: She was a small woman. The realization had been slow in coming because her personality was far too large to be contained in that petite body.

Dressed as she was, being in charge, an intimidating edge to her fragile and humor-packed voice, she had the instant respect of every person in that room. She would not coddle students as Eric and Dirk were wont to do.

Giselle called on two of the more timid women in the class to demonstrate a technique. They arose nervously, but both showed a competency and confidence they'd not shown before.

Those women didn't want to disappoint her. They wanted to be like her—check that. They wanted to *be* her. Eric looked back at Giselle and he saw that she knew exactly what she was doing.

Women responded to her edge.

He and Dirk exchanged looks, then bumped fists. “Bryce Kenard is definitely the only man in town who could roll her,” Dirk muttered out of the side of his mouth, and Eric couldn't find fault with that statement. Eric glanced over at Bryce, the soon-to-be golf partner, where he sat on the floor with his son asleep on his shoulder.

Even with an infant in his arms, Kenard's power was unmistakable. He intimidated everyone. Not only was he huge, taller and much broader than Eric, he had deep burn scars that matted one half of his face. His voice was as damaged as his face from the house fire that had killed his first family and nearly killed him. Eric didn't think the man could get any more intimidating than he already was—*especially* in a courtroom—but the wide Celt knot tattoo around his massive right arm probably made him downright terrifying to anyone who didn't know him.

Yet he'd rather watch his wife teach karate classes while feeding and burping his baby than be home alone at night.

That was really sad.

On the other hand, Bryce would be going home with and getting laid by a woman who obviously adored him, and Eric . . .

. . . would not be.

Which jolted his mind fully back to Vanessa Whittaker.

Not the cover girl. Not the TV chef. Not the Ford muse.

The sweet woman he'd met at Chouteau Elementary.

How could he apologize to her, thank her, and make her believe it enough so he could have a chance to find out if—

Eric looked down at the floor, his mouth tight.

*Who* was the sad one again?

He wanted to talk to the woman who'd fought for the guardianship of a troubled kid, the one who'd been kind to an old crank reporter nobody liked, the one who'd borne Eric's unwarranted rudeness with grace.

His gratitude remained, along with deepening embarrassment, regret, and guilt, all badly tarnished by the fact that he wanted to sink himself into that gorgeous body. He wasn't sure how much was his emotional connection to her or sheer attraction.

*Gratitude. Hero worship. Whatever you want to call it, but you've got some other neuroses mixed up in there besides a hard-on and being . . . 'in love.'*

He sighed. The rest of the class passed in a blur until all the students had left and the Kenards had said their goodnights.

"Must I say it or are you going to pop out with it like you know you should?"

Eric glowered at Dirk's smirking face. "*Dammit*, news gets around this town fast."

"Yes, it does, especially when you telegraph it for the entire courthouse to mock. And you thought Justice's crush on Knox was pathetic. At least Knox managed to hide his feelings for her until they started sleeping together."

"I'm just grateful nobody knows the rest of the history."

"Why would that make any difference?"

"I," said Eric heavily, "was the only person in Annie's life who didn't have any connection to Vanessa Whittaker at all. And then I wasn't." At Dirk's blank stare, Eric explained what had changed between Saturday and Monday.

"Well, I'm sorry," Dirk sighed. "I can see why Annie wouldn't want to stay."

So could Eric.

Tuesday, Dirk argued for Vanessa's permanent guardianship of Junior. It wasn't hard.

Vanessa Whittaker had everything a kid could ever need: a mansion to live in on hundreds of acres of developed and wooded land, a gourmet restaurant, a small fortune in the bank.

LaVon Whittaker had . . . less than nothing: A toxic dump of a home, an empty refrigerator, no money, and a bad reputation.

In the courtroom, Eric had to face LaVon's screeched accusations once again, but that was nothing new. Judge Wilson finally threatened her with contempt of court if she didn't shut up. When court was adjourned, the room emptied, and LaVon continued her rant. Dirk interrupted her spiel, at which point she'd hurled racial epithets at him Eric had never heard outside a redneck locker room.

"LaVon, shut your mouth before I slap it shut," Vanessa snapped as she approached them. She grabbed LaVon's arm and forcibly dragged her away. "Sorry, Dirk," Vanessa tossed over her shoulder with a wince of embarrassment.

Dirk shrugged, unperturbed, and turned back to Eric. "I have been hearing that since the first time I stepped between her and LaVon."

"Huh. So what's up?"

"Turns out the kid can read."

"No shit?"

Dirk shook his head. "Vanessa found him in a corner with his nose in a book—and I mean, *in* the book—so I called his teacher. She came up here on her own to testify on his behalf, but he needs glasses. She's sent notes home with him, but she doesn't know whether LaVon got the notes or if she ignored them. She wasn't sure whether or not to call you directly to take him to the eye doctor."

"Good God," Eric muttered, feeling as if he'd failed the kid on a couple of different levels.

An hour later, from the window of his private office, Eric watched Vanessa leave, holding Junior's hand as they went to her car. His jaw clenched when he beheld the fine piece of machinery she drove, and his fist clenched against the window, above his head.

A Plymouth Prowler, in that distinctive purple metallic.

Eric had vaguely noticed it at her motel, but had been too distracted to devote much attention to it.

He watched her drive that beautiful purple . . . Batmobile . . . down the street, the boy belted in and looking happy for the first time in his life.

“I’ve never been so humbled by an act of courage in my life—by a child,” Knox had said years before as he stood in the Salt Lake City airport with Eric and Dirk, awaiting the boarding call that would take Knox back to Kansas City, leaving a freshly shorn Eric to Dirk’s stewardship in these strange cities with a strange history and a strange religion. “And at great personal cost. Make something of the life she gave you and don’t let her down.”

Eric couldn’t believe the sudden moisture in Knox’s eyes when he looked at Dirk, so freshly returned from his mission to New Zealand that he still spoke with an accent. “Don’t try to convert him, don’t haul him to church; just get him acclimated to Provo and the culture so he can concentrate on school. Keep him out of trouble as much as you can. You know what I want to happen.”

Yes, Eric *had* been obsessed with Vanessa all these years, doing what was right, trying to make that little girl proud of him, being careful not to let her down so that her sacrifice would not have been in vain.

And after all that, after everything Eric had attained, he’d let her down anyway simply because he hadn’t said “thank you” when he should’ve.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **15: LAURA MUST NOT COMPLAIN**

Tuesday afternoon was extremely busy once Vanessa had been appointed Nephew’s legal guardian.

“Nephew—” Vanessa refused to call him Eric. Eric Cipriani, no less. “Junior” was just as bad. “I’ll give you ten minutes to collect whatever prized possessions you have and put them in here.” She handed him a largish box once they’d pulled up in front of her

parents' mobile home. "No clothes. No shoes. Nothing that stinks. I'll let LaVon dig out that landfill herself because I sure as hell am not doing it and I'm not going to let you do it, either."

"That's stupid. What am I going to wear?"

"We're going shopping for a few things and get your sizes. When we get home, you can go online and see what you like and order from there."

She could see that concept was lost on the kid. He had no idea how business was accomplished in the world of easy access to . . . anything because there was no computer in the trailer, much less internet access. No PDAs, video games, cell phones, though they did have basic cable because LaVon wouldn't miss her soaps. Nephew's school had a computer lab and internet access, but he didn't understand how it worked because he'd never had enough time or attention to have it explained to him thoroughly or use it to any great extent.

"Oh, and before we get to the store, remember this: You swipe anything you don't pay for, I'll take you right back to Eric and have him keep you there for a good month before I come back to get you. If you do it when we get home, you'll really be sorry."

His jaw clenched.

"I know you've grown up thinking that's normal, but it's not. You pay for what you get and you do honest work to earn the money you need. Next item on the agenda: Pick a name. Any name. I'm not going to live with a pint-sized Eric Cipriani."

His eyes narrowed speculatively. "You like him."

"Yes, I do, and if I wanted to take an Eric Cipriani home with me, it'd be the big one."

"You know he's getting married in December?" he taunted.

"Yes, which is one very huge reason I'm not taking him home with me."

Well, and Nash.

"And so maybe you're not so different from Simone after all."

She turned to look at him slowly and cocked an eyebrow at him. His smug expression faded. "Do I need to remind you? *I* have a college degree, a television show, a million-dollar business, *and* I know how to cook. How am I like your mother again?"

That shut him up, since, being a fairly bright kid, he understood when one of these

things was not like the other.

“One more thing. If you think Eric’s hard on you, you just wait until I get Knox Hilliard down your throat.”

He gulped.

Naturally LaVon wasn’t in the trailer, but Vanessa’s father was, napping in his wheelchair, his chin on his chest, working for every breath of oxygen he took. This time, she didn’t let him sleep; she awakened him to tell him what was going on—and it shocked him to his core.

“But Nessie—”

“Not another word, Pops. This was his decision and as you can see, he’s not heartbroken about Simone’s passing or getting the hell out of this shithole.” His mouth tightened and she sighed. “Please let me come back for you,” she begged. “Please. I can give you such a much better life than this.”

“I vowed before God and a priest I’d stay with your mama, Vanessa Nicole,” he said solemnly. “An’ I’m gonna. Don’t matter what she does ’cause what she does is on her at Judgment Day.” He crossed himself. “Only matters what I said I’d do.”

Vanessa relented because that was completely true, and bent to hug him. Nephew stormed out the door without a backward glance or a word to his grandfather. “I love you, Pops,” she said, pretty sure it would be the last time she’d ever see him alive.

“I love you, too, Nessie.”

*But not enough. Never enough.*

She left then and found Nephew sulking in the front seat, his box wedged between his knees and the dash.

“What’s your problem?”

His mouth tightened. “Why do you love him?”

She shrugged, understanding instantly. “He’s my father.”

He said nothing to that and she sighed, turning the key to release that glorious roar and cover the awkwardness. “Look,” she said when they finally turned out onto the highway, “until you choose a new name and it gets carved in stone, I’m calling you Nephew. Get used to it.”

“Fine with me.” As they ventured south, he began to perk up. “Where are we going

first?”

“UPS to ship your box. It’ll be there tomorrow,” she said and ruffled his hair.

That done, Vanessa herded him into the salon at Wal-Mart and had his hair cut to a respectable length, which was to say, short. Very, very short. He squinted into the mirror and didn’t let loose one word of protest. That was suspicious.

“You really can’t see worth a damn, can you, Nephew?”

He looked up at her, his brow wrinkled, and said, bemused, “I don’t know.”

She sighed and dragged him twenty feet to the eyeglasses shop for an exam and had orders for glasses and contacts sent to the Wal-Mart in Ava.

“Oh, my,” Vanessa murmured when she saw the prescription, then looked up. “Okay. Clothes. If you don’t like anything here, let me know and I’ll take you to Target.”

He looked at her, surprised. “You’re going to let me pick what I want?”

Vanessa’s soul started to hurt. Was this how Knox had felt before he’d asked Giselle to take her shopping for clothes? At least she didn’t have to explain what a period was and how to deal with it, like Giselle had had to do. “Yes, Nephew. Why would I make you wear clothes you don’t like? Except, I’d prefer it if you at least matched.”

She stood outside the changing room door holding clothes Nephew had chosen. She’d tried to estimate his size, but had struck out three times now. Twelve must be an odd age for a boy, she decided, because almost nothing fit him well. When he came out of the dressing room for the last time, she muttered, “Well, it’ll have to do.”

That done, Vanessa found a medical supply company and arranged for an electric scooter to be delivered to her father in the morning.

Nephew stayed with Vanessa in her motel room that night and she made him shower over and over and over again.

They left early Wednesday morning and though she had absolutely no reason to pass by the courthouse on her way out of town, she did anyway, looking for a glimpse, a sign, anything. But the only sign of Eric was the same one that stood where she’d first seen it, across the street from the courthouse.

**CIPRIANI KENPO**



A bittersweet pain poked through her breastbone. He knew what she'd wanted from him when she was thirteen: a "thank you," some acknowledgment of what it had cost her to prove his innocence. Now, as a woman who'd been schooled in love by the best, whose second lover had proven to be as splendid as her first, she also wanted a whole lot of other things from Eric Cipriani, only one of which was sex.

Shocking, is what it was.

*Why* had he come to her motel room Sunday morning with an offer of breakfast—and possibly more—when he had a fiancée at home? And after he'd thoroughly humiliated her for asking an important question? There was only one answer to that: He was still the dog he'd been in high school. He certainly had not knocked on her door to say what he should've said years ago. Indeed, it was almost as if he'd forgotten all about it.

She got mad all over again and the speedometer measured every rise in her temper, leaving behind that cesspool of a town *and* its prosecutor.

Who still hadn't said "thank you."

\* \* \* \* \*

## **16: AT THE FOOT OF HARDCRABBLE HILL**

April 2010

"Aunt Vanessa," Vachel demanded late one afternoon in early April as he burst in the back door with his usual post-siesta energy. "What's going on? There's a missionary out weeding a flower bed. They're not supposed to be doing stuff like that."

"His companion's father died and he doesn't have anything else to do right now," Vanessa said as she tended the sauté pan in which a week's worth of parched corn sizzled. It was a popular snack she put out on the bar instead of peanuts. "His bishop's

taking them to the airport tonight so he can go home. I'm going with them."

"Why do you have to go?"

"I paid for the ticket. I have to go so I can provide ID."

It was late when Vanessa returned from Springfield with two very quiet men. The lone elder and his bishop disappeared down a dimly lit path to gather his things from the missionaries' cottage, then left to stay with the bishop's family until he was assigned a new companion. Vanessa climbed the back steps of the mansion wearily, then trudged up to her office to check her email—

—then suddenly dropped into her chair with a gasp and a choke.

"Aunt Vanessa, I'm going out for— What's wrong?"

She looked up from her laptop to see Vachel hanging over the threshold by the doorjamb.

"Your grandfather died," Vanessa murmured, dashing her tears away. Not that she hadn't expected it.

Vachel's mouth tightened. "I'm not going back."

"Yes, you are. Go pack."

"I have things to do."

"They'll wait."

"But—"

"This isn't negotiable, Vachel," Vanessa said, giving her voice just enough harshness to make sure he knew she meant every word. After all, she had backup. "We'll leave tomorrow morning."

She knew that panicked look in his face, a look he hadn't had for a year now thanks to a plethora of good male influence, regular therapy, and a bedroom suite that allowed him as much space and light as he could get without being outdoors.

"I don't want to go, either," she said softly. "But I loved my father and I think you loved him too."

"No, I didn't," he flashed back, anger showing through the panic. "He wouldn't protect me."

She couldn't argue that, but she wouldn't relent. He growled and pushed himself away from the door, yanking it closed with an angry slam. Vanessa sat and listened to

him thump and throw things around in his room; she didn't have to wonder what he had planned for the night.

He clipped down the stairs to raid the ice maker so he could go check his crawdad traps—his release valve when he couldn't otherwise contain his anger.

She looked back at the screen.

**Subject: Your father**

**Reply-to: ecipriani@co.chouteau.mo.us**

I didn't know if anyone would let you know. His obituary is attached.

EC

Vanessa didn't kid herself she grieved for her father; she didn't. He had earned his rest and she only wished she could ask him how Whittaker House stacked up to heaven. But she could stop worrying about him now, about his obstinance and his willingness to live with LaVon, about why she even cared since he hadn't protected her or fed her. However, before Knox, Vanessa had had Dirk to protect her, so she could afford to feel more charity for her father than Vachel could, to feel some measure of love for what little her father could give her. Vachel had had no one.

No, Vanessa didn't grieve for her father. She grieved for the messenger and for herself.

For what she still wanted that she couldn't have.

Eleven months, three weeks, and three days.

A week and a half shy of the year anniversary of Simone's death.

She knew, because she'd kept track. That fact embarrassed her; it embarrassed her that a little thrill ran through her at the sight of *his* email address in her inbox.

She sighed as she re-read it. It wasn't as if she hadn't expected the news, but not from *him*.

As long as she kept the image of him as a seventeen-year-old with a bad reputation, questionable parentage, and little to nothing in the way of potential and/or worldly possessions, in orange and shackles at his arraignment, she had a chance at keeping her libido from going out of control.

Ah, but now she'd seen him as a grown man, successful in his own right, having come back to become a powerful man in the county that had nearly beaten him.

She closed her eyes and dropped her head down on her keyboard, oblivious to beeps. She wanted to kiss him—deep and slow—wanted to wrap her legs around his waist, wanted to feel his naked body against hers, in hers—

The passion in his voice when he had asked her to breakfast . . .

The hungry way he had watched her the two days she'd spent at the courthouse arranging for Vachel's guardianship . . .

It had taken every bit of self-control Vanessa had developed over the years to ignore him, ignore that, ignore what he obviously wanted from her when she wanted it so badly, too.

For reasons she didn't understand, she had immediately visualized him here, on her turf, in her life.

At Whittaker House.

But he had a fiancée then and he had a wife now and he had had no business asking her to breakfast or watching her *that* way—and *why* would she want a man like that anyway? And why was she aching over a married man?

Vanessa sat in her office chair, looking at her phone it as if she could divine some meaning from it. In a fog, she picked up the receiver and hit the speed dial by rote.

"My father died," she said without preamble. "The wake is tomorrow night."

"Oh? You going?"

"Yeah. He was the only member of my family I cared about."

"Mmmm." Knox held the phone away from his mouth to talk to Justice for quite a while and Vanessa could hear them rapidly trying to arrange a plane ticket. Then, "Okay. I'll be out tomorrow. Hopefully by noon."

"Thanks."

"You all right?"

Vanessa heard the slight hesitance in his voice, the question he wanted to ask that he wouldn't. "Tired. Took one of the elders to the airport to go home. His father died. Came back to find out mine did, too. Then Vachel pitched a fit at having to go back." She knew she was babbling; he knew it, too. She continued to rattle on, listing every item on the to-

do list, though he knew it as well as she, but he let her talk without interrupting. Then she stopped.

“All right, kid. Well, I’m sorry.”

She swallowed. “Um, Knox? I— I wanted to tell you I’m sorry for not— Uh, not coming to see you when you were in the hospital.”

“Vanessa,” he said slowly after a long pause. “Have I made you feel like I was unhappy that you didn’t?”

“No.”

“Where have I always run when things got a little too hot in my kitchen?”

She sighed.

“And where did I spend two months getting waited on hand and foot, getting chauffeured to therapy and doctor visits after I got out of the hospital, after the wedding? And who covers my ass when I want to commit suicide-by-sugar?”

“I don’t—” Crap. She was going to start crying. “I don’t know what I would have done if you had died.”

He chuckled. “I did die.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Vanessa, what’s all this about? You’re not usually so maudlin and I know this can’t be over your father.”

*I’m lonely.*

The thought shocked her because she hadn’t been lonely since she was a child; her self-appointed guardian and his minions had made sure of that.

Way too much to do.

Too many things to accomplish.

Nash.

Good Lord, how could she be lonely when she had a mile-long to-do list, a vision of a far grander Whittaker House, and a live-in lover?

But right now, she wanted to not feel so empty and hopeless. She glanced at her email, Eric’s initials mocking her.

It was the first time in almost two years—since Justice and Knox had asked her to be on Eric’s arm for their wedding—that she’d been able to put a name to those feelings.

“I— I, uh . . . I’m not— Er, well, I mean—” Knox remained silent, waiting for her to say whatever she had to say. If only she knew what that was. “I don’t know how to say it,” she finally whispered.

“It’ll all work out,” he said abruptly. “You need to have a little faith.”

Vanessa hung up after the appropriate goodbyes, wondering what Knox expected her to have faith in and where he thought she would find enough to do any good.

The camouflaged door between her office and Nash’s suite opened. When closed, it blended into the woodwork flawlessly; a careful inspection wouldn’t yield its presence, much less a casual glance. There were secret passageways and concealed doors like that all over Whittaker House and only Vanessa and her architect knew them all.

She looked up to see Nash leaning against the threshold, his muscular arms crossed over his bare chest, his ratty jeans riding low on his hips. God, he was hot. Why couldn’t —

“Shitty day?”

She nodded.

He said nothing for a moment, then, “Come to bed.”

\*

He had performed excellently as usual, but tonight Vanessa’s body didn’t seem to find him satisfactory and her mind was filled with *ecipriani@co.chouteau.mo.us*.

“All right, Granny, spill it,” Nash said. “‘Cause you ain’t doin’ it for me lately, either.”

Vanessa laughed reluctantly and snuggled up against him, their bare bodies slick with sweat, the room pungent with the aroma of sex. “Are you sure you’re not gay? You’d make a really excellent girlfriend. Except for that part about liking girls, I mean.”

Nash laughed and played with her hair. “What, you wanna talk about shoes when we’re fuckin’?”

“That would be diverting.”

“Okay, divert me. Who’m I standin’ in for? And if you say Ford, I’ll kick your ass out for lyin’.”

Vanessa didn't have the energy or the heart to protest on any level. "I'm sorry."

"Would it make you feel better if I told you you're standin' in, too?"

She laughed then, suddenly amused. Relieved. "Yes, it would, actually. I won't have to find a way to shake you off my leg when I'm done with you."

His big warm hand caressed her arm and up her shoulder. She yawned and was almost asleep when he murmured, "I'm gonna make this hiatus official and retire."

That got her attention. "Why? You're young. Look at all those old rockers that still go on tour and make albums."

"She—" He stopped. Started again. "V, you know why I ain' left yet?"

"I thought you wanted a break from your career, and then you just got spoiled."

He said nothing for a moment. "The fans, the road— They're important. They pay my bills. They like what I do. But I don't feel just right. It should feel just right. You got a career, you got money, you got women, you got the world at your feet. Everythin's peachy."

"But something's missing."

"Someone. She gave me an ultimatum. Her or my career, the fans, the road, the groupies."

Vanessa said nothing for a moment. "You've been here three years, Nash. No groupies. Just me, not exactly itching to leave or find anyone else. You're not a diva. You're polite, you keep to yourself, and you treat my staff well. And you've never seemed like the groupie type to me."

"I had my share," he said slowly, thinking. "After she cut me loose. I was hurtin'. Strung out on booze and coke. Pissed she didn't believe I'd been faithful, so I told her I hadn't been."

"Oh, Nash," she sighed.

"Yeah. She wanted security and an education, which I promised her, and she got tired o' waitin'. Can't blame her for that. It took a long time to hit the big time, long past the deadline we'd agreed on, and she finally sent me off to Nashville with a handful of cash she'd saved and told me to do it right, give it one last good shot before we gave up."

"And she let you go alone?"

"She was workin' full time, goin' to school. She wanted to be somebody of her own,

not just the ol' lady draggin' along with the band like a groupie, and I promised I'd give her that, too, but didn't deliver."

"How long were you two together?"

He drew a long breath. "Twenty-one years. Met at eight, got married at eighteen, divorced at twenty-nine."

Vanessa's heart hurt all of a sudden, not for Nash exactly, but for the death of a longstanding relationship. She could feel the heartache in his voice, thick, heavy.

"I have never, not once, stopped lovin' her and I shoulda just left the road and gone back home to her when she popped up with divorce papers."

"Maybe if you had, you'd be wondering what you missed if you'd taken the other path and making her miserable over it to boot."

"Well," he said. "That's a possibility."

"So . . . what, ten years now?"

"Yeup. Aw, I deserved to lose her, V. I was an asshole. I didn't deliver on the promises I'd made her, but without her holdin' the fort down, supportin' me, I'd be nothin'. Not only that, but she thought I could do more, be more, always had more faith in my talent and my brains than I did. It made me mad. I felt like she was pushin' me to be who I wasn't, but she had a better handle on who I was than I did. She always thought—and I don't know where the hell she got this—but she always thought I was smarter than her."

"You're brilliant, Nash. She was probably right."

"She's a cardiac surgeon," he said wryly.

Vanessa's mouth dropped open. "Oh."

"Yeah. *Oh*." He thought a moment. "I been watchin' your little pets—"

"Missionaries."

"—pets rotate in and out like a revolvin' door, always on the go. At first, I'd catch one or two of 'em to talk to 'em, see what keeps 'em goin'. These kids—they got a plan. Serve God, go home, get married, get an education, get kids, do what God tells 'em to do. Nothin' distracts 'em. Hell, the last thing I wanna do is serve God, but I didn't have any sorta plan. I just wanted to get famous. An' I did that, but I never thought past that except when Mel—Melanie—forced me to. She made me mad when she did that, 'cause I never



thought there'd come a time I'd get tired of it, but *she* knew I would."

Vanessa pursed her lips and refrained from expressing her opinion on that because her plan was the only thing she had. She'd never understood how Nash could tolerate his aimlessness and more than once wondered what he did all day, every day.

"Used to be, I'd see these college kids at my concerts and laugh at 'em because after the concert's over, they go back to their boring little lives and their little plans. Me? I'm the highest-paid poet in the world."

"No. That would be Sting."

He chuckled. "So I get to party all night and sleep all day and sing, pluck a few strings for my livin', right? All I gotta do is stand there and be adored and get panties and money thrown at me. Life's one big party."

"And now you're bored with it."

He didn't reply for a moment. "No," he said slowly, "I'm not bored with performin'. I really love bein' up on stage, V, playin' banjo or fiddle or mandolin or whatnot. Puttin' my poetry out there. Adrenaline like you don't know. The kinda energy that gets tossed back at you— It's the other twenty hours of the day when I'm off stage, when all I got to look forward to is a long bus ride to the next stage. Not bored. Tired. I'm just not—"

"Fulfilled."

"That's it. My daddy always said that there comes a time in a man's life he wants to leave something of himself behind, a little him, somethin' that makes him immortal."

Vanessa knew the sentiment; Knox had said something similar to her once, long ago.

*Shit, Vanessa, I've wanted a family since I was nineteen. Marry a nice Mormon girl, create the kind of family I didn't have, the kind of families my cousins have. Go to church. Hold callings. Raise good kids. Do my home teaching. Play basketball on Saturday mornings with the elders quorum. Be the kind of man most of my uncles are. Now I'm thirty, and I still don't have it, and even if I do get married and have kids, I won't be able to go back to church.*

She hadn't quite understood that because she'd never given children a whole lot of thought beyond the idea she might want one or two someday. If she found the right man.

"And you can't have her and a family and your career."

“Nope. It’s why I faked my death an’ came here. By myself. To sort out a plan, one that’d make her happy and me happy and so’s we could live together, too. Now it’s three years gone— It’s taken me that long to put it in play so I could go back to her with an accomplishment worthy of her opinion of me.”

“So you *have* been doing something constructive.”

“Yeup. Told you I was workin’.”

But Vanessa didn’t ask what; he’d tell her if he felt like it and they each had their reasons for maintaining a comfortable distance.

“I wanna go home, give her my . . . gift, I guess you’d call it. Keep doin’ what I been workin’ on. Raise myself a rugrat in peace, maybe two.”

“What if she can’t have children or doesn’t want any?” A long moment of silence stretched out and Vanessa’s eyes widened. “*Oh.*”

“She don’t think I know,” he muttered, almost so low she might not have heard him if her ear hadn’t been pressed to his chest. “She don’t want nothin’ to do with me. I ain’t had the guts to get close enough to let her know I know.”

“And . . . ?”

“Girl’s six now, almost seven. Second grade. Name’s Trixie. Beatrice. Little tomboy, is what. I feel like I already know her.”

“How?”

“My father-in-law. Well, ex. Reggie. He likes me— God knows why—”

Vanessa laughed.

“—but he takes videos, sends ’em to me. Lets me know what’s goin’ on, her grades an’ such. Her friends, what she likes doin’. See, he thinks I oughtta know about my girl, provide for her, which is the only reason he goes behind Melanie to tell me.

“We— We wanted kids. We tried, didn’t happen. The last night, before she gave me the divorce papers, we— And then Trixie happened and it’s like I flaked on her again.”

“Did she tell you she was pregnant?”

“Not a peep.”

“Then that’s on her.”

“Naw. It’s all on me ’cause I didn’t do what I said I’d do in the first place an’ it all snowballed after that.”

And that, Vanessa knew, was the heart and soul of Nash Piper: keeping his promises. Doing what he said he'd do. Being nice to people. Helping out where he could. *Quietly.*

*I vowed before God and a priest I'd stay with your mama . . . and I'm goin' to. Don't matter what she does 'cause what she does is on her at Judgment Day . . . Only matters what I said I'd do.*

Vanessa sighed and vaguely crossed herself.

"So I try to make it up, but you know, money ain't gonna do the trick. You can't ever make it up, not when you're not there to be a real dad."

"Would she even let you?"

"No, but I ain't tried, either, and that's me bein' a coward."

"Does she know you're alive?"

"Reggie wouldn't keep that from her." He paused. "I can't live like this no more, V. It's been eight fuckin' years and I know I will never shake her. I don't remember a time I didn't love her, when I wasn't in love with her."

"What's she look like?" Vanessa asked, already knowing the answer.

"Identical twins, V, I'm telling you, right down to the funky green eyes and the streaks in your hair. Except her hair's curly. I saw you on *Vittles* and I thought, 'Shit, if I did *her*—' So I came here. But it didn't work out like that. You ain't her. You ain't ever gonna be her. An' I ain't ever gonna be whoever I'm standin' in for and I *know* it ain't Taight."

She sighed.

He nudged her. "C'mon. I 'fessed up. Your turn. The fish that got away."

She swallowed and tears stung her eyes. "Just a small-time country lawyer back home I'd never even spoken to until I decided to bring Vachel home with me last year."

He started. "Come a'gin?"

"A boy I had a crush on. That's all it ever was. I was thirteen. He was eighteen. I just wanted him to talk to me a little bit. I thought I'd have some time to grow up and catch his attention, but he left town before I even hit puberty . . . And here I am, fifteen years later with fame and a career and freedom, and I'm still . . ."

*Pining.*

*Pathetic.*

“Does he know about this?”

“Pretty sure he does. And then he . . . He wanted to sleep with me. I think. Last year, I mean, when I went home. When we spoke finally. For the first time ever.”

“Does he know how to find you?”

“Yes, but he’s married now.”

“Oh,” Nash said, obviously more startled now. “That ain’t like you a’tall.”

“I know.”

*Vanessa, uh, I’d like— I mean, would you— Do you want to go get breakfast or something? With me?*

*Are you out of your fucking mind?!*

“An’ you’re goin’ back tomorrow.” Vanessa heard the question in his voice, but didn’t answer it. “So what else?” He waited. She ground her jaw against the tears and said nothing more. “Don’t make me drag it out of you in little bitty bits. Start from the beginnin’.”

Vanessa opened her mouth, snapped it shut, then shifted and climbed sinuously back on top of him. She leaned down to kiss him and he followed her lead.

“Don’t think fuckin’ me’s gonna make me forget about this,” he muttered between kisses.

“And don’t think fucking me is going to make me tell you.”

\* \* \* \* \*

## **17: STAY OUT OF THE MUD, FLUTTERBUDGET**

The stares she and Vachel garnered as they drove through Chouteau City were exactly the same as the ones she had gotten the year before. Only this time . . .

“Did you bring something else to wear besides your usual?”

She wished she'd thought to ask *before* they left.

"No."

Vanessa sighed. "Did you at least pack a good shirt or two and a jacket?"

"Of course!"

She might have laughed at how offended he was if she'd felt like laughing. Her gut clenched as she drove by the courthouse at two o'clock, saw people spilling from the doors and caught herself looking for *him*.

A *married* him. She gulped, wondering if she was so callous she could contemplate

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Absolutely not. She had too much religious training, both Catholic and Mormon, to stomach adultery. Besides, she knew what Laura would think, and Vanessa would never be able to bear Knox's disappointment.

Once she and Vachel had gotten a room at the motel by the courthouse, and unpacked toiletries and such, they went to her mother's mobile home.

Vanessa and her streaked hair.

The Prowler.

The strange kid with her.

LaVon's whole fan club, gathered around her on the deck of the mobile home, fell silent as they watched Vanessa and Vachel get out of the car. Now, nothing but the relatively quiet ambient noise of the trailer park could be heard.

Suddenly, LaVon wailed and fell to sobbing as if her heart had broken and, well, it had. She'd miss that social security check, all right.

"Eric?" called LaVon through her sobs, calculated to swing everyone's attention back to her. "Is that you?"

"My name is Vachel Whittaker," he said, his voice clear and confident, his diction precise. Suddenly, Vanessa didn't mind his wardrobe quite so much if this was what he was getting out of playing highland warrior with every grown man in Wright and Davis County every third weekend of the month.

"Vanessa!" she snapped, shooting out of her chair, forgetting to stay in character. "You changed his name? Simone—God rest her soul—named him that for a reason!"

"Which is exactly the reason it got changed."

“What the hell kinda name is Vachel? Vachel the satchel?”

It took every ounce of control Vanessa had to remain cool, but Vachel said, with an admirable calm, “A friend suggested it.”

LaVon gestured to his clothes and screeched, “Did he tell you to wear a skirt, too? Good Lawd A’mighty! The boy’s turned homo!”

Vanessa rolled her eyes and Vachel snorted. “It’s not a skirt.”

“Why’re you wearing it? You go in the house and put some pants on right now!”

Vachel curled his lip. He and Vanessa both leaned back against the car, crossed their arms and ankles, and stared at LaVon benignly until she started to sputter and cough. The fog of cigarette smoke overhanging the deck was visible and neither of them would brave it. It forced LaVon to descend from her redwood throne to come to Vanessa, which pleased her mightily.

She stopped a couple of feet away and wagged a long, gaudily manicured finger at Vachel’s attire. “This, this, this— What’re you *doin’* to the boy, Vanessa?”

Vanessa looked down at Vachel, inspecting him as if for the first time: white tee shirt, black knee-high Doc Martens, tiny blue reflective sunglasses, and a white-red-and-blue tartan kilt. He had a tightly folded red bandana wrapped around his forehead. His short blond hair had been bleached white by the sun and his skin tanned fairly dark by same; it was an amazing contrast. Try as she might, could find nothing but petty glee in the way he looked as long as it sent her mother over the moon.

“What’s wrong with him?” Vanessa finally asked. The corner of Vachel’s mouth twitched into a smirk. “I love him, Ma, which is more than you ever did.”

LaVon’s eyes narrowed on Vanessa and she drew close enough for the smell of rancid tobacco smoke to choke her. “I been tryin’ to get in touch with you for a year,” LaVon hissed at her. “Why’n’t you return my calls? Long distance is expensive, you know.”

Vanessa raised an eyebrow. “I have nothing to say to you and I already know that the only thing you have to say to me is ‘Gimme gimme gimme.’”

“You owe me,” she snarled, “an’ one o’ these days, I’m just gonna show up at your pretty little door.”

“First, I don’t owe you a damned thing. Second, you have to have a car that’ll get

you that far, which you don't and probably never will. Third, my staff and the Wright and Davis County prosecutors are primed for your arrival, so it won't be fifteen minutes before you're in jail for trespassing. Then a nice state trooper will escort you clear out of the Ozarks and warn you not to come back."

"Which one of *those* prosecutors're you bangin'?"

Vanessa's well-timed arm across Vachel's chest kept him from launching himself at his grandmother, but he snarled at LaVon and she retreated in shock.

"And if you think," Vanessa continued calmly, "that you'll ever be able to squeeze a dime out of me, you better think again. Now. We're only here for Pop's funeral, so just give me the details and we'll be about our business."

LaVon's friends drew closer, so she crumpled her face and broke her voice when she finally realized she'd let her façade drop. The waterworks began anew. "Vanessa, what am I goin' to do without your father?"

"Same thing you did with him, I imagine. Smoke and gossip with your friends. Find a new boyfriend, since I heard your last one just died, too. Sorry about the loss of your social security check."

Her friends gasped at that. The hateful murmurs began and Vanessa rolled her eyes. "Never mind, Ma. I'll Google for Pop's wake."

The two of them climbed back into the car and prowled away.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **18: ALL EYES ON ME**

He caught himself going to his office window every hour or so to look for a purple Prowler. He was at his desk when he heard its distinctive roar, and he was not disappointed when he saw her again—even if it was from far away.

Beautiful, well educated, successful, famous.

Pissed off.

She was entitled. At this point, the only thing he wanted to do was apologize and say thank you so he could close that bitter chapter in his history.

He sighed and went back to his desk to gather what little he needed to take back into court after lunch. It didn't even make a dent in his mood that he was kicking Dirk's ass. Out in the office, it was a hive of activity. Almost fully staffed, he had nine attorneys and three secretaries.

Giselle taught six classes now, the two evening ones and a women-only session in the late afternoon. Nursery provided. That had been Dirk's idea when he'd first seen how the women responded to her. It had boosted their profits by twenty percent; thus, when asked, Giselle had agreed to become an official partner, since the women came for her. Now Dirk taught one weeknight and Saturday's classes, which left Eric teaching one night a week. He had time to concentrate on his job, his campaign, and his social life.

If he had one. Irony. At the point he finally had time to indulge his singlehood, he wasn't interested.

That wasn't to say he lacked for invitations. Unattached women had either approached him or signed up for the classes he taught—and he was very careful to keep his interaction with the opposite sex cordial but aloof.

Girls he'd slept with in high school, when he could and would fuck any legal-aged girl, were now at an age when they'd begun getting divorced. They came sniffing around the dojo and the courthouse with great frequency to see if they could unearth badass Eric Cipriani to pick up where they'd left off.

He had his staff to run interference and he was never in his office alone with a woman with the door closed, employee or not. The Chouteau County prosecutor's office could afford no scandal, especially with its prosecutor's history and future. Eric's weekly golf games with Kansas City's movers and shakers had helped to fix Chouteau County's reputation, but he didn't want to do anything that might damage it. If his time at BYU had taught him nothing else, it was how to successfully avoid the appearance of impropriety, sexual or otherwise. By and large, Mormons did propriety and discretion very, very well.

Then there was Stacy Afton, daughter of well-heeled Tye Afton, a bombastic jerk



whom Eric would rather not have to talk to at all. Afton, powerful enough to weather one major and several minor scandals, was a senior member of the Senate Appropriations Committee and ignoring him was not an option. Eric still hadn't been able to determine if he could get elected to attorney general on a third-party ticket, either Independent or Libertarian, but he sure as hell didn't want to hop in bed with the scandal-ridden Republican senator from Missouri.

*Say, son, I heard you were interested in something more than that mess Hilliard left you to clean up.*

*Maybe.*

*And you graduated from that Mormon college out in Utah, what is it? Brigham Young?*

*Yeah.*

*You Mormon?*

*No.*

*Damn. But they made an honest man out of you, right? Gave you some of that Mitt Romney polish?*

*Enough to keep me out of trouble. Why?*

*I can help you out with the next few steps up the ladder.*

*Oh yeah? What's my part of the deal?*

*Squire my daughter to a couple of the high-profile state functions in Jeff City.*

*In other words, she needs a bit of respectability and you think being seen with me would do it.*

*More or less, yes.*

*Uh, I'm Knox's lawyer and I write for his wife's blog as well as my own. I don't know how you think I can lend your daughter any respectability when I'm associated with him and everybody in the state hates his guts.*

*No they don't. It's just not kosher to associate with him. But you— You're different. Yeah, Knox got things done, but you work clean, and don't think no one's noticed. You're an honest businessman and you have a way about you. Kenard and Taight are backing you, and Kenard's wife is your business partner. You have the ear of Justice's audience and a grassroots base of your own.*

*So you're hooking for my access to money and the conservative masses in addition to my apparent respectability.*

*I like you, boy. You're a straight shooter.*

*And I get what out of this deal?*

*Unlimited help all the way to the White House, which is where we want you. I mean, yeah, you have good connections, no doubt, but they don't have the political oomph to get you all the way there, right?*

*Afton, what the hell are you talking about? They got a senator elected almost all by themselves.*

*Yeah, you know, Oakley's a good guy and all, but he's a freshman senator and not*

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*And they stared down that posse of a Senate panel until it kissed their asses, which you know, because you were there. What can you do for me that they can't?*

*They're only six people, Cipriani.*

*Nine. You forgot Mitch Hollander and Jack Blackwood and Morgan Ashworth.*

*I'm so glad you brought that up.*

*Yeah, that's what I thought. You want Morgan, too, and he told you all to fuck off.*

*Well, you know, if you were running the show, Ashworth wouldn't likely turn down an appointment as Treasury Secretary or Fed Chairman, would he? And wouldn't that be a breath of fresh air? Think about it, Cipriani, how far you could go with the RNC behind you, and especially with your ethnicity? First Native American president.*

*You don't even know what tribe I'm from.*

*Does it matter? With your philosophy, your rhetoric about balancing hope and justice, you'd be God's gift to conservative politics. You're young, good-looking, charismatic, smart, and respectable. Play the race card, and you're a shoo-in.*

*I've never played that card in my life and I'm not about to start. What you want is your daughter to have a shot at being the First Lady so you can have open access to the Oval Office.*

*Okay, look, you do have one problem. You're single. Nobody's going to elect a single man in his mid-thirties. So you can either come out of the closet and be conservatism's token queer, or get married and that problem's solved.*

*If I were gay, I wouldn't play that card, either, and I'm certainly not interested in a politically motivated marriage with a woman I don't know.*

*Doesn't mean you wouldn't like her anyway. One date. What could it hurt?*

*I'll think about it.*

Eric had heeded Davidson and Connelly's warnings about the man and done some digging, then gone so far as to seek Glenn out for his opinion, which had made Glenn instantly suspicious. Forcibly overriding years of habit, Eric had reluctantly told Glenn his reason for asking, which had resulted in an uneasy truce between them and a nice, detailed history with, of course, the final puzzle pieces missing. Eric finally decided Glenn was right. If the FBI and the state investigators hadn't figured it out, Glenn couldn't be blamed for not doing so.

Eric had finally gone to Knox. "What do I do?"

"You keep your friends close and your enemies closer and Connelly's right. Afton's the enemy and I don't care what side of the aisle he sits on. He hates us, and I'm convinced he was one of the players in that witch hunt that got us all called to Washington."

Eric had never felt so politically naïve in his life.

It had taken only one date to a state dinner in Jefferson City with Stacy Afton to have him looking for a way out of any promises Afton may have inferred. Apparently, not all women who grew up in money had class. She'd embarrassed Eric so badly he'd wanted to slide under the table, especially after the governor had stared him down with an expression that said everything: *Control her, Cipriani.*

First Lady? Fuck that. He wouldn't take Stacy Afton bowling.

*Look, Afton, she was plastered before the first course was served and then she got loud and mouthy. After dinner, she came out of the restroom with coke all over her nose — I'm a prosecutor, for fuck's sake. I should've arrested her. Then she felt me up right in front of every grande dame in Missouri. She has no home training whatsoever and what she needs is a finishing school, not Mr. Etiquette. Not only that, but I went googling. She's got amateur porn plastered all over RedTube. It's not even good porn.*

*Oh. You saw that.*

*Get her dried out and cleaned up, buy her some manners and some modest clothes,*

*and then maybe we can try this again. I am not going to be seen with some Paris Hilton wannabe, much less marry one—especially when the governor made a point to make sure I knew he was pissed.*

*Well, now, son, you don't have any room to get prissy. Your history's not spotless.*

*Yet I know which fork to use for which course, what liquor to drink when and where and how much, what to say and not to say at a cocktail party, and how to waltz. That's more than I can say for your trust-fund brat.*

*Aw, son, okay. I don't blame you, really, but the offer's always open. I'll work on her. Keep in touch.*

Eric figured he'd only succeeded in making himself appear more respectable—*prissy*—by laying it out straight, but he refused to spend any more time in Stacy Afton's company.

There was really only one woman he was interested in anyway and he'd blown that to smithereens. He simply didn't know what to do now. Thinking about Vanessa, wanting to make things right with her, *obsessing* over her—it was getting him nowhere, yet he couldn't leave it alone.

He went to Vanessa's website twice a week when it was updated, and scoured the Food Network listings to catch episodes of her show. He'd bought Vanessa's issues of *Maxim* and *Esquire* on eBay, but then trashed them without opening the envelopes, loath to make her a masturbatory fantasy when the real thing was relatively close. He just didn't know how to approach her.

Eric had hoped that by sending her the email about her father's death, he could open some door or even crack open a window, but she hadn't replied.

"You're a fool," Dirk muttered when he saw Eric dressed in Armani as he dropped by the dojo at six, on his way to the wake.

"Yes," Eric returned absently while he perused the mail. "Yes, I am. I need to get this over with and put behind me."

Dirk's eyebrow rose. "Little late for 'thank you' now, don't you think?"

Eric's brow wrinkled and he looked up at the wall painted with the Kenpo crest. "Is it ever too late?"

Dirk grunted. "If it'll open more wounds than it'll heal, yes." He pursed his lips as if

to decide whether to say what was on his mind, but Dirk had never been shy about voicing his opinions and Eric had already seen how protective he was with regard to Vanessa. “You know where she lives. You know her website and her email and her phone number. You’ve had a year to call her or email her. You have a full staff of attorneys and assistants and karate teachers, so you could’ve gone to see her, but you didn’t. Now it’s just one of those things where you should let sleeping dogs lie.”

“Now wait a minute. You weren’t there. You didn’t see how it all went down. She wants nothing to do with me, and it’s taken me a year to figure out how to get close enough to get it done. This is about as good a chance as I’m going to get. She can’t run. She won’t make a scene. I can thank her, apologize, leave. Go on with my life.”

“No. Find another way.”

“Run interference for me, since you’re all chummy.”

“Oh, no. I don’t want to be in between you two any more than Knox does.”

“Then give me a better idea or quit lecturing me.”

“You know how LaVon and Company will react to you showing up.”

“I’ll slip in, speak my piece, and get out before anybody sees me.”

“I don’t think that’s gonna work . . . ” Dirk intoned as went to start class.

It didn’t.

Eric’s appearance at Vanessa’s father’s wake caused a bit of a stir as he wound his way through the crowd, but he ignored the whispers as he always had, and looked for her.

There.

Standing at the side of the room—not with the family—speaking graciously with a mourner who seemed to need more comfort than Vanessa herself. She looked like she’d rather be any place but in the midst of these people.

The blond kid at Vanessa’s left drew his attention and Eric’s eyebrow rose. Crisp white linen shirt, loose yet tidy. Leather 19th century commander’s jacket with pewter buttons. Knee-high black-and-green argyle socks and black shoes. A black-and-green tartan kilt.

*A kilt.*

He blinked and blinked again. The boy had grown. Eric knew he was only thirteen, but he topped Vanessa by a good inch or two and his bearing—feet wide, arms crossed

over his chest, with a somber, patient expression on his face—was that of a man's: confident, courageous, and clever. This was not a kid who'd been dressed by the mother figure in his life. Well. Vanessa Whittaker certainly must know how to raise children.

And Vanessa! The oddity of Junior's dress had overshadowed her, but now he studied her. Her dark pink—not traditional black—wraparound skirt clung to her every generous curve, and her knee peeped out between the layers every time she moved. The deep V neckline of her textured white silk blouse showed a hint of cleavage. He looked closer and saw the faint outline of a corset under that expensive silk.

Her chestnut-and-blonde-streaked hair was arranged in a mass of large curls pinned to the top of her head. She wore a dark pink choker with woven beads of some sort hanging from its edge. High-heeled sandals that matched her skirt made her legs look the same as they had last year—deliciously right for wrapping around his hips.

Oh, how he'd love to slowly take off every stitch of those clothes and bury his nose in her throat, then between her breasts, then slowly kiss and lick his way down, spread her legs, taste her . . .

Eric screwed up his courage and started toward her, the gathered mourners watching him warily, whispering, clearing a path for him. At that moment, Junior caught his approach and elbowed Vanessa, who turned to watch him as he took step after step toward his doom.

He knew that look in her eyes: contempt, anger, and wariness mixed with the remnants of a little girl's crush; she couldn't hide that no matter how hard she tried, but . . .

No trace of desire.

Had he imagined it?

"Vanessa," he said quietly.

"Eric." Her voice was cool.

He looked at Junior. "I'm impressed," he said. "You've turned into a man."

Surprise and shock flitted across the kid's face and he felt, rather than saw, the surprise emanating from Vanessa.

The kid extended his hand then. "Vachel Whittaker," he said clearly, deeply. Eric took his hand with alacrity and the boy's grip was firm. A man's grip. A man's voice.

“Privileged to meet you, Vachel,” Eric said, resisting the temptation to ask where the hell he’d come up with a name like that.

The boy blinked. “Um, yeah. Uh . . . You, too.”

Eric turned to Vanessa then and tried not to look down her blouse or get high on her perfume. “Thank you,” he said with all the sincerity in his soul, making sure to look straight into her fascinating turquoise eyes. “I never said thank you, and I’ve always regretted that. And—” He gulped. “I’m sorry for walking away from you that day. I was ashamed and embarrassed, and I didn’t know what to do, what to say to you. I also— Ah, I also didn’t want to risk talking to an underage girl, but I could have sent a note, flowers, something. And I didn’t. I’ve let years go by without talking to you, telling you how much I appreciate what you did for me because I was embarrassed, and then I thought it was too late, and I’m— I’m still embarrassed. I wasn’t honorable last year when I . . . was mean to you. And then asked you out. I haven’t been honorable about it at all since, and I’m very sorry. Please forgive me, Vanessa.”

More shock. More surprise.

Her beautiful, rose-kissed mouth was open, then she bit the inside of her cheek. She said nothing, but he searched her eyes for some sign of . . . something. She held his gaze.

“Accepted,” she said finally, softly, “and you’re welcome.” He saw her eyes soften, the contempt and anger seeping away, but the wariness remaining. Moisture began to gather in her lower eyelids. He pulled out his handkerchief and offered it to her.

She laughed through her tears, again surprised. “I didn’t know men under ninety carried handkerchiefs.”

He shrugged. “Comes with being trained by a man who grew up rich and refined.”

Vanessa smiled in wistful amusement. “Knox Hilliard.”

“Indeed. I hear he grubstaked you?”

“Yes and I’m pretty sure you didn’t get to college on your own, either.”

“True.”

“Well, I guess it all turned out for the best for both of us, didn’t it?”

“Yes. So why are we still bitter?”

She laughed outright at that. “I have no idea.” Eric felt his gut tighten. They were communicating. Talking. Laughing.

Together.

As adults—a man and a woman.

Who had shown up with her thirteen-year-old nephew, but no husband, no lover.

He couldn't not ask. Her more-than-gracious response to his presence had thus far been better than he had hoped. Promising, even. "Vanessa," he began hesitantly. "Would you and Vachel have dinner with me this evening? Please?"

Immediately, the anger and contempt flashed back and her eyes dried miraculously. "I don't think so," she murmured, her voice scalpel sharp.

"Oh," he breathed, shocked. "Um, okay. I'm . . . sorry."

Her eyebrow rose as if to ask him why he was still standing in front of her wasting her time and he swallowed, turning to go.

"Oh, an' ain't this special?"

Eric sighed when he heard that particularly annoying scratch he heard at least once a week. He closed his eyes and let his head fall back on his shoulders.

"Ma," Vanessa said, her voice still hard. "Grow up. You've been after him for the last fifteen years and he's succeeded in spite of you. Don't you think it's time to lay it to rest?"

She was *defending* him? He opened his eyes then and looked down at LaVon Whittaker, who stared up at him with that hatred he'd come to know very well. He couldn't even muster up any anger anymore. It was more like the tiniest pebble in his shoe he just couldn't get out no matter how hard he shook it or dug at it.

Just part of his life.

She turned back to look at Vanessa. "You do got a thing for prosecutors, don'tcha? What, Hilliard dumped you when he started banging that barely legal redheaded whore of his? An' you're doin' the ones down south? An' now you move on to Mr. Rapist here?"

The sound of Vanessa's hand connecting with LaVon's cheek resounded throughout the funeral home.

Eric gaped. He didn't know which shocked him more: LaVon's accusations or Vanessa's sudden violence. Everyone else was as stunned as he. Nobody moved; nobody spoke. He didn't dare look at Vanessa.

The nice, pretty lady he'd met at Chouteau Elementary last year had vanished.



“You want to embarrass me and Eric so you can have something to chew on with your groupies tomorrow morning?” Vanessa said loudly and clearly, for everyone to hear. “Fine. We can do that. Simone was a manipulative, lying bitch who got mad because Eric wouldn’t have anything to do with a minor and made sure all his friends knew how he felt about that. She nearly ruined a man’s life because he snubbed her and cut her off from the rest of her fun.

“And *you*! Instead of *protecting* her from all the men who took advantage of a thirteen-year-old girl— That you went after the one man who wouldn’t— What *you* did — Getting her wrapped up in that and then letting her take the whole rap for that is *far* more despicable than what she did. She was a *minor*, LaVon! A little girl! She had a baby when she wasn’t even fifteen yet. What is *wrong* with you?”

Eric did look at Vachel then, whose eyes blazed as he looked at his grandmother. The boy-man’s fists clenched at his sides and his mouth was tight. Eric realized that his eagerness to go home with an aunt he didn’t know had been a last-ditch effort to salvage something of himself—a gamble that had paid off.

The tension pressed in on Eric; he was as embarrassed now as he had been with Stacy, but this time it was his fault. Foolishness, just as Dirk had said, to think he could come here and talk to Vanessa, then leave without incident, and she was bearing the brunt of it.

He turned with a growl. “Vanessa,” he murmured and took her by the arm; she could be pissed at him later. “Let’s go. You don’t deserve this. You never did.”

“That’s right. And I don’t deserve to be propositioned by a married man, either.”

He stopped, aghast, and looked down at her. “What?”

“Annie Franklin? Your wife?”

“No . . .” he said carefully. “We broke up last year.”

Her mouth formed a silent *Oh*! She blinked. “I’m *so* sorry,” she whispered. “I— I didn’t know.”

And now *she* was apologizing to *him*.

“I’m leaving. Would you care to come with me?”

“Yes,” she breathed.

“Vanessa!” her mother hissed when they again began to walk toward the door.

“Don’t you dare go with him!”

Vanessa stopped suddenly and looked over her shoulder. Eric would have never thought her capable of hatred so deep it radiated from her, hatred that Vachel’s expression mirrored.

“I chose Eric over you when I was twelve years old,” she snarled, and her mother pulled away from her as if stung. “And while we’re at it, let’s clarify one thing about Knox Hilliard. He was never my lover. He’s my *dad*.”

Her mother’s mouth worked without a sound coming out. “Wha— What do you mean your dad? Your dad’s over there in that casket.”

“No. The man in the casket is my father, the one who kinda sorta loved me with whatever he had left after you and Simone sucked his soul dry. And that ‘barely legal redheaded whore’ is the sister I never had, the one Simone should have been but wasn’t, and I *love* her.”

Eric watched, listened.

“Knox Hilliard kept me from going hungry when you didn’t feed me. He kept me in decent clothes and shoes and coats in the winter—without *stealing* them. He paid for my cheerleading just because he knew that was something I wanted to do. He made sure I got to the doctor when I was sick. He put braces on my teeth and took me to get glasses and then you *never noticed* that I had braces and glasses.

“He pushed me to get through high school early. He taught me how to drive. He got me emancipated the minute I got my driver’s license. He gave me his car and sent me off to get an education, and you *never noticed* I was gone. He paid my tuition, my room and board, and gave me a credit card so I wouldn’t go without anything I needed or wanted. Now, today, right this very minute, he’s at my inn doing my job for me. He’s my business partner and he dropped everything on short notice to get on a plane and cover my job so I could come here today and pay my respects to my *father*—but make no mistake: Knox Hilliard is my *dad*. He took care of me the way you and *Pops* should’ve taken care of me but didn’t. He loves me and I love him.”

Eric’s mind churned and burned through those details. She was five years younger than he, the same age as Justice; Knox’s support of Eric and Vanessa would have overlapped by two years at least—and that wouldn’t account for whatever he’d paid

toward Dirk's mission and tuition.

*I've never been so humbled by an act of courage in my life—and by a child. That girl saved your life, Eric . . . and at great personal cost.*

Was this what Vanessa had braved at home after she'd gone to Knox on his behalf? He closed his eyes. "Thank you" just wasn't enough; it wasn't ever going to be enough, but it was the only thing he had to offer her.

LaVon trembled in rage, her nostrils flaring and her eyes narrowing, her chest heaving. "Knox Hilliard murdered my Tom and you're here singin' his praises?"

"That's what you get for fucking around on your husband with a serial killer, who, in case you never made the connection, raped and killed every woman he was involved with. You brought a man into the house who tried to get me alone more than a few times and he *terrified* me."

Eric swallowed his tongue and he was pretty sure everyone else had, too.

"Knox's only real problem was that he was the only man in this county who had the balls to hunt him down and pull the trigger—so the next time you see Knox, you better thank him for saving *your* miserable little life. I told the truth, Ma. I was rewarded for that by a man who values truth and courage and justice. I wish—" Vanessa stopped, her lips tight, her eyes sparkling with tears. "I wish you could understand what that means." She looked up at Eric then, and he offered her his arm. "Let's go," she murmured. "I don't ever want to come back again, all this, this *trailer trash* drama."

Eric led Vanessa and Vachel out of the funeral parlor. Soberly, he handed her into her car while Vachel took the other seat.

"May I meet you back at your motel?" he murmured. "I think you and I need to talk."

She looked at him for a long moment, then nodded.

Eric heard the roar of her engine as he jogged across the funeral home's parking lot to his car, got in, and zipped home to get his truck. Just in case. He couldn't have planned this any worse if he'd tried. He was sure, by the time he pulled into the motel lot, their tenuous connection would have dissipated, and Vanessa would again tell him to get lost.

But no.

Vanessa and Vachel stood leaning against her car, waiting. Vanessa stared off into

the distance while Vachel looked down at an iPhone and his thumbs moved over the screen.

Eric parked and walked toward them, catching Vanessa's eye, but Vachel moved off a bit as Eric approached, still texting or gaming or . . . avoiding Eric.

"Vachel told me you had a vintage Corvette," Vanessa murmured.

"Seventy-three Stingray." He shrugged. "Two seats. Three people. Doesn't work very well."

She clasped her hands in front of her and stared at the ground.

"Thank you," he said again softly. "Knox told me you had sacrificed to clear my name, but I had no idea how much. I'm sorry, Vanessa."

She said nothing for a moment, then murmured, "My life is far, far better than it ever would have been had I not done it. I didn't need anything from you but a thank you, which you've given me, so we're square." She turned to leave him there, but he laid a hand on her arm.

"Please have dinner with me, you and Vachel."

She stopped and glanced over her shoulder at Vachel, who must have been paying attention to the conversation. Some silent communication passed between them, which he couldn't see and had no wish to.

"Okay," she said. "Thank you."

\* \* \* \* \*

## **19: BROKEN ROAD**

Eric held the passenger door open and offered his hand to Vanessa while Vachel reluctantly climbed in the back. "Thank you," she murmured again, but her voice was distant, and he sighed as he went around to get in the driver's side.

This wasn't going to turn out well.

The clock read 9:36 p.m. when he started the engine and began to back out of the parking space. He glanced over at Vanessa, but it seemed she still didn't want to look at him.

"Annie and I broke up the night before I came to ask you to breakfast," he finally said as he navigated the streets, pulled out onto the highway, and headed south. He saw her reflection in the side mirror and he watched her swallow. He looked in his rearview mirror at Vachel, who was equally taciturn, his arms crossed over his chest as he, too, watched the world go by, though his lids began to droop and his head bob downward.

"Why didn't you tell me that then?" she asked after another long moment.

"Would it have made any difference?"

"I would have accepted had you told me that before you said anything else. And thanked me. That's all I ever wanted from you, Eric."

Bullshit. He knew she wanted more, and he was only too willing to give it to her if he could slowly chip his way through the wall he'd made her build.

"I looked up to Annie," Vanessa murmured abruptly, startling Eric. "She was nice to me even though she had every reason in the world to resent me because of her mother. She would talk about her goals for the future—" She smiled a bit. "She talked in bullet-point lists and I'd sit there and absorb every word of what she said. I wanted to be just like her."

That gave him a jolt. "Really?"

"She never pulled that catty-girl bullshit and she wouldn't tolerate it in the cheer squad."

"I don't think she knows you see her that way. She really admires what you've accomplished."

Vanessa blinked. "Oh."

*Well, that and . . .*

"I was lucky," she said. "I had a lot of good, strong women around me to teach me what LaVon should've."

"Oh? Annie and who else?"

"Giselle. Sister Jelarde."

"Dirk's mother?"

“Yes. She was the Young Women’s president at the time.”

Eric chuckled. “So you didn’t escape indoctrination, either.”

“Oh, no. But I needed it, that stability and perspective.”

“Did you get baptized?”

“No. Giselle wouldn’t let me.” She flashed him a sly grin. “She and Knox got into more than a few fights over that, but she won out. She said I wasn’t old enough to make that decision and that I was confusing gratitude and comfort with true faith. And, well, she was right. I didn’t understand much of it, much less believe, but Sister Jelarde made up for whatever holes Knox, Giselle, and Annie didn’t get quite filled. I’m very grateful and I try to pay them back down the line.” She took a breath. “So, since I didn’t get baptized, I make sure the missionaries in my area get taken care of and the church members have jobs, if they’re willing to work. Church members helped me when I needed it and so I do what I can to help them.”

Eric said nothing for a moment as he tried to formulate his most pressing question . .

“Are you— Uh, well, I mean—” He stopped and took a deep breath. “I’m not seeing anybody,” he blurted.

“That’s nice.”

*Shit.* He’d made her retreat back into herself, but he didn’t know how far.

“Um . . . ?”

“Yes,” she said shortly. “Later,” she murmured tightly, casting a glance toward the back seat.

Eric released a frustrated breath. They weren’t getting anywhere like this and he didn’t want to spend the evening trying to ward off her chill.

“Okay, which part of this whole evening has you freaked out the most right now?”

She looked at him suddenly, then her beautiful mouth slowly curved up in a smile and the corners of her eyes crinkled. “All of it. It’s— My watches are melting.”

Eric blinked, confused, but then he began to chuckle. “Surrealism. Salvador Dalí.”

Her smile deepened, but faded fast on a sigh. “It’s just— I didn’t know— I mean, you and me, we’ve barely spoken, but our lives are so—”

“Entwined.”

She nodded. “I don’t . . . even *know* you, but you’re so much a part of my life. I mean, everything I have is because of you.”

Eric’s throat went dry when he realized how wonderful that sounded, how much more he wanted to be part of her life.

“Likewise you,” he murmured.

But he needed to get *it* all out there, get *it* out of the way, because *it* hung over his head like a—

“I’ve seen your painting,” he said bluntly. “And your magazine covers.”

Her body stiffened slightly. “Oh?” she asked quietly, in that gracious tone of voice he now realized was a complete front.

“You and . . . Sebastian?”

She held up a hand and she turned to the back seat, laid a hand on Vachel’s knee, then murmured, “He’s out.”

Then she looked back at him, and said tightly, “I don’t owe you any explanations for how I have or haven’t lived my life, and you have no right to ask.”

He looked at her sharply.

“Yes,” she snapped, her nostrils flaring. “He was my first. And just so you know, I can count *my* sexual history on two fingers. I doubt you can even *remember* three-quarters of yours, so don’t look down on me because I go for high-profile quality and not low-class quantity.”

Half angry, he opened his mouth, but—

“Don’t. You’re mad because you’re comparing yourself to Ford-slash-King Midas and feeling like you’re coming up second best.”

“Okay, so what? It’s not like I don’t talk to the guy regularly. He manages my money. And so, yeah, maybe I’m a little insecure.”

“Then let’s make you a lot insecure. My lover? Nash Piper.”

Eric felt like his chest had exploded. Two famous men, one of whom had gone completely missing years before.

“Turn around,” she said, her voice hard. “I’m not going to bandage your ego or coddle your pride, especially since *I’m* not the slut in this car.”

Suddenly deeply ashamed, he said, “Please, Vanessa. I’m sorry. Again. I— I just

want to have dinner with you, please.”

“Who are you having dinner with tonight, Eric?” she demanded. “Ford’s muse? Chef Granny? The little girl? ’Cause you sure as hell aren’t having dinner with *me*.”

“*None* of them.” He wiped his hand over his mouth. “I knew nothing about you last year. When I met you at the elementary school, saw your eyes, understood what you wanted to do for Junior, I—” He sighed. “I wanted to say thank you. I wanted to apologize. I wanted to talk to you. That’s all. It’s why I asked you to have breakfast with me, so we could talk in neutral territory. I didn’t know anything about what you had done with your life until after you sent me packing.”

“Oh,” she said again, this time with some surprise.

“I want to have dinner with that nice, pretty lady I met at Chouteau Elementary last year.” He shoved his hand through his hair, so frustrated with himself he couldn’t stand it. *When* had he not been able to talk to a woman? *When* had he not been comfortable with a woman he wanted in bed? “Shit. Nothing’s coming out right.”

“So . . . you don’t know who this woman is, in the car beside you.”

“No,” he breathed, relieved that she now understood. “And I want to find out.”

“That’s not all you want.”

He looked at her sharply. “No, it’s not,” he affirmed immediately, “and we wouldn’t be having this conversation if you didn’t want the same.”

She shrugged, then one corner of her mouth lifted up with some reluctance. “You do get straight to the point, don’t you?”

“I don’t know how to talk to you,” he muttered. “It’s the damndest thing. I’ve never been so tongue-tied in my life, like my foot’s halfway down my throat. I end up just . . . telling you exactly what I think and feel.”

She said nothing to that, and he glanced at her to see her reaction. But she sat, her head bowed, her finger picking at one of the many tiny bumps in the fabric of her skirt. “I had a crush on you,” she said low, without looking at him. “You knew that, right?”

“Yes.”

“I, um, never really . . . Uh, I didn’t—” She stopped. Took a deep breath. “I never got over it,” she said in a rush. “That’s why I’ve been so angry with you. You were getting married and you looked at me like— Like I’ve always wanted you to look at me.



And now you're upset because of Sebastian . . . I don't know what to do, what to think. You were always larger than life—I have cooked for and served—been propositioned by—some of the most famous, powerful men in the world, but you— To me, you're . . . apart. Separate.” She paused, then whispered, “Unattainable.”

He swallowed at the word she had chosen, his whole world tilting wildly. “So . . . what you're telling me is that you don't know who you're having dinner with, either.”

Vanessa looked to him slowly. “No.”

He took his hand off the gearshift and offered it to her. “Hi. My name's Eric Cipriani. I teach karate.”

She stared at him, then at his hand, and began to laugh, the corners of her eyes crinkling yet again. She took his hand and shook it firmly, saying, “I'm Vanessa Whittaker and I'm . . . a cook.”

Eric looked back at the road only because he didn't want to crash his truck.

They were getting somewhere.

*Finally.*

“I want to know why you broke up with Annie,” she said softly, suddenly.

That was fair. Eric drew a deep breath. “Maybe the better question would be why we were getting married.” Vanessa remained silent. “We were, well, friends with benefits,” he finally said. “We had similar goals, similar philosophies. It was a deliberate choice to be together, work together. Like a partnership.” He shrugged. “The sex was good. But . . . then we talked to you at the school and . . . ” How was he going to say this? Did he even want to? “Seeing you was kind of a defining moment for us.”

“I don't understand.”

“Uh, Annie decided she needed more than what I could give her and I . . . needed more than what she could give me.”

Vanessa said nothing for a moment, then, “There's more, but I understand it's private. No problem, but . . . was she angry?”

“Not at you or me. In fact, she wanted me to get your phone number for her.”

“Oh. Okay. That's sweet.”

“Uh, yeah. She thinks you'd be very sweet.”

Vanessa stared at him, her eyes growing big and her mouth opening as it sank in.

Then she began to smile again, that wonderful smile that made the corners of her eyes crinkle. “I didn’t know she—” She put her hands over her mouth and began to giggle.

“Me neither until she suggested a threesome,” Eric said dryly, glad he’d been able to make her laugh. Perhaps letting loose with the truth—or most of it—wasn’t so bad, even if it had its rough spots. “All of a sudden, it was like hanging out with a guy, both of us drooling over you.”

“Well,” she said through fits of laughter, “I like Annie, don’t get me wrong. Just . . . not that much. If she wasn’t mad at you or me, who was she mad at?”

“Her mother,” Eric said promptly. “She needed to get away from her.” *And Vanessa.* “So she moved to Omaha to manage her pharma’s sales staff up there. She broke up with me after she broke up with her mother.”

Vanessa chuckled. “Took her that long, huh?”

“Some people have higher tolerance levels for abuse.”

“That’s not necessarily a good thing.”

“So . . . LaVon thinks you and Knox—?”

She turned in her seat so that she faced him, and crossed one knee over the other. He hoped his very sudden hard-on wasn’t visible. “No. It’s just something she used to hit me with, used it to try to discredit Knox. Everybody knew that Knox’s only interest in me was protecting me from LaVon.”

And from a dozen other people who might be out for revenge.

“I had study hall in the prosecutor’s office and by the time I graduated, half the egghead contingent did, too.”

Eric laughed wryly and shook his head. “Why doesn’t that surprise me? Knox must’ve been in hog heaven.”

“He got a little impatient with how many people showed up, but the other attorneys helped. Mr. Hicks taught math better than any teacher I’ve ever had.”

“What did Nocek have to say about all that?”

“Nocek had nothing to say about anything Knox did after he killed Parley. Nocek knew he was next on the list.”

Ah, yes. That made perfect sense.

“Do you know, all these years that he went to the Ozarks— To his inn, he said. I

never knew it was you.”

She started and looked at him sharply. “You didn’t?”

He shook his head. “He never said a word. So, Whittaker House,” he said, fascinated by what he’d seen on her website, needing to know more about what she’d built. “Are you planning to buy out Knox’s half eventually?”

She took a deep breath. “Officially, Knox is just the CFO now. OKH Enterprises is my actual business partner.”

He looked at her sharply. “Eilis? Sebastian’s *wife* is your partner?”

“Yes. We’re friends. We joke about it. Compare notes. Call each other ‘Muse.’”

He began to chuckle. “God, that’s incestuous.”

She chuckled. “It is. It was strange at first, I’ll admit, but she said, ‘I knew what I was getting when I married him.’”

“How did OKH become your partner?”

“Knox took a lot of draws the last couple years before he was due to inherit. By the time he did, he’d taken his whole share from Whittaker House and more. OKH bought out Knox’s share for the price of his draws. But we work together like we always did. He does the books and the lawyering, which he can do from pretty much anywhere. I do the food and general management and direct its path. He doesn’t tell me how to do my job and I don’t tell him how to do his. Eilis doesn’t interfere unless Knox’s reports are overdue—which happens more often than I’d like.” She sighed. “I’ve had to work a lot harder since he moved to Utah. I didn’t realize how much he got done on the weekends until he wasn’t there anymore. But,” she added, “I’d rather have him alive in Utah than dead, so I don’t say anything.”

“I miss him, too.”

She said nothing to that, but then laughed unexpectedly and laid her hand over his where it rested on the gearshift. Eric swallowed, because her laugh was so . . . husky. Earthy. “Thank you for rescuing us from the vultures back there.”

“Vanessa, I’m sorry I came. All I could think about was saying thank you and— I didn’t think. Dirk said—”

“Eric,” she interrupted, “it’s okay. I’ve been dealing with that since I was a child.”

“I know. That’s why I’m apologizing. Again. You shouldn’t have to still be dealing

with it.”

“You deal with it every day.”

He shrugged. “I chose to come back. I knew what I was doing.”

She remained silent on that, he supposed, because she knew it was true. Then, “Why *did* you come back?” she asked slowly.

“Several reasons, but mostly because I wanted to prove to Knox I hadn’t wasted his money or his time. And, well, revenge. I don’t mind being able to rub LaVon’s nose in her shit.”

She stared at him, as if something had just occurred to her. “Your press conference,” she whispered, “last year, when you thanked Simone. That was—”

“That was me rubbing their noses in it, yes.”

Vanessa swallowed and looked away. Wiped her cheek. “I— I saw that,” she mumbled. “I thought you’d forgotten me.”

“So . . . you were already mad at me before Simone’s funeral,” he said slowly.

“Yes. Knox tried to explain, and I wouldn’t listen to him.”

“Hey, hey, don’t cry. We’re here, right? Just you and me—and Vachel,” he teased, getting a little smile out from under all those tears, “going to dinner, talking, getting things straightened out.”

She looked up at him then, and his gut lurched at the raw hope he saw in her face, the hope he returned wholeheartedly.

“Nash Piper?” he whispered.

“Friends with benefits,” she whispered back. “It’s not a problem. He has his own issues that he needs to work out. His ex-wife. He’s . . . afraid.”

Eric blinked. “Just like us.”

She nodded earnestly. “Yes, exactly. Just like us.”

“And Sebastian?”

“*Who*’s the slut?” she shot back.

He couldn’t help his slow grin. “Point taken.”

\* \* \* \* \*

## 20: SOMETIME BLIZZARDS MUST STOP

They ended up in downtown Kansas City's west side at a Mexican restaurant.

"Manny's," Vanessa murmured when Eric handed her out of his truck with some flourish. "This is nice, Eric. Thank you."

"You're welcome, Vanessa," he whispered, giving her that saucy, sly grin, the one that had set her heart to pounding when she was a child. The tingling in the pit of her belly, the heat rising in her chest, the difficulty she was having breathing, though— *That* was all woman.

"Aunt Vanessa?"

Vanessa started and twisted away from Eric with a guilty jerk. She turned to see a groggy Vachel climb out of the truck. God help her if he sniffed out the sexual undercurrent flowing between Vanessa and Eric.

The boy stopped to stare at Eric's truck, then he gestured vaguely. "I always liked your 'vette," he muttered, sullen.

"You did?" Eric asked, obviously surprised.

"Yeah. The guys, they— They wanted to throw rocks at it, slice it up to get you back— Because of me— But . . ."

Vanessa stared at Vachel, shocked. "What stopped them?"

Vachel's mouth tightened and he looked away. Vanessa turned to Eric, but wouldn't look at him. "Every day," she murmured, "I find out something new that just kills me. He —" Salt stung her eyes. "He has this core of honor I— I'm not sure where it came from, but I think maybe it was . . . you."

Eric squeezed her hand. "Who gave it to you?" he whispered. "Before Knox took you under his wing?"

"Laura," she murmured. He wouldn't know the reference, but he seemed to comprehend that she was unwilling to give any more of herself to him for now. He cleared his throat and said,

“Let’s go eat,” with exaggerated enthusiasm.

“For the record,” Vanessa said wryly as they entered the restaurant, Eric’s hand lightly splayed over her back, “I almost bought a Stingray. Seventy-six. I love them.”

“That means a lot, coming from the woman who drives the Batmobile.”

She laughed, delighted at his mock envy, but didn’t say much more because she was reeling from what was happening, the speed at which it had.

Thanks rendered.

Apologies exchanged.

Misunderstandings clarified.

Histories exposed.

Desires acknowledged.

Wants voiced.

Paths cleared.

Manny’s, cozily crowded, was far too close and personal for Vachel’s claustrophobia, and he stuck close to Vanessa on the way to their booth. She slid in first, allowing Vachel to sit on the outside. Eric slid in across from them and glanced between her and Vachel in such a way that she thought he understood.

As usual, Vachel ordered three times the amount of food he could eat, but Vanessa said nothing. He needed the security of knowing he had enough.

Eric didn’t bat an eye.

That was when she fully comprehended that Vachel and Eric already had a longstanding relationship, however dysfunctional. Vachel had always depended on Eric the way Vanessa had depended on Knox, albeit clumsily. Once Vachel learned that getting arrested would get him taken directly to the prosecutor, Eric had become the only male Vachel had allowed himself to trust—a function of both of them being victims of the same women. Eric knew Vachel in ways Vanessa didn’t, and he’d apparently done the best he could within the boundaries Vachel set for him.

“Okay, Vachel,” Eric said in a rather commanding tone, “I want you to admit you got arrested on purpose and why. I already know, but I want to hear it from you.”

He blushed and swallowed, but he obeyed. “Yeah. Well. Um, I was hungry and I couldn’t, uh, steal as much food as I could buy if I stole one big thing and hocked it.”

Vanessa felt a sharp ache behind her breastbone that never got any duller, no matter how many times she heard him say that. She remembered contemplating that course of action long ago and deciding against it, knowing what Laura would say, what she would choose.

“Why didn’t you tell me what was going on with you in that house? I must have asked you a million times.”

“I didn’t know if you were worse or better and I didn’t want to go off to foster care. I knew some foster kids at school and they didn’t have it any better than I did.”

Eric said nothing more for a moment, then nodded slowly, solemnly. “Okay, but why didn’t you just ask me for money or food? You know I would’ve given it to you.”

“I don’t know. It was easier to let you pay for everything I stole than ask for money.”

Pride, and precious little of that, was the only thing Vachel had had left by the time Vanessa had walked into his life.

Once the food came, Eric began to draw Vachel into conversation, little by little, making him comfortable—

—starting fresh with Vachel, too, both boy and man hesitantly eager to put their long and turbulent history behind them. He began by asking about school, the highland games, and what sports he was into.

“Archery.”

“You have archery at school?”

“No,” he said shortly, and Eric looked at Vanessa. She shook her head once, very slightly. Any discussion of school would ruin what was turning out to be a nice evening.

Once Vachel loosened up, he talked more and faster than he had since he’d come to Whittaker House.

Vanessa ate in silence, lost in watching Eric, only half listening to him and Vachel yammer at each other. Vachel’s maturity surprised Eric at most every turn in the conversation, and his willingness to talk—to *Eric*—shocked Vanessa.

She’d have to give the boy’s therapist a hefty Christmas bonus.

With each glance Vanessa sneaked at Eric, she ached a little. His dark face was square, carved—exotic and familiar at the same time—his black eyes flashing

intelligence, his black hair gleaming, his large hands strong, his smile quick and sincere.

He smelled divine.

He wore a fine silk-blend suit of dark olive, his collar and cuffs impeccable and his tie rather bold and striking.

She knew what she'd done all these years, quietly conflating Eric into some mythic figure, *pinning* for someone who had probably never existed. Now, sitting across from him, she wondered if she'd been that far off the mark or . . .

*Don't ever mistake sex for love because that's when girls start getting stupid.*

. . . if she was falling into the trap Giselle had warned her about.

Eric asked Vachel pointed questions about his life with Vanessa, at Whittaker House, and treated him with the respect of an equal—like the man Vachel strove to be. Vachel didn't have enough life experience or education to truly be Eric's equal, but Eric didn't talk down to him or dismiss him in any way.

Nash wasn't unkind to Vachel, but Vachel gave him no chance to be kind. Black hair and beard notwithstanding, the boy had recognized Nash immediately, and went out of his way to avoid the man. Vanessa understood that, too. After hearing that music, seeing that face and almost-bare body on his grandmother's wall for half his life, Vachel didn't want to hear the voice or see the man in person any more than he absolutely had to.

It was a key factor in Vanessa and Nash's ability to keep their affair a secret from Vachel as well as everyone else.

He would not have adjusted easily to the knowledge that the aunt he loved like a mother was sleeping with a man he did not like.

Or anybody else, for that fact—and most *especially* Eric, a man Vachel's mother had obsessed over his entire life. Vanessa couldn't begin to sort out how much damage it might do to his fragile psyche if his *aunt* went noticeably nuts over Eric Cipriani, too.

Even though she already had.

Vanessa thought about last night—was it just last night?—with Nash. She found comfort in her easy friendship with Nash, the sex an extension of that friendship, just another gesture, like a hug or a kiss on the cheek. She'd enjoyed what she'd had with Sebastian, what she had with Nash, and she had no need for anything more from either of them.



Eric, on the other hand—

Well, Eric she wanted with an intensity, an urgency, she didn't understand and had never experienced, but she knew she wanted something entirely different from him:

A relationship.

Especially now, knowing this mythic figure had the same insecurities she did, that he wanted the same thing she did, as she watched him happily chat with a boy who had been the bane of his existence for twelve years.

Didn't matter anyway. Life had gotten in the way and she just couldn't see how something like that would work—four hours apart, a history that was less than stellar, two successful careers which would afford them no real opportunity to build on this fragile truce.

She was too old for this.

She sighed and faced reality: It wasn't possible.

And so she wanted nothing. No taste of what could be when it couldn't, no one-night stand with a man who meant much more to her than that. Nash and monogamous friendsex would suffice for however long it took him to gather his courage and go home to Melanie and Trixie, which probably wouldn't be long now that he'd given voice to it.

At the first lull in the males' conversation, when Vachel turned his attention to his food, Vanessa hesitantly asked, "So . . . what happened to you and your mother after you graduated from high school? You both just disappeared."

"My mother moved to Oklahoma," Eric said, "to live with our people, to participate in the tribe's activities."

"The Osage."

Eric nodded.

"Do you talk to her?"

"Oh, sure. Couple times a week. Email. My mom's really cool."

"And you?"

He grinned. "I moved to Utah. Knox got me into Brigham Young University. He practically shoved me out of the plane over Provo and told me not to come back until I had a doctorate in something; he didn't care what."

"I take it you didn't convert?"

“Oh, hell no. But he said I needed an attitude adjustment and he didn’t have time to kick my ass constantly. My only redeeming quality back then was that I actually bothered to go to school and do the work, get good grades—and he wanted to help me capitalize on that. So he sent me to the only school in the country guaranteed to make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear.”

Vanessa looked at him, confused. “I don’t understand.”

Eric grimaced and began to poke at his food. “You know the rumors about me in high school? The partying, the girls, the drugs?”

She cast a quick glance at Vachel, who shrugged.

“Oh, believe me,” Eric said dryly, “he knows all about my history.”

Of course he would. Vanessa relaxed.

“And it’s all true. I couldn’t do any of that at BYU. I mean, I could’ve, but it took a lot of hard work to find out where the parties were if you weren’t an athlete. Plus, Knox made it worth Dirk’s while to be my nanny until I was fully assimilated.”

Vanessa feigned a grimace. “You poor thing.”

“Yeah. Had to cut my hair. Had to give up the cigarettes and drugs because it was just too easy to get caught. Getting liquor there isn’t the easiest thing to do, especially if you’re underage. It was difficult to find girls who’d, ah—”

She blinked because she couldn’t believe it. Was he *blushing* underneath that tan?

“Put out?” Vachel supplied with a smirk.

Vanessa gaped at the boy, but Eric traded a wry glance with him. “Yeah, that. It took a lot of effort when I managed to find one.” He shrugged. “Or maybe I didn’t know where to look. Anyway, I hated it and I bitched at Knox until he said, ‘Why the hell do you think I sent you there?’”

She gestured toward him and said, “Well, apparently you did actually assimilate, Mr. *GQ* Attorney.”

“I probably wouldn’t have made it, but two things happened my first semester that kicked my ass better than Knox could’ve.”

“Wait, let me guess. One of them was a girl.”

He laughed and she loved to see him laugh. “Yes, as a matter of fact. I met a really nice girl in my history class that I wanted to ask out. She was willing to be my friend but

not date me and that— That was humiliating. I wasn't used to the word 'no' from a girl and I didn't understand the concept of a guy and a girl being just friends." He stopped, then chuckled. "Well, I still don't get that."

Vanessa had to laugh, because she didn't either.

"Anyway," he continued, "Heather and I hung out at the library studying, and we ended up talking a lot. She made me look at what I wanted to do with my life, figure out what I was interested in and what I was good at. I figured out that I really like nice girls, and she made me understand what nice girls look for and want. They want a man with an education and class and refinement. A guy who's not a dog, only out for one thing."

"Like you were in high school."

He looked to Vachel and pointed his fork at him. "Take note."

Vachel snorted and Eric laughed. "So I decided to roll with it. I wasn't getting out of it. It wasn't going to change. I wasn't going to be able to live the way I'd always lived and she made me think I really didn't want to. And I certainly wasn't going to tell Knox Hilliard that I refused to do this anymore."

Vanessa pursed her lips, able to empathize with that completely.

"So what happened to that girl, Heather?"

"Oh, she went on a mission for the church. I never saw her again. She's probably long married by now with six kids."

"Ah. What was the second thing?"

He took a bite of food, and Vanessa waited. "My first political science class. It hit something in me, got me fired up. I hadn't declared a major before I went; Knox said since I didn't have much life experience, it was just best to sample a bunch of things and pick what interested me. And . . . political science hit the spot right off the bat. I woke up one day toward the end of the semester and I knew exactly what I wanted to do, where I wanted to go, and how I wanted to get there. I also knew I'd have to keep my life as squeaky clean as possible to have a chance to get anywhere important."

Vanessa stared at him. "So . . . being the prosecutor is . . ."

He nodded. "If I win on Tuesday, it'll just be the next phase in my career. Just like I mapped it out."

"What's after that?"

“Attorney general. Then governor. Then the White House.”

Vanessa’s eyes widened a bit. He was so sure, so definite about it, as if just saying it would make it happen, and she didn’t doubt it would.

“I started blogging with Justice a couple of years ago, and I’ve got a pretty wide audience now—”

She knew that, because she couldn’t keep herself from visiting his blog.

*. . . that’s when girls start getting stupid . . .*

It hadn’t even taken sex to make Vanessa get stupid over Eric.

“—not too offended by the fact that a Libertarian might run as a Republican, as long as everybody’s clear on my opinions.”

“It’d change the face of the Republican party,” Vanessa murmured, hearing the excitement in his voice and knowing what his career plans meant for her.

“Exactly!” His face lit up in delight that she understood. “Are you—?”

“Libertarian,” she said shortly.

He cocked his head a bit. “You read me?”

“I, uh . . . I . . . don’t get online much,” she hedged. “I don’t have time.”

Fortunately, he took that at face value and continued, every enthusiastic word chipping away at her. “Right now, while I’m campaigning for the prosecutor’s office, I’m also quietly campaigning for attorney general. The Republican party’s waiting until after this election to see if I’ve got the chops and then . . . we’ll see. If I win Tuesday, I’ll be on my way to Jefferson City.”

She nodded, her heart breaking, knowing without doubt that tonight was the end. “That’s— That’s wonderful. How is your campaigning going?”

“I honestly don’t know,” he replied, his brow furrowing. “My opponent is running on a platform of getting the crooked bastards out and cleaning up Chouteau County. Since I was part of the, ah, ‘conspiracy’ that kept Knox’s corrupt reputation intact, I’m a crooked bastard, too.” He gestured to Vachel, who had crossed his arms over his chest somewhere around the phrase “political science” and fallen asleep, his chin against his chest. “No matter how many times I say, ‘Look at the test results,’ or ‘Hello, blond hair,’ there are some people who aren’t going to believe I’m not his father. There are a lot of people who believe I raped Simone, and your mother— Well, she’s not a lightweight.

She can be very persuasive when she wants to be and . . . she's actively campaigning against me."

"She's very smart," Vanessa whispered, looking down at her plate, sick to her stomach for a whole lot of reasons. "Clever. Manipulative, narcissistic. She can spin a complex lie and remember every detail. I don't know whether she ends up believing her lies or not, but she can make people believe anything she wants."

"And considering Knox's reputation, it's not a stretch to believe he might have thrown my trial. Then there's Parley and that's being called out, too. I worked for Knox, so there are people who believe that somehow I'm mixed up in that cover-up. To top all that off, what I write gets taken out of context and twisted."

Vanessa pursed her lips. "My mother's whole crowd knows I'm with you tonight. Is that going to hurt you?"

He shrugged. "Doubt it. They've done all the damage they can, I think."

"What will you do if you lose Tuesday?"

"Go to work for Giselle's husband while I run for attorney general." Vanessa nodded. "Get into tort law, where the money is. I've never done that, so it's kind of exciting to think of stretching that way. Whatever happens, I have options." He gestured to her with his fork. "What about you?"

"Notre Dame," she murmured. "Bachelor's in entrepreneurship and then culinary school in New York."

He gave her a lopsided grin. "No, I know all that, thanks to *Esquire*. I meant Whittaker House. Resort, TV show, what next?"

"Golf course," she answered slowly, as each word about their separate futures drove a bigger wedge between them. "I'm building a golf course."

He stilled and looked at her. "You don't sound too happy about that."

Vanessa couldn't help that Chef Granny Whittaker came to the fore to cover her, to hide the tender underbelly of her soul. She smiled brightly. "Oh, it's not that. I just remembered I have another zoning meeting to go to next week. Those are always a fight, but the upcoming vote should tip things in my favor. I've been trying to get this zoned for . . . two years, I think."

"You mean they didn't *want* a golf course? Why?"

She took a deep breath. “It’s hard to explain. Almost everybody likes Whittaker House. It’s pretty, it employs people, it lets people show off their handcrafts and foods. The Conservation Department set up shop on the back corner of my property so they could help me with land management and run some experiments, and give the school kids wildlife demonstrations. Whittaker House brings money—good money—to the area. It takes the edge off the Ozarks hillbilly stereotype, but it still retains its small-town, cozy, homey feel.”

“And a golf course would make it more upscale and suburban.”

“Yes. There are a lot of people who moved to the Ozarks to get away from that. There are a lot of people who never left because they don’t want to be in suburbia. A golf course brings in a different kind of clientele and it’s too . . .” She pursed her lips while she looked for the right word. “City slicker.”

“Yeah, I can see that,” he said, then gestured to Vachel. “He always fall asleep that fast that often? He slept all the way down here and it’s not that far.”

“He has some issues,” Vanessa said quietly, looking at her nephew and thinking about the last year of small, hard-won victories. “Sleeping is one of the big ones.”

“Oh?”

Vanessa’s mouth tightened. That was the last thing she wanted to talk about.

“Okay,” he finally murmured. “But what’s with the kilt?”

She took a deep breath. “I was trying to find a way to draw him out as to his interests, and he let me know, in his roundabout way, that he might like to go to the highland games. I took him and he went completely bonkers for it.”

“And the name? No kid would pick that.”

“The man who sold me the land for Whittaker House is an old veteran. Korea. He was a prisoner of war and understood Vachel immediately.”

“Prisoner of war,” Eric murmured, looking down at the table and playing with his utensils. “PTSD?”

“Yes. Only ol’ Curtis—the veteran— He calls it shell shock. He told Vachel about a man he met in the work camp there, the bravest man Curtis had ever known. He swore to himself if he ever had a son, he’d name the baby after this man. But he never had any sons.”

“The man’s name was Vachel.”

“Yes.”

Eric sighed. “My golf partner, Bryce— He has PTSD.”

“Giselle’s husband.”

“You know Bryce, then?”

“Oh, yes. He likes my food. And he helps out with Vachel. Bryce is very gentle with him, teaches with stories and parables. Logic. Vachel is the same age one of Bryce’s sons would have been if he’d lived. Giselle says it helps Bryce as much as it helps Vachel.”

“What about Knox?”

Vanessa paused. “Knox hasn’t been around enough the last year to be anything but a . . . hammer.”

“That’s what he does best.”

“Well, sometimes it’s the only thing that works. So, between Curtis, the highland games, and Bryce, Vachel got a name and a decent collection of male role models who all expected him to be a man. I couldn’t have wished for more. I think he has one pair of jeans and he wears buckskins to go fishing and hunting.”

Eric started. “He hunts?”

“Almost every day.”

“You go with him?”

“I won’t hunt if I don’t have to. Curtis taught Vachel how—Bryce, too, actually—and goes with him if he’s going out for big game or fowl. Otherwise, he traps and fishes. The conservation rangers let him know what game he can and can’t take on any given day, how much, where they want him to hunt if they need extra help.”

“That’s incredible. If I didn’t know that was Junior, I wouldn’t believe it.”

“Well,” Vanessa murmured, “he has a long way to go yet. I think letting him indulge his idiosyncrasies helps him better than trying to fit him in a box. He’s around men who’re strong and honorable, who aren’t weak like my father. He’s around women who are kind and thoughtful. It’s been an eye-opening experience for him.”

Eric nodded.

A waiter came by to clear their table. “A nice grappa, please,” Vanessa murmured. “Three sorbets.”

“Coffee. Black.”

She smiled. “No frou-frou coffees, huh?”

“Absolutely not, and I’d normally ask for tequila, but I’m driving. And speaking of that, what’s with the Prowler?”

She speared him with a look. “What’s with the vintage Corvette?”

“Okay, okay, you got me. If ‘How do you like me now?’ would fit on a vanity plate, I’d get it.”

She smiled. “Mine would say, ‘Took the trailer park out of the girl.’”

Once their drinks arrived, Eric said, “Vanessa,” in a hesitant tone that made Vanessa’s heart clench. “Is there any possible way we could see each other?”

She looked down at her glass and thought for a moment, then raised her head. “I don’t think so, Eric. I have my life. It’s in Mansfield and it needs me and my expertise. *It is me.* You— You’re . . . going to be in Jeff City, and then Washington—I have no doubt about that. You’re working hard for it, doing everything right. I . . . I just don’t see how it would work. I don’t want to be friends with benefits, don’t want to try for a long-distance relationship, and I will not be a booty call.”

He nodded slowly and she could feel the disappointment that flowed through him, and Vanessa, well, she wanted to curl up and sob.

She nudged Vachel until he awakened enough to eat the sorbet that had arrived with the digestif and coffee.

“Palate cleanser,” she murmured at Eric’s look. “I’m trying to teach him how to eat well.”

“Oh, what the hell,” Eric murmured and dug into his sorbet.

“Roll it around on your tongue,” she instructed. “Let it melt; don’t just swallow it.” Eric tilted his head to stare at her with a smirk, and she felt the heat in her cheeks.

Too soon they finished and left. Vachel climbed into the back seat, and Eric handed Vanessa in without a word.

Neither of them spoke until they’d gotten through downtown and headed north over the Broadway bridge, Vanessa watching out the window as the scenery swept back, all wrapped up in the bitter and the sweet.

“Vanessa . . .”



“Eric, please don’t. I— I would have a hard time with a relationship between us,” she said softly, praying Vachel couldn’t hear. “I would never know if, when you look at me, you’re seeing me or—well, any one of the roles I play for the public.”

Pause. “All right,” he sighed.

The rest of the ride was silent, though Eric took her hand and laced his fingers through hers. She looked at him sharply, able to see his face clearly as they passed under a street light.

“Relax.”

She tried, but it was difficult to do so when each caress of his thumb on the back of her hand made her catch her breath. It had never been this intense, so erotic that holding hands could make her ache to be naked with him.

It was hard to let go of his hand once they got to the motel, but she had to. Vachel dragged himself up to their room, fell on his bed, and immediately began snoring. Then Eric gently caught her hand again and led her outside.

She had no time to say or do anything before Eric wrapped his arms around her, his hand in her hair, and kissed her—deeply, as if his entire future rode on this one kiss. His mouth opened hers and his tongue invited hers to play.

Nothing had prepared her for the wave of pure emotion that surged through her. Desire and passion she knew well; this . . . was a whole different animal, so foreign to her, so . . . rich and broad and deep.

Vanessa slid her hands around his ribs, under his suit coat, and splayed her hands out on his back. Her fingers brushed the metal of a handgun tucked in his waistband and it only heightened the feeling of foreignness, of . . . addiction, perhaps. She could taste the lemon on his tongue, smell his expensive cologne, feel his hard body and harder arousal pressed against her, hear his ragged breathing. If she opened her eyes, she knew she would see that magnificently carved face she had carried around in her memory for more than a year.

Finally the kisses got lighter, sweeter, less intense.

“The nice, pretty lady at Chouteau Elementary,” he murmured against her mouth. “That’s who I see. That’s who I want to get to know.”

Her eyelids fluttered open to see him watching her as they kissed.

“The woman who took in an abused kid and lets him hunt and dress in kilts, the woman who slapped her mother because she deserved it,” he continued, his voice raspy, jagged. “The one who was nice to a dinosaur of a reporter nobody likes. That’s who I see, who I want to talk to.” His hand swept down her torso, shoulder to waist, then back up again and he cupped her lace-and-silk-covered breast. His thumb stroked her bare skin where her blouse parted. “Talk, kiss, talk some more, make love. Slow. Easy. All night.”

*Attainable.*

Vanessa shivered with wanting, her body prepared for a full night of love—and she considered it, what he was offering her. She had gone from a thirteen-year-old girl who just wanted a peck on the cheek (maybe even the lips) from the badass of Chouteau County High School to a twenty-eight-year-old woman who wanted so much more from the Chouteau County prosecutor.

*Unattainable.*

“I want to,” she finally breathed, ragged, after many moments of staring into his eyes, feeling one hand making love to her breast and the other to her buttocks. “You know I do. But I can’t. Logistics. Timing. Thirteen-year-old boy. It would be completely irresponsible.”

He swallowed. “I know. You’re right. When do you leave?”

“Tomorrow morning. I have so much to do . . . I can’t possibly stay any longer.”

“I want to come see you.”

“Eric—”

He kissed her and she fell into him once again. It was a long moment before he spoke again. “Vanessa, give me a chance, please. I know—” He put his finger against her mouth when she opened it. “I *know*. Different lives. Competing goals. Opposite career paths. Two hundred and fifty miles. I get that, but . . . I don’t want to live with ‘what if.’ I want to know if we wouldn’t make it. I want to know if we could’ve, but decided not to for whatever reason. I definitely want to know if we can and then try our best. I want the chance to fall in love with you. Give me that, Vanessa. *Please*.”

Vanessa nearly wept with longing, and she nodded, almost too eagerly. “Yes,” she whispered. “I want that, too.”

\* \* \* \* \*

## 21: FIRST RUNG ON THE LADDER

Eric stopped at the threshold of his office on Wednesday morning and took a long, bleary-eyed look at it. He'd only been in it for fifteen months—

—and it was his for another four years, if he wanted to stay that long. The election for attorney general was in two years, and he'd begin his campaign in earnest this weekend.

"You're going to be worthless today," Connelly said too loudly, making Eric wince. "Where'd you go last night after the party?"

"Westport," Eric said, his chest swelling in spite of his hangover because he'd done *two* jobs well. "Kelly's."

"You should have stayed home today. You look like shit."

Oh, no. Not after crushing his opponent at the polls and then drinking "Ford-slash-King Midas" under the table.

Though normally assiduous about tracking his investments—especially in this economy—Eric had for weeks used his campaigning to avoid sitting down with Sebastian to rearrange his portfolio. He simply couldn't stomach looking at the man with that painting in his head and knowing . . .

Last night, though, in the Chouteau City VFW Hall—with the Jelardes, the Kenards, the Taights, Annie and the new boyfriend she'd dragged down from Omaha, all the prosecutors and county employees turned out to wait for election results—Sebastian had cornered him.

"Eric, you're bleeding money. We *have* to have a sit-down to get this straightened out. I need to have your signatures on some of this shit, because I can't move it around on my own like you seem to think I can. If you want me to do that, I will, but I gotta have your John Hancock."

The full force of Eric's jealousy hit him in the sternum. *Unattainable*. Not only had he not expected it, but he thought himself above such pettiness. It still took everything he had not to plow his fist into Ford's face right then for having had the temerity to be Vanessa's first lover and, moreover, paint her and make their relationship clear to the world—except Eric could kill a man with one punch, and that wouldn't look good on election night. Possibly not any other night, either.

"Yeah, hey, can we do this by email or something? I'm really busy."

Sebastian studied him for a long moment, then said abruptly, "You got a problem with me?"

"No problem. Busy, like I said. It's good to be busy right now, right?"

Annie poked her head into the conversation and said, "Vanessa Whittaker. That's his problem with you."

Sebastian's mouth dropped open.

"Annie . . ." Eric ground out, glaring at her.

"Eric, zip it," she snapped. "In case you forgot, some of those accounts are ones we hold jointly and I need you to quit jacking around. I didn't come down here to congratulate you. I came down here to light a fire under you since you'd rather avoid Sebastian than stop losing money. I'm not going to tolerate another percentage point drop, and if that means I have to be the big bad bitch who lets the cat out of the bag, I'm okay with that."

Eric thought his head would explode, but Sebastian sighed, closed his eyes, pinched the bridge of his nose, and said, "Okay, look. I don't know what the hell's going on and I don't care. We'll go have a beer tomorrow, hash this out like men, get Annie's money out from under your issues, and then we can all get on with making bank."

"My *issues*?"

"Shut up," Sebastian snapped. "Forget tomorrow. Tonight. Kelly's. One o'clock or I'll come looking for you."

The impending meeting dimmed any enjoyment Eric might have gleaned from the election-night festivities, yet he showed up at the appointed place and time. He saw Sebastian's black Ferrari turn into the lot across from the Westport bar, and Eric followed him in to park thirty feet away.

Other than his flirtation with imprisonment, Eric didn't remember ever feeling so out of control or powerless in his life. It broke his martial discipline: His spirit deserted him, unable to quell his mounting illogical rage, leaving his body to do what came instinctively when rational men descended to animals, fighting over territory.

Females.

"Taight!" he bellowed across the lot and Sebastian turned. Eric took a step toward Sebastian, then another and another, faster—

—until he stopped short when Sebastian yanked a baseball bat out of his car and gripped it in both hands, cocked to hit a grand slam.

"Don't even think about it, little boy," Sebastian snarled. "I'll bash your fucking head in if you come after me with those killer fists of yours. I told you we'd have a beer and talk it out. I'm *damn* sure not going to deal with your jealousy eight years after the fact, when I got a wife and three kids."

"Tequila," Eric growled, his eyes narrowed.

Sebastian lowered the bat slowly and watched him warily. "All right," he drawled. "If you really need your ten paces at dawn, I guess tequila's as good a weapon as anything."

They grabbed chairs at the bar and Eric ordered four double shots. He downed his two immediately and watched with great pleasure while Sebastian stared at his warily for a moment.

"I'm not a hard drinker," Sebastian muttered, and *sipped* his first shot. Eric smirked, already knowing how this would end.

The conversation never actually rolled around to Vanessa, since Eric kept the liquor coming and Sebastian couldn't hold it worth shit.

"Yer a pussy," Eric slurred at some point after his thirteenth shot.

"Yesh," Sebastian slurred in return, still on his seventh. "Yesh, I yam. An' yer a fuckin' idiot." Thus saying, Sebastian promptly passed out on the bar. Eric paid the tab, wrote Bryce Kenard's number on a napkin for the bartender, then managed to walk a straight line out the door and get in a cab without hitting his head.

"So what are you going to do now, Mr. Cipriani?" one of the county employees yelled up the stairs at him, pulling Eric's pounding head out of last night and into this

morning.

“Going on vacation!” he yelled back, splitting his head in four more parts. The gales of laughter from everywhere in the courthouse drifting upstairs were worth the pain, though, and he grinned.

Glenn walked in Eric’s office that afternoon and plopped himself in front of Eric’s desk, making himself at home.

“You’re early, Glenn,” Eric intoned absently, buried in a case file.

“I know who proved you innocent.”

“Sure you do.”

“Vanessa Whittaker.”

Once again, Eric had to call on his years of karate training not to react to that in any way. “Go back to your morgue, Glenn.”

“What I don’t know,” he went on as if Eric hadn’t spoken, “is why, *last* year, she was so chilly to you and then *this* year, she was slightly less chilly. You know, when you brought her and your namesake back to her motel, and you groped her ass on the balcony for anyone to see.”

Eric’s head snapped up and he glared at Glenn from under his brow, furious. It was one thing to contemplate breaking Sebastian’s head open; he and Eric were the same size. Glenn wouldn’t stand a chance, but oh, did Eric want to reach over his desk—

“Glenn,” Eric growled.

Glenn smirked. “Old man Whittaker’s wake. Quote, ‘I chose Eric over you when I was twelve years old.’ Remember that?”

*Shit.*

“Annie left you right after Vanessa showed up last year,” he continued. “Vanessa shows up this year and all hell breaks loose, but then it ends up with you and her going at it in public.”

It was with great effort that Eric kept his voice even. “Vanessa was nice to you,” he said, low. “Invited you to Whittaker House. You took her up on that.”

Glenn stared at Eric, then at the edge of Eric’s desk.

“You got a series of articles out of her and you sold out of every one of those papers. Had everybody in Chouteau City begging for more. Your little fledgling blog is

doing just fine, thanks to your apparently endless supply of articles on her. You should be able to close the paper for good and switch to full-time blogging for your income in, what? A year? Two years?”

His mouth tightened.

“So fuck *her*, right? You got what you wanted out of her, and who the hell cares anyway because you’re here and she’s there and whatever the hell— She’s an adult, right? It doesn’t matter that her name was redacted from the trial transcripts because it was fifteen years ago and who cares, right? And so what if she was nice to you. It must have been an act anyway, because nobody else likes you.”

His nostrils flared. “All right. You made your point.”

“I’m asking you, as a favor to this office, not to publish her name.”

“I’m not stupid, Eric. This is about you and your campaign. You know how that’s going to get spun if it comes out.”

Eric stared at Glenn, stunned. “I—” But what could he say? He’d never thought about it that way.

“Lord, it didn’t even occur to you, did it?” Glenn breathed, clearly as surprised as Eric. “All right. Look. Whatever’s in the past, I’ll keep in the past, I give you my word on that. But if you and her start up . . . I’ll report that. Whoever you date is newsworthy, and I’m not going to pass it by on the off chance somebody makes the connection from what I write.”

“Oh, so you’re going to turn the *Recorder* into a gossip rag?”

“No,” he snapped. “I’m going to report the news. Think about it for a while, Eric. She was Ford’s mistress. *Esquire*. *Maxim*. That would take a good chunk of the conservative vote away from you. At least Stacy Afton’s got her old man behind her.”

“Literally,” Eric growled.

“I’m not printing *that* without proof.”

“You know what, Glenn?” Eric said. “I’m going to do what I damn well please and to hell with you and your advice.”

“So you are going to pursue her.”

“None of your business. Get out.”

Glenn arose and went to the door, but turned. “It wasn’t advice, Eric,” he said

soberly. “Just giving you the facts of life. If you want that job, attorney general, governor, president, whatever, your life won’t be yours anymore. People will make up what they can’t find.”

“I know. I’ve been dealing with you for the last seven years.”

“I’m not your enemy, Eric, and I told you before: I never made up anything about Knox or you or anybody else. I just reported what was there. If you had asked for my advice, I would have told you to be careful. That’s all.”

\* \* \* \* \*

## **22: COME INTO MY PARLOR**

It took Eric more than four weeks of bribery, cajoling, extortion, threatening, begging, and blackmail to get his trial and class schedules squared away enough that he could go to Mansfield to see Vanessa for a week, though he did call her first to find out when it would be best.

He couldn’t afford to surprise her so much that she’d turn him away after he’d gone to so much trouble.

*Which is why this relationship won’t work. You’ll have to do this every single time you want to go see her.*

And she’d have to do the same if she were to visit him, plus she’d have a bored thirteen-year-old boy on her hands. Bored thirteen-year-old boys were a scourge on society and he didn’t care how smart and responsible they were.

Eric emailed Vanessa every day, but she very rarely returned his messages; when she did, they tended to be quite short. He called every evening, and though she usually couldn’t talk long, he needed to hear that soft husky voice, even if only for a few seconds.

*Eric, you realize that just because you’ll be on vacation, I won’t be, right? Whittaker House is overflowing, and that’s not including Friday and Saturday night*



*dinner. I have to work and my days are eighteen hours or more. I'll do my best to minimize that while you're here, but I won't be able to entertain you. I don't want to give you a false impression.*

*No, I understand. It's okay, Vanessa. I want to watch you in your environment, see what you do.*

He drove through Mansfield, Missouri at eleven on a Friday morning in late May, looking at it with small-town eyes and saw that it wasn't much different from Chouteau City, except a lot smaller. He turned around when he realized he was going the wrong way, then followed the signs to Ava.

When he finally came upon Whittaker House, he slowed and stopped in awe because the website pictures didn't begin to touch on its grandeur.

On ample acreage, it was like every description of Zion he'd ever heard at BYU. It was more beautiful than Temple Square in Salt Lake and much more grand. He'd never seen anything so lush, so . . . perfect. In the middle of it all reigned the most glorious example of a stripped-down gothic revival mansion he'd ever seen. At four stories with three steeply pitched gables—one of which rose far above the roof line—it was enormous. It was antique brick, a light terra cotta, with simple white trim and curved-top shutters that matched the Palladian windows. A deep veranda wrapped all the way around it. It had little extraneous ornamentation along its gables and eaves. The veranda eaves and ceiling dripped baskets of colorful flowers.

The roof was clad in square glossy black shingles with a strange geometric pattern. They didn't look like asphalt, ceramic, or wood, but Eric couldn't figure out just what they were.

The lawn was immense, with a large, flower-bounded boulder toward the front, modestly carved with "Whittaker House" and its street number on both sides. There were sheep grazing on pickets!

Eric drove up the long cobblestone horseshoe drive, down and around to a precisely landscaped parking lot. Planters filled with flowers between pairs of parking spaces and different-colored cobblestones marked each space. Strategically planted apple trees had made the whole thing disappear from the highway.

"She hid a parking lot in plain sight," he marveled.

Another car zipped by on another well-hidden drive right in front of him, headed south to what appeared to be a long, low stable off in the distance, but knew it had to be valet parking once he saw a young man jogging back to the mansion.

Eric got out and stood by his car. He looked across the highway to a collection of gothic revival shops the same brick as the mansion, roofed in the same material, all meticulously landscaped and arranged around a half-moon-shaped courtyard. Fishing gear and custom fly-tying. Needlecrafts. Clothing boutique of a local designer-tailor. Salon and spa. Gourmet grocer, featuring locally made foods. Hunting outfitter. Stationery.

He turned toward the mansion and walked around the grounds a bit. Cottages, smaller versions of the stores across the highway, sat scattered behind the mansion, spread out in an asymmetrical fan shape amongst a park-like lawn with flowers and trees, benches and a playground just north of the garage. Various narrow cobblestone pathways led to the cottages.

Two outbuildings to the northwest sat at the edge of an apple orchard and were much bigger than the rest, but so far away they almost faded into the lawn and trees.

All of the cottages, the valet garage, and the two outbuildings were clad in the same brick as the mansion and shops, and all of them had that strange roof pattern. Each cottage had some unique feature, with no more than two of the little buildings alike. Some were two-story and some one. Each had unique eave detailing, as a proper gothic revival should, and none of the cottage eaves were as barren as the mansion's eaves. Each cottage had a large railed porch with rocking chairs or a porch swing, and each cottage's foundation was swathed in flowers.

He climbed the side stairs of the mansion and wandered around the veranda, looking for wherever the kitchen might be. He saw quite a few guests strolling, rocking in chairs and drinking various concoctions, the most frequent of which seemed to be mint julep, iced sweet tea, and lemonade. The guests read, knitted, dozed, wrote, sewed, and the like.

It seemed there were at least two casually dressed waiters on staff at this time of day catering to the needs of those who wished to while away their time without the distraction of cell phones, laptops, PDAs, and other gadgetry.

One very familiar sight—two Mormon missionaries clad in cheap suits and driving

a generic car—whizzed down the driveway and turned out onto the highway, headed toward Ava.

Through the floor-to-ceiling French doors spaced equally along this wall of the mansion, he could see an immense dining room that seemed as cozy as a small parlor, with a grand staircase blocking the view to the other half of the mansion. Intrigued, he decided to forego the kitchen for the time being and go around to the front entrance. The grand front door was made of heavy walnut casements surrounding elaborate beveled glass windows.

*Ah, Vanessa. Impeccable taste, brought to you by the same man who taught me what a handkerchief was for.*

He walked in onto wide-planked walnut floors, a shallow alcove on his left (it took him a minute to realize it was an elevator), and a welcome desk to his right.

Deep into the main floor in front of him was that massive walnut staircase—bigger and more ornate than the one in the Chouteau County courthouse—twelve feet wide, rising twenty feet to the next level, bisected by a landing. To the left of the staircase was a dining room. To the right of the staircase was an enormous room littered with comfortable couches, club chairs, coffee tables, end tables, and plenty of lamps. Its far wall was lined with shelves and shelves of books to the ceiling, halved horizontally by a relatively shallow wrought-iron balcony from the front wall to the back, to enable people to access the ceiling-high library via a compact switchback wrought-iron staircase.

And on the back wall of the large sitting room, there *it* hung.

*Wild, Wild West*, eight feet wide and five feet high.

Eric sucked up a sharp breath at its magnificence and wondered if he would have the privilege of touching that magnificently curved body this week and become her third lover.

There was something very strange about a twenty-eight-year-old woman with such a sparse sexual history that was, at the same time, so remarkable.

*I go for high-profile quality and not low-class quantity.*

So she did. Eric wasn't high-profile—yet—but he sure as hell hoped he could live up to the quality part.

He was so taken with the enormity and beauty of the painting—this *place*—that he

started when a simply but elegantly clad blonde approached him.

“Hello,” she murmured. “I’m Shelly Geier, the concierge. Welcome to Whittaker House.” Eric had to adjust his grip to accommodate the flaccid handshake she offered.

“Eric Cipriani.”

“Are you a guest with us this weekend? I don’t recall your name on our arrivals list.”

He looked at her a moment, his attention caught by something subtle that he’d seen before. She had almost the same look on her face that his eager unattached female students got—but there was something different about it. More elusive, more . . . calculating.

“Yes,” he replied, watching her face change nearly imperceptibly to satisfaction.

“Really,” she purred, keeping his hand a few seconds too long, curling her fingers into his. He decided to follow this path to see if his instincts were correct, so he didn’t bother to retrieve his hand. “Perhaps I can give you a tour?”

Eric cocked an eyebrow, tilting his head just a tad, and quirked his lips. “A tour of . . . what?”

“The . . . *property*,” she returned smoothly, her expression betraying only the most miniscule amount of satisfaction.

All his years managing people, teaching them, watching them while they testified, picking up on subtle, almost indistinguishable tidbits of body language, had given him an almost sixth sense about people’s motives and what they might be hiding. It was a skill Knox had never really learned and it gave Eric strengths in the courtroom Knox didn’t have, although Knox’s memory more than balanced out any deficit.

The concierge didn’t think she’d given away a single thing even though he’d read most of her game plan in just the few seconds they’d conversed. Still, he was missing something, some important detail.

“Ah, well. Actually, I’m looking for Vanessa.”

Her smile of studied, benign amusement was well practiced, as if she hadn’t just propositioned him. “I assure you, Mr. Cipriani, as your concierge, I’m more than capable of taking care of your . . . *needs*. Miss Whittaker is most likely flitting around.”

*Miss Whittaker. Flitting around. Meow.*

He flashed her a smile that wouldn't betray his suspicions, slowly withdrew his hand, and said, "Then if you could tell me where she might be, ah, *flitting*, I'd appreciate it."

"Hmmm." She looked at her watch. "That would be difficult to determine at this time of day and she won't be around until six this evening to begin seating guests."

His eyelids drooped a bit in response, and a corner of her mouth turned up. "No problem. I'll just wander around until I find her."

Leaving her there to stew in *that*, he turned and walked out the front door, across the veranda and around a corner, nearly colliding with a man only a little shorter than Eric, with long black hair, similar complexion, and a thick but tidy beard and mustache covering most of his face.

"Scuse me, buddy," he muttered absently as he passed, then actually *looked* at Eric. He stopped, his eyes narrowed a bit, and then he burst out laughing. That was strange enough, but the man didn't bother to explain himself as he shook his head and continued past him into the mansion, still chuckling.

"Piper."

The man stopped. Turned.

Eric stared at him, his jaw clenched, and Piper returned it with a smirk.

"I'm leavin', Cipriani," Piper said in a thick country accent chock full of amusement. "You got no threat from me."

"Why are you still here?"

"Not for her tryin' to kick me out since she got back from Kansas City. I wanted to see what's had her in a snit for the last two years."

Eric stared at him, but Piper continued on his way into the mansion, the words, "Now I see. Now I go," floating back after him.

A snit.

Over Eric.

Two years.

*Justice wanted her to be one of her bridesmaids and I wanted you to be one of my groomsmen . . . she declined.*

*I had a crush on you . . . I never got over it . . . you were always larger than life . . .*

*unattainable.*

Sebastian Taight. Nash Piper. About Eric's height. About Eric's build. Both with black hair.

Eric wouldn't pass for either of them, but all cats were gray in the dark.

"Oh," Eric breathed as all the pieces of the puzzle fell in place, filling in spots he didn't know needed filling. The significance of it humbled him. His jealousy, unwarranted. His hesitance in trying again to approach her, unnecessary.

If he'd sought her out any time in the last ten years like he should've . . .

"I really am a fucking idiot," Eric muttered.

He took a deep breath, now more eager than ever to see Vanessa and put it all to rights. He set off around the other side of the veranda, following the cobblestone driveway that led to the northwest corner of the park until he was at the rear of the mansion. Once there, he saw Piper walking toward him, still chuckling, still shaking his head. He gave Eric a wide grin and threw his thumb over his shoulder. "She's back there—first big outbuildin' on the left," he offered. As he passed, he clapped Eric on the shoulder heartily and said, "Good luck, Cipriani."

Without bothering to respond, Eric headed in the direction Piper had indicated. Once he got to the "first big outbuildin' on the left" and rounded the corner, he stopped short and gaped.

Wide-open carriage doors comprised the entire front wall. Vanessa stood behind a stainless steel table up to her elbows in rabbit carcasses, her hair in a pony tail, her body swimming in a bloody paper coverall, and blood all over her face. She stopped, a fillet knife in her hand, to wipe her forehead with the back of her arm.

Eric blinked. He wasn't going anywhere near that mess, not even for a kiss.

"Welcome to my world," Vanessa muttered as she skinned and filleted another rabbit. "I hate to introduce you to my butcher shop this way but Vachel showed up with this haul about an hour ago, so I had to deal with it right away."

"Yeah, I'm not crying."

"Most people do. They don't mind eating it as long as they can pretend it wasn't cute and cuddly at one time or had a face. Damn things eat my gardens when they could be eating out of my compost. They deserve what they get."

Eric laughed. “Is that for tonight’s menu?”

“No. Tonight is—” She looked up at him then. “Do you really want to know?”

“This is what you’re famous for, right?”

“One of them. So, tonight’s dish is ’possum and squirrel medallions over thyme-and-rosemary couscous with the coveted Vanessa Whittaker creamed collard greens.”

He grimaced. “Where’s the nearest Taco Bell?”

Vanessa laughed then and went back to butchering rabbits. “I warned you. But. I do serve other things for the less, ah, epicurious.”

Eric snorted. “I’ll take a hunk of cow, thanks. You learned how to butcher ’possum in New York?”

“Not specifically, but I learned how to treat different meats, depending on their toughness and maturity. And just so you know, I didn’t intend to make a career out of cooking like Granny Clampett. It was a little side interest that kind of evolved. I get ideas from the Foxfire books and then mix it up with oddball dishes I create. If it’s a hit, I keep it. If it’s not, out it goes.”

“Foxfire books?”

Her mouth twitched in thought. “I don’t know how to explain them. Kind of an . . . encyclopedia of Appalachian life. Customs, folklore, recipes. Instructions. Like dowsing. How to make moonshine.”

“Would you make moonshine?”

She grinned. “I would if I thought I could get away with it. That would do well on my bar.”

“This place,” Eric murmured, gesturing vaguely toward the mansion. “It knocked me over. It’s about as perfect as any place could be.”

“My father,” she said softly, “hoped heaven was at least as pretty. He was looking forward to dying.”

Eric shoved his hands in his pockets and looked at the floor.

She cleared her throat. “Anyway,” she said, her husky voice a bit hoarse. “The holiday season is booked up three years out, working on year four, because of the masquerades. The Hilliards’ suite—in the top of the middle gable—is never rented out and it’s inaccessible except by elevator key and secret passageway. January through

March, and September through November are relatively slow, but I use those months to sort and clean, create dishes, plan for the next year. It's really not as slow as I'd like because Laura Ingalls Wilder's house is just down the road a bit. That's why people come to Mansfield and they do it year-round. And as of—" She checked her watch. "—five minutes ago, I have two permanent residents."

"I met your third."

She bit her lip. Refused to look up at him.

"It's all good, Vanessa. Don't sweat it. I— Got it. Finally."

She sighed, then said wryly, "Well, so did I. Nash told me he came here because I look like his ex-wife, so when I saw you at my father's wake . . . "

He smirked. "Oh yeah . . . ?"

"Let's just say I realized that if Nash had shown up in his natural hair color, nothing would have happened."

Eric burst out laughing.

"You know that makes me certifiable."

"If you are, I am, too," he said, chuckling. "I've been crazy jealous about you since I saw you at the school exhibition— And I've never been jealous in my life."

She grinned.

"So now that we know we're both crazy . . . why did *you* come to Mansfield?"

"Laura Ingalls Wilder, same as everybody else. I adore her. She gave me courage." She looked up at him. "She was the reason I went to Knox with Simone's diary in the first place."

"I don't know who she is," he said, as she went back to cutting.

*"Little House on the Prairie?"*

"Oh, the TV show."

"No, no. The books."

Eric shook his head. "I didn't know how to read until I got to college and then I just dove headfirst into Kierkegaard."

Vanessa laughed outright at that.

"How big is your staff?"

"Right now, eleven full-time employees, twenty part-time. Housekeepers.



Gardeners. Servers, bellhops, and valets. Chefs and line cooks. I usually grab a few teenagers for seasonal work, like now, and I always have an apprentice chef or two.

“I’m the chief executive chef, so the time I spend cooking is to create the dishes. My executive chef runs the kitchen. I create the food, do all the butchering myself, tape the TV show.”

“You tape your show in your kitchen?” he asked, surprised.

“No. The set is in the basement. I have to keep the technology out of sight. Kind of ruins the mirage if the guests see how *not* rustic we are. Everything’s hidden, like internet and cable outlets in the suites and guest cottages. That’s not to say they’re not there. You just can’t see them. Vachel has a TV and a computer in his room, video games, iPhone, the works. My office is totally high-tech. I had to put in a few things for the disabled and to meet fire codes, but people understand that stuff. Nobody would find the lack of an elevator in a four-story building acceptable.”

“And your employees?”

“The few who live here can do what they want, but no employee is to let the guests see their technology.”

Eric watched Vanessa work: The intense expression on her face, the speed and precision with which she wielded her scalpel-sharp knife, the way she held and considered each carcass before she began to cut.

“Where is Vachel, by the way?” he finally asked.

She glanced at her watch again. “Sleeping in a tree or a meadow somewhere, this time of day. He has to have his siesta.”

“His PTSD.”

“Yes. He doesn’t sleep much when it’s dark. Winter was . . . difficult.”

Eric’s lips pressed together, wondering what that kid could have lived through to make him so afraid of the dark he wouldn’t sleep in it, and regretting that he hadn’t called Social Services years ago.

“He usually spends his nights hunting. During the school year he studies. One reason he doesn’t like school is because he’s so tired. His work is fine, he tests well, but he gets in trouble for nodding off . . .” She shrugged. “He’s really too—I don’t know, adult?—for school, but he needs the education to go with his maturity. He doesn’t . . .

fit.”

“Does he have friends?”

“Friends, no, but he does have a fan club. His kilts and buckskins. His aloofness. He very rarely speaks.”

“Mysterious. Tough.”

Vanessa nodded. “I had tween girls calling here constantly because he won’t give his cell number to anybody. I finally had to call their mothers and have a chat.”

Eric laughed, then noticed a pile of fur off to one side of the table. “What do you do with the pelts?”

“Send them to a tannery,” she said as she sliced and diced. “Have them made into throws and blankets for the beds. Adds an unexpected touch. You don’t expect to see furs all over a gothic Victorian, but then they get sold as fast as I have them made.”

Interesting. “Just so you know, your concierge—” Eric stopped abruptly when Vanessa’s head snapped up, her hands still.

“Shelly?” she prompted.

So. There were issues there, and he still wasn’t quite sure his suspicions were correct. Yet. “Uh . . . Well—” He stopped, unwilling to say anything more.

Vanessa sighed and went back to cutting. “Never mind. She’s a flirt; I get that.”

“She wouldn’t tell me where you were.”

“Oh.” She paused a moment, then muttered, “I’m sorry. I should’ve known she’d do that.”

“You don’t like her, do you?”

Vanessa said nothing for a beat, but her cutting pace never slowed. “No,” she finally said. “I don’t. But she’s good with unhappy people, she does her job well, and she’s discreet, which is paramount here.”

“Why’d you hire her?”

“Besides her references? She looked straight at Nash and didn’t recognize him.”

That made sense.

“Will she respect your space?”

“I don’t know.” Vanessa stilled, then she looked back up at him slowly. “Is that something I might have to worry about?”

He stared right back at her and said, very firmly, very deliberately, “No.”

She stared at him, as if she didn’t quite believe him, but went back to her work with a firm nod. “Okay.”

Eric leaned against the doorway and crossed his arms over his chest, watching for a great long while before she had packaged what she’d cut and thrown the packets into a small chest freezer marked **RABBIT**.

“Oh, hey,” he said, “what’re your buildings roofed in?”

“Solar panels.”

He blinked, surprised. “I didn’t know they came that small.”

She glanced up at him and smiled. “Technology’s amazing, isn’t it? Whittaker House made my architect famous.”

“How so?”

“A building like mine is an energy hog. I was very specific about what I wanted it to look like, but I also wanted it to be as energy efficient as possible. Nia had to figure out how to do it. She got together with Knox’s cousin Étienne—the engineer—?”

Eric nodded.

“—and they basically built a power plant.”

“So you’re off the grid,” Eric said slowly, leaning backward to look down the hill at that magnificent mansion—*power plant*—feeling a rush of admiration so strong he could barely breathe.

“No, we’re *on* the grid, but only to sell power back to the utility company. We sit over a natural spring and draw our own water. Étienne also designed a filtration system that would work with Nia’s ideas. We collect rainwater and recycle runoff. The only propane we use is for the kitchen, and those tanks are buried. Since all the buildings are able to generate their own power, we’ve been able to grow fast. I wouldn’t have been comfortable trying to get a loan for the boutiques across the highway if I didn’t know they’d pay for themselves in electricity in a couple of years, whether my tenants make money or not, whether they stand empty or not.”

He looked back at the rabbit under her knife. “And the animals?”

“The Conservation Department makes sure we keep our predator-prey ratio healthy. They make sure we don’t fish out our streams. They have breeding programs all over my

land here, and outward. My menu suits the Department's purpose and their presence here suits mine. They help me be the kind of steward I want to be."

"Steward . . ." he said slowly. "Of the land?"

She nodded.

"Most people wouldn't care about that, Vanessa," Eric murmured. "How did you come to care so much?"

She stopped and stood up straight, wiped her forehead with the back of her arm. "Common sense," she said. "Responsibility. Protecting my investment. This—" She gestured toward the outside with her knife. "—This is survival. I can dress my food, present it like it's an upscale New York dish, but if you think about it, you realize it's just survival food. I can cook on any surface you can imagine, as long as I have a flint and some water."

"Oh, you're one of *those*."

Vanessa gave him one of her eye-crinkling smiles. "Yes, I am. And I protect my land as well as I can."

"So are you organic?"

"All the vegetables I serve are fresh from local farms. I have several vendors who're stay-at-home moms—and most of them are church members. They started growing vegetables for me for some extra cash and now that's where I get it all. They'll grow anything I ask for. A couple of them have hen houses. I get all my eggs from them. All the bread I serve is locally made, too. But . . . we aren't completely organic," she admitted. "We do the best we can, but it's not one of my sticking points. Things happen. You have to be flexible. It's like the electricity. Yeah, we conserve there, but we use a helluva lot of propane and water. It's always a balancing act."

"And the planters on the veranda?"

"Herbs."

"What about winter?"

"My vendors all have greenhouses now."

Eric stopped asking questions to watch her work while he thought about what she had said. What it meant to him. His heritage. His ancestors and his tribe. His mother.

It took her another long while to clean everything up and package the fur. Once the

butchery was clean and she had shucked her coveralls, she went to an out-of-the way table and boxed the pelts. She tossed the box across the room to Eric and said, "Put that on the front corner of the veranda where the rest of the boxes are, would you, please?"

He grinned. "Oh, I see. You let me come down here so you could put me to work."

Vanessa laughed. "Of course I did. Did you think you were coming to Whittaker House to be waited on? There's a small cottage on the other side of my private garage. I need some help there when you're done with that."

Eric felt an odd sensation in his chest that felt as warm and soft as the rabbit pelts inside the box he held. It wasn't lust, wasn't love. It was . . . something he had never known and couldn't identify.

When he'd finished that task, he went back to the butcher shop to find it closed up tight and Vanessa gone.

He wandered past a six-car garage, which had doors matching the butchery, though this one had windows. It housed her Prowler, a large pickup, and two four-wheelers with trailers. Behind that was another small cottage, two-story, away from the rest and covered by large oaks. It was different: It looked lived in. Loved. Cared for with a personal touch the others didn't have.

So. This was where Vanessa lived. He began to smile.

He walked up the three stairs to the porch, then into the cottage without a qualm.

Water ran through the pipes. The cottage was so small, it only took him four steps to follow the sound to the narrow staircase that wound around the back of the chimney, which led to the second floor. Her bedroom, tidy and mostly pink. Another five steps got him to the bathroom, which had no door.

Taking a chance that she meant him to find her somewhere in this tiny cottage, and knowing that this was the only place she could be, he stepped into the bathroom.

There, in the glass-enclosed shower, she stood nude, her body beautiful and streaming with water, her streaked hair clipped to the top of her head.

She looked over her shoulder, straight at him.

He knew exactly what he'd be spending his nights doing to that beautiful voodoo priestess body of hers.

All week long.

\* \* \* \* \*

## 23: MARY HAD ALWAYS BEEN GOOD

Vanessa wasn't going to waste this opportunity.

She'd finished the butchering in record time, so no one would come looking for her. Vachel was sleeping. Shelly had things under control.

*I want the chance to fall in love with you.*

She'd obsessed over that ever since he'd declared his intention, the possibility that this boy-man she'd carried in her heart all these years was eager to give her what she had always wanted from him. But today, she'd awakened with the thrilling tension of a girl about to go on her first date.

Eric had called her the minute she got home last month, and she'd bolted out of her car to run to her office. Breathless, she'd checked her packed calendar to try to figure out what commitments she could rearrange.

Then she'd gone straight to Nash.

*Consider this your eviction notice. Go home to your woman and your brat.*

*Oh, so small-time married country lawyer stepped up to the plate, huh?*

*Not married. And maybe he did, maybe he didn't. We'll see. I'm shaking you off my leg now.*

*Okay, doll. But I ain't leavin' 'til I get a good look at him.*

Fortunately, Eric had shown up while she was butchering.

*Say, doll, your boy's here moseyin' around. I can clear out in a coupla hours if you'll store my shit. That good for you?*

*Yes, thank you.*

*Yo, V, thanks for a good run. And thanks for bein' a real friend.*

*You, too, Nash. And, hey. Good luck with Melanie and Trixie. I hope that works out*

*for you.*

*I'm gonna need all the luck I can get. Have your little pets pray for me, 'kay?*

*Sure thing.*

Vanessa had had time to collect herself and gather her thoughts before Eric showed up in her butchery door. Then she'd concocted a hasty plan and sent him away just long enough to prepare.

No matter what happened in the future, she wanted to make love with Eric today.

Now.

As she let the hot water rinse the soap away, she watched him take his clothes off. He returned her look, undressing slowly as if he didn't want to scare her by appearing too eager. Her breathing quickened when he stripped his tee shirt over his head, and she saw the intricate spider-web tattoo that banded his left upper arm and covered his muscular shoulder. Then her breathing got harder and faster when he pushed his jeans and snug boxer briefs down his legs; a matching tattoo banded his right thigh and climbed up his hip, disappearing around the back.

She stared shamelessly at his arousal. Her nostrils flared. She wondered how he would taste—and when she'd get to wrap her mouth around that. She looked back into his intense face.

She *ached* for him.

Eric opened the glass door and stepped in with her, behind her, buried his nose in the crook of her neck. Kissed. Licked. His hands wrapped around her waist, then stroked up her ribs to cup her breasts.

Better. *Much* better than she'd hoped for.

Perfect, as a matter of fact.

"How much time do we have, Vanessa?" he murmured as he nibbled at her jaw.

"An hour maybe," she whispered, almost unable to speak. "I couldn't wait until tonight."

He said nothing to that. She knew he wouldn't have expected this at all; wouldn't have expected her to be so upfront about it, nor so soon after his arrival.

"I want to seduce you, Vanessa," he murmured. "Not here, not in the shower. I want to love you properly, take my time, and in my world, an hour's a quickie."

Vanessa smiled then and turned, wrapping her arms around his neck; she thought she'd never been so happy in all her life. Here, now, in her shower amongst the life she'd built for herself, with Eric, the man she'd risked everything for so many years ago; the man she'd fallen in lust with a year ago; the man she was pretty sure she could fall in love with. He caressed her and stroked her and kissed her—

—so very well, his tongue in her mouth, teasing, tasting, his skin against her nose so that she could smell him, all earthy and utterly male.

He drew away from her and turned the water off, then led her out of the tiny bathroom into her tiny bedroom. He rolled her into the middle of the bed, her legs wrapped around his hips.

“Come be inside me, Eric,” she whispered, reaching for the drawer on the night stand and pulling out a handful of condoms, letting them fall on the bed like confetti.

“Mmmm . . . I want to touch you more, kiss you more.”

“Necking and petting? I learned about that in Young Women’s.”

He chuckled. “Everybody else calls it foreplay and I like it. I like it a lot.”

“No. Not now. Please. I’ve been waiting for you, for this, all day. All month. My whole life, I think.”

He gave her that sly grin and whispered, “Well, if you insist . . .” After a moment of preparation, he found her spot, then slid slowly, carefully inside her. Stayed. Her back arched and she drew in a soft breath of ecstasy.

*Yes! Much, much better.*

His skin on hers, her breasts mashed against his chest, her arms around his neck, his body pressing hers into the mattress, her mouth under his.

They kissed. Vanessa had never felt so liquid, so . . . right. She hummed into his mouth as he licked at her lips, then teased her tongue.

The senior girls had been right. He *definitely* knew how to make girls feel good.

“VANESSA!”

At the familiar bellow, which was way too close to the cottage for comfort, her eyes popped open and she nearly choked. Eric stilled and they stared at each other, wide-eyed.

“Vanessa, you didn’t,” Eric growled.

“I forgot. Eric, I swear I forgot. I— All I could think about was you. Making love



with you. Cover your ears.”

“VANESSA!” It was closer this time, and then her front door opened.

“KNOX HILLIARD, YOU GET OUT OF MY HOUSE RIGHT NOW!”

“Whose Corvette do I see out in the parking lot?!”

“Whose do you think?!”

“Well, where the hell is he?”

Eric clamped his hand over Vanessa’s mouth and barked, “You knew exactly where I was, you obnoxious bastard. Get the fuck out.”

The slam of her front door, then booming laughter that grew fainter and fainter until there was none.

They looked at each other again and then began to laugh. The moment was lost, but they had something to share now.

“Dying sure didn’t have any deleterious effects on his crappy sense of humor, did it?”

She rolled her eyes. “Uh, no. He killed it for me; how about you?”

“Can’t you tell?” he muttered, pulling away from her to discard the condom.

“Ah, yes. Just making sure.”

But they kissed. And then again. Longer still, and Vanessa simply enjoyed his taste, his touch. Soft, tender.

She stroked his arm as if to feel the spider web buried in his skin. “What is this?”

“Symbol of my people,” he whispered.

“You’re close to them?”

“Not really. I’d like to have been, to learn and carry on what traditions are left. It’d make my mom happy, but life got in the way.”

She smiled then and traced his lower lip with her finger.

Eric’s arousal firmed up at that—because of her smile or the way she touched him, she didn’t know. “Mmmm, maybe he didn’t kill it after all,” Eric breathed, stretching to grab another condom. “Let’s try this again.”

“Oh yes. *Thank* you.”

“AUNT VANESSA!”

He froze. His head dropped down into the crook of her neck and Vanessa clapped

her hand over her face.

She took a deep breath.

“What, Vachel?”

“Curtis is out of his medicine. He miscounted.”

“Have Knox or Justice take care of it.”

“Oh, they’re here already? Cool, okay.” Pause. “Uh, are you all right? You sound funny.”

“I’m *fine*!” she screeched, but then felt Eric’s body begin to shake. His warm breath puffed into her neck.

“Easy for you to say,” Vanessa grumbled, yet feeling the pull of his amusement. “are you gone yet?!”

No answer.

Eric burst out laughing and rolled off her, captured her hand in his and brought it to his lips. “Shit, Vanessa, is this an endurance test or something?”

“I told you what my life is like and I wasn’t exaggerating. I don’t know what you plan to do with yourself all week.”

He still chuckled. Wiped a hand down his face. “I’ll find something.” He turned his head and looked at her with that heart-breaking smile she’d always adored. “You think third time’s the charm?”

“Nope. Everybody knows where I am now. Next thing you know, the missionaries will show up needing something.” She sighed. “Time to get back to work.”

“I’ll help you. Tell me what you want me to do.”

“Oh, I see. You just don’t want Knox to laugh at you.”

“Knox? Hell, Vanessa, you’re talking about a man who got caught by an office full of attorneys and cops fucking his only female assistant prosecutor up against the wall of his office in the middle of the workday. He can’t point and mock.”

“He didn’t!”

Eric’s chuckles turned back into a rolling laugh, then a guffaw. “You should’ve seen it.”

“With *Justice*?”

“Who else?”

“Wasn’t she embarrassed?”

“Not a bit. She thought it was funny as hell. They both did.”

They continued to laugh as Vanessa pulled on her whites and Eric re-dressed. They walked back toward the mansion with fingers laced and Vanessa shocked herself when she remembered—

“I’ve never held hands with a boy before,” she murmured.

He looked at her sharply. “You’re kidding.”

“Nope. It just now occurred to me. You popped my hand-holding cherry.” He laughed again at Vanessa’s self-satisfied smile and they continued along the pathway to the mansion.

“Curtis is the veteran, right?” Eric asked suddenly.

“Ol’ Curtis Lowe,” Vanessa began, “lives in a small cabin at the back of the property and insists that we refer to him as ‘the sharecropper’ because he thinks it’s funny to let the guests think he’s a charity case. The man’s richer than God.”

Eric stopped. Stared at her. “His name is *not* Curtis Lowe.”

She smiled up at him. “It *is*. Just like the guy in the song. Looks like him, too.”

“And his medicine?”

“He wouldn’t take it if Vachel weren’t around. I told Vachel it was his responsibility to make sure Curtis took his medicine so he’d stick around for a while. I told Curtis it would shatter Vachel if he died because he didn’t take his medicine.”

“Mmmm, no pressure there.”

She shrugged. “It gets the results I want.”

“And what you want is to keep ol’ Curtis alive and give Vachel someone to take care of.”

“Right. Curtis fought me for years over that and the only thing he ever let me do is feed him. My food is his Achilles heel. Better than his mama’s, he says. So I make him sit in the kitchen and tell me *all* about his mama’s cooking. You can guess what I do with that.”

Eric laughed.

“Knox is my next project. Haven’t figured out how to make him do what I want him to do yet.”

“Which is?”

“Take care of his diabetes.”

Eric grunted. “Good luck with that. Justice can’t even get him to do it.”

“Justice doesn’t know.” At his look, she said, “I suspect everybody else thinks she does, but that this is one area where she can’t get him to heel.”

“That explains a lot. Why don’t you just tell her?”

“And hit the button on World War III? That’s not my style. I’d rather Knox rat himself out than put myself in the line of fire like that.”

“You’re as sneaky as he is.”

“Oh, I’ll never be that good.”

They climbed up the back porch stairs and walked into the main kitchen. Justice had made herself at home to cook, but Knox was nowhere to be found.

“He’s hiding,” Justice said in answer to the question that no one asked. “Didn’t want to get his head ripped off—and before you ask, I told him not to do that.”

“What’s that?” Vanessa asked, coming up behind her and looking over her shoulder.

“It’s sauce for apple dumplings.”

“I could’ve had some for you when you got here, if you’d asked.”

“Uh, I didn’t know I’d want some until about an hour ago.” She looked at Vanessa, her face full of excitement. “I’m pregnant again!”

“Fabulous!”

“I just got past puking everything up and now I’m into eating everything in sight.”

“I’m guessing Knox is happy?”

Justice flashed a swift, dreamy smile. “Oh, he’s thrilled.”

“I’ll bet,” Vanessa muttered absently, dipping a spoon into Justice’s sauce to taste. “Damn, that’s good. Love that kick. I still can’t figure out your secret ingredient. *Please* tell me?”

“Absolutely not and quit asking. Oh! I saw *Mister Thompson* walking down the highway with just a rucksack and his iPod. Where’s he going?”

Vanessa felt Eric’s gaze and bit her lip. “Montana.”

Justice stared at her, incredulous. “He’s *walking*?”

“That’s how he got here, remember? Walked and hitchhiked from West Virginia.”

“I swear, I do not understand that man.”

Vanessa risked a quick glance at Eric and felt the heat rising in her cheeks at the smirk of satisfaction on his face.

Then he looked at Justice. “Hellooo, Miss McKinley.”

Justice looked over her shoulder. “Oh, hey, Eric. Knox about had a heart attack when he saw your car.”

“Yeah, I bet. How’s Provo?”

“Weird,” she replied. “I’ve never lived in a college town before, so that alone was strange. Not like UMKC, where, you know, there’s a campus in the middle of a huge city. It’s almost like BYU is the city. The culture is strange. The jargon’s a foreign language and it was very odd listening to Knox speak that language. He had to give me a crash course in Mormonism so he wouldn’t have to stop and translate every three minutes.”

“You never talked about it before?”

“Not much. You know how much I despise organized religion and I don’t get how his family can claim either Ayn Rand or Joseph Smith, much less both in the same breath. I mean, I *thought* I married into a semi-intelligent family.”

“They’re on the cafeteria plan,” Eric drawled. Vanessa began to chuckle when Justice shot Eric a quizzing glance. “Take what they want, leave the rest. Like a cafeteria.”

Justice laughed. “How much of it did you take?”

Eric raised his hands. “Hey, I’m a Lamanite. I don’t have to believe a damned thing. As one of God’s chosen people, I get a special dispensation all the way through life.” Vanessa grinned at him then. “Oh, *you* know what I’m talking about.”

“Yeah, I do.” Vanessa chuckled and glanced at Justice, who looked confused, albeit resigned to her confusion.

“Eh, I’ll ask Knox later.”

“Are you spending the summer here or what?”

“Oh!” Justice said, tasting her sauce. “No. We moved back, living in Eilis’s house until ours is rebuilt. Just got back three days ago, actually. Spent a couple of weeks in California so Knox could surf all his favorite spots. We’re going to go to Australia over

Christmas.”

“What happened?”

“Well,” she said with a snicker, “seems the law school somehow didn’t bother to get the church’s approval before pushing Knox through the hiring process. It took the powers that be a little bit to figure out that *the* Knox Hilliard was teaching for them. You know, the *same* Knox Hilliard they excommunicated sixteen years ago.”

Vanessa gasped. “He got fired?”

“Oh, c’mon,” Eric said. “I was shocked they got away with hiring him at all, and I’m surprised he lasted all of two semesters.”

“Well, did and didn’t. He and the dean were summoned to Salt Lake about halfway into the first semester, but they were stuck and needed him to finish out the year. The law building pretty much blew up the minute his students heard the whispers and went googling. He was very popular the second semester.”

Vanessa watched Eric laugh, and she was entranced. All those years—gone. She was thirteen again and he was eighteen and she watched that brilliant smile in that dark, carved face that had always made her want to laugh, too. But this time, when he caught her staring, he didn’t stop laughing, didn’t turn and walk away.

His smile did fade a bit, but only enough for him to touch his tongue to his bottom lip suggestively, then burst out laughing yet again when Vanessa felt her blush deepen.

Embarrassed, she turned away. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d blushed, the last time she’d met a man who could make her blush.

“So, uh, Justice,” Eric said, his laughter winding down, “what’s he going to do now?”

“Teach at UMKC and have actual office hours. Write. Publish. And otherwise be a stay-at-home dad.”

“What are you going to do?”

She stopped stirring and looked straight at him. “I’m going to go to the new Chouteau County prosecutor and prostrate myself at his feet for my old job back.”

“Pretty sure he’s not going to have a problem with that. Where’s Mercy?”

“Knox is probably out trying to make her ride a sheep. Those two are attached at the hip.”

“I’m guessing he’s fine since he’s as obnoxious as he ever was.”

“Yes, back at full strength, thank heavens. My hand was getting tired.” There was dead silence for a beat before the entire kitchen staff started to laugh. Justice, her face still perfectly straight, rubbed her tummy and said, “This? First time out of the chute since the man died. He’s potent, I tell you.”

While everyone else howled, Justice calmly put Eric to work peeling and coring the apples she’d picked.

“Justice, I didn’t know how much I missed that nasty sense of humor of yours.”

She grinned. “I had a good teacher.”

Once the hilarity wound down, Vanessa wrapped an apron around her waist and stepped up to the stove to direct one of her apprentice chefs. Two waiters roamed in and out for foodstuffs that were always on hand for the guests who had rooms.

Vanessa heard the sound of pie crust being worked with a fork. Then, “How many pies do you need this weekend, Vanessa?”

“None,” she called over her shoulder. “You’re pregnant, you just got here, and I didn’t plan for it.”

“Oh, good. Just me and my apple dumplings.”

“I’d rather the entirety of the Ozarks not automatically associate your presence with cherry pie. It’s bad for business and bad for you. Scarcity is a fine thing.”

Just then Vachel burst into the kitchen from the back door. “Why are you here?” he barked at Eric.

Vanessa and Justice turned to gape at him. “Vachel!” Vanessa snapped once she’d recovered herself. “What’s the problem? You guys got along just fine last month.”

“Yeah, in *Kansas City*,” he said snidely. “Not in Mansfield.”

“Uh oh.” Knox’s voice came from the doorway between the kitchen and the dining room. “Looks like we’ve got territory problems. C’mon, Vachel. We’ll go get Curtis’s prescription filled and have a chat. Eric, you can thank me later.”

Knox, one arm full of gorgeous squirming strawberry blonde toddler, clapped his other hand on Vachel’s shoulder and steered him gently outside. Their voices floated back through the open windows, getting quieter as they walked away from the mansion toward the private garage. “Look, I know this is probably really weird for you.”

“Uh, *yeah*. First my mom and now my aunt. I mean, I knew she liked him but—”

“Apples and oranges, and let me tell you why . . . ”

Vanessa swallowed, the sting of tears in her eyes and a sharp pain behind her nose. She turned away from Eric—the reminder that she was tied up in the same family as Simone and LaVon Whittaker too much to bear. She could feel the pull of Chouteau Acres Mobile Home Park dragging her back into the cesspool.

It never went away completely.

Regardless of how famous and successful she was, regardless that her past wasn’t littered with one-night stands and illegitimate children and addictions of one sort or another, regardless that her education was impeccable—

“Stop it,” Eric whispered in her ear, his hand around her arm and tugging her around to him. “You’re not Simone, you’re not LaVon. You’re better than that. Remember, you took the trailer park out of the girl.”

Really, she didn’t want to cry in front of her staff. They had never seen that, never seen her lose it, but—

“How did you know?” she whispered.

“I’m very observant. The tip of your nose turns red when you’re feeling insecure.”

She looked up at him. “Really?”

His smile flashed. “I have no idea. I’m teasing you because I know I can make you smile.”

“You’ve always been able to make me smile.”

“Well, look at that,” Alain crowed from the door. “She does have a libido and a taste for men. Go get a room, Boss, and let me have my kitchen. It’s Friday.”

“Oh, Alain,” Justice called. “Apple dumplings. Could you have someone put them in the oven for me, please? I’m going to go get dressed for dinner.”

“No problem.”

Vanessa leaned into Eric and his arm snaked around her waist to pull her to him. She murmured, “I’m afraid there are no vacancies, sir. Would you care to share a cottage with the owner?”

“That’d be an acceptable arrangement,” he purred.

Vanessa smiled. “Did you bring suits?”



“That’s what you told me to do.”

“You can eat with Knox and Justice. I seat the guests myself and then schmooze during dinner. Part of the Whittaker House gimmick is me seating, possibly serving, personally.”

“Why doesn’t Vachel live in the cottage with you?”

She pulled away from him a bit and took his hand. She drew him outside and down the stairs, headed for her cottage.

“He’s very claustrophobic. He refuses to go into any of the cottages for any reason whatsoever. His room is above the kitchen, across from my office, which used to be the conference room. He needs a lot of space, a lot of light. Windows. He won’t even sleep in a twin bed. Apparently Simone—probably at the suggestion of my mother—decided that a closet in a single-wide was the perfect place for a crying toddler. That’s why he can’t sleep when it’s dark. He will, but he has to be really tired or I have to be close by.”

Eric scowled. “You’re kidding me.”

“No, I’m not. The first thing I did when I got him here was take him to a doctor and a shrink. He was more malnourished and screwed up than I expected. He was very clingy for a while, but that wore off as he started to get some good food in him and feel more secure. Curtis tells him about being in a concentration camp, how he survived. The missionaries help because they’re always so cheerful. The highland games definitely helped. He needed to be surrounded by confident, happy, strong men. I’ll tell you what, though. If I thought I could get blood out of a turnip, I’d sue my mother for the cost of his therapy.”

“Is that why you can feel good about letting him have his freedom?”

“Oh, no. That would have never happened without the highland games. The men all love him, but they won’t tolerate dishonorable behavior. I can ask any one of them to knock some sense into his head. He’s only gotten really out of line once or twice and even then, I only had to say the two magic words.”

“Knox Hilliard.”

“That’s it. He didn’t believe Knox would actually get on a plane just to crack his head open.”

“Oh, he should’ve known better than that.”

“He does now.”

It only took a moment to get to her cottage and Eric actually looked at it this time as Vanessa made a beeline to her bedroom. It was maybe five hundred square feet of open area heated in the winter by the relatively big fireplace opposite the corner kitchenette. On the other side of the fireplace was the narrow staircase going up to her bedroom. He had to duck the ceiling when he climbed it to get to her bedroom, where he saw Vanessa’s beautiful ass sticking out of one closet. She muttered the occasional curse word as she sorted through the mess of clothes, shoes, and accessories.

Still bent over, she looked at him through her legs and gave him a cheeky grin. “I’ll let you clean out my closet for me while you’re here.”

Eric smirked and rolled his eyes, then turned and left to get his things, finally deciding to just drive his car back there and park in her private garage, since he wasn’t going any place for the week if he could possibly help it.

He brought in his clothes and hung them on a hook near the bathroom door. She’d gotten back in the shower in the time it had taken him to bring his car around and park. Then, without a trace of hesitation, Eric stripped and once again got into the shower with Vanessa.

“We have a little bit of time,” she whispered.

“I don’t do quickies, Vanessa,” he murmured as his lips brushed her shoulders and neck. “I told you that— I take my time and since we got interrupted this afternoon, I want all night. What I’ll do right now, though, is soap you down, then help you back into that corset I know you had on at your father’s wake.”

\* \* \* \* \*

## **24: MAY I SEE YOU HOME?**

He was serious! Vanessa held her breath while Eric—wet, cut—poured shampoo

into his hands and washed her hair. This wasn't arousing so much as feeling taken care of, cherished. He washed her head to toe, taking his time between her legs.

Then he rinsed her off and let her return the favor.

She loved feeling his body under her hands and, because he was a head taller than she was, he knelt in front of her so she could wash his hair. He wrapped his hands around her hips, his thumbs in her pubic hair, and pressed his lips to her belly.

"Breathe, Vanessa," he murmured. "We only have so much time and soap in my ass makes me itch."

She burst out laughing then, and she finished, making sure to rinse his ass well. He caught her hands and wrapped them around his cock while he kissed her, long and deeply.

Then he hustled her out of the shower, dried her off, then himself. He discarded the towel on the way out of the bathroom, sat on the bed, and drew her to stand between his thighs. He kissed her between her breasts and breathed deeply. Vanessa thought her legs would give out on her right then. He seemed to have remembered where she laid each piece of her clothes out because he grabbed her lacy pink tanga shorts from behind him without moving his mouth away from her skin.

She stepped back when he leaned down, holding her panties open for her to step into. He pulled them up her legs slowly, his hands caressing her softly, carefully, teasingly. He cupped her buttocks in his big hands and drew her back toward him so that he could nuzzle under her breasts.

"Mmmm, yes, I'll make love to you all night, Vanessa, even when I'm not touching you. You'll go do what you do and while you work—while I watch you work—you'll remember me washing you, dressing you, touching you, kissing you."

Vanessa's eyes had closed long ago, her fingers buried in Eric's wet black hair.

"You're getting wet," he murmured, his nose and mouth between her breasts now. "I can smell you. Every man in your dining room tonight'll want a piece of you and won't even know why."

"Eric," she sighed as her hands left his hair to stroke down his neck to his shoulders and back, not caressing so much as kneading the muscles there.

"Vanessa," he sighed in return.

She missed the feel of his mouth when he turned to get her white merrywidow. He stood and wrapped it around her, hooking it up the back for her, slowly, carefully, his knuckles grazing her back and his lips brushing her nape. When she raised her hands to adjust her breasts in the demi cups, he brushed them away. He dug his hands into the cups and adjusted her breasts himself to his satisfaction, and it satisfied him to make sure her nipples, now hard as pebbles, were not covered by the lace.

“Eric, I can’t work the dining room like that,” she whispered.

“I know,” he whispered back. “But it was a nice thought while it lasted.” And then he adjusted them properly, which was even more tantalizing when lace brushed up against her stiff nipples, his thumbs adding to the sensation.

Stockings. Barely-there white shimmer stockings with French seams. He knelt behind her and drew one up her leg, keeping the seam perfectly straight. She caught her breath when he pressed his lips into the crease between her thigh and buttock.

“Eric, I can’t do this much longer. I’m dying.”

“Mmmm, so am I,” he muttered against the back of her thigh. “It’s the good kind of dying.”

Vanessa didn’t know what to do. She couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think, couldn’t do anything but feel what Eric was doing while he dressed her; she couldn’t imagine what he’d do while *undressing* her.

The other stocking, and Vanessa was about to faint.

“Hand me your shoes, Vanessa.”

She leaned over the bed to get to them and then gasped when she felt Eric’s mouth high on the inside of her thigh, then his finger slowly drawing her panties aside.

Stretching farther and putting her hands flat on the bed, Vanessa spread her legs wider apart. He accepted the invitation, wrapping his hands around her hips and drew himself closer into her.

His tongue dipped up inside her, tasting, drinking. His fingers slid around her, between her legs from the front, and he teased her clitoris.

Her eyes closed. Her breath stopped. Her head dropped forward.

Vanessa moaned low in her throat, whimpered, when she came, soft, gentle, at Eric’s touch. Eric, the man she’d always wanted—

—the one she'd pined for.

He didn't say a word when she had finished with a gasp; he just drew away from her to put her shoes on her feet, still slow. Still careful. Surrounding her ankles with his big hands and caressing her feet and calves. He stood up tall and strong behind her then, and drew her up and back against him, against his strong chest, his cock between them, hard, throbbing, and wrapped his arms around her.

"Remember that, Vanessa," he whispered in her ear between nibbles. "Remember, while you work, while people eat and laugh and don't know that I dressed you, while men want you and won't know why. I'll watch you and I'll remember. Every time you look at me, you'll know I'm thinking about what I just did to you."

She sighed, then his warmth was gone as he grabbed her skirt off the bed. Linen. Pale pink. With a long slit up the back. He bent to hold it for her to step into, as he had her panties. Once it was settled on her hips, he zipped it up the back, his knuckles again caressing her as he pulled the zipper slowly and buttoned the two small buttons at the waistband.

Then her blouse of fine white cotton with three-quarter length sleeves of exquisite Battenberg lace cutwork, and matching cutwork along the hem that barely brushed the waistband of her skirt. He turned her toward him to button her up the front.

She dare not look up at him because she felt shy and embarrassed at her complete loss of control, her willingness to take whatever he would give her. It was different when she'd invited him into her shower earlier: She'd been prepared.

This? No, really. Who made love while *dressing*? It was beyond her comprehension and absolutely the most wonderful thing a man had ever done to her.

And he was still naked. Dark, stealthy.

Aroused.

As he wound his arm around her and pressed her body to his, she saw something . . . different . . . in his eyes she didn't understand.

Then he kissed her, deep yet lazy, as if he could do this all day long, aroused yet not apparently interested in taking care of his needs.

And she tasted her own juices on his tongue. She found that as arousing as she ever did, but so much more so now because it was *Eric* and she could taste him commingled

with her and he had bound her desire for him up with emotion she had never experienced . . .

“But, Eric, you didn’t—” she protested against his mouth.

“Don’t worry about it,” he murmured in a tone she couldn’t decipher.

“But I want to—”

“Later,” he whispered. “In bed. Right now it’s time to go to work.” He stepped away from her, releasing her slowly. His fingers still entwined with hers, he spread her arms wide and stepped back to look at her, inspecting her closely. A self-satisfied smile spread across his face. “I do good work.”

Vanessa would have laughed had she been halfway sentient, but she was still too drugged. She took a step past him toward the stairs, past her sudden and unexpected shyness.

She took two steps down, then looked over her shoulder. He stood nude and fully aroused, his hands on his hips as he watched her.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” she whispered after a moment.

“There’s nowhere else I’d rather be.”

\* \* \* \* \*

## **25: APHRODISIAC OF THE SOUL**

He strode in the front door like everyone else because he wanted to see what she did, how she did it, how she’d become a millionaire in the heart of the Ozarks at the ripe old age of twenty-eight.

There was a bit of a wait as she seated every guest herself, but since this was her “gimmick” and people really liked her gimmick, no guest would begrudge the time she spent with another guest. Each person knew he’d get his turn.

The grand parlor’s furniture had been rearranged to accommodate a bluegrass band.

A rug had been removed to reveal a parquet dance floor where already two couples danced.

Vanessa's concierge glided by and stopped when she saw him. He didn't miss the surprised raking glance she gave him. She hadn't expected to see him dressed so finely after she'd seen him this afternoon in worn jeans and cowboy boots. She'd checked him out earlier with a simple hookup in mind, but now . . .

"Oh, hello again, Mr. Cipriani. I didn't find your name in our rolls. Have you booked a room with us yet?"

He had to give her credit for her level of subtlety; she was very, very good at putting out all the right signals without actually seeming to. "Yes," he purred. "I did."

She affected the appropriate amount of brow wrinkle. "I'm sorry," she purred in response. "I must have forgotten which suite you were in?"

"I'm in the cottage behind the private garage." Her eyes widened nearly imperceptibly and her mouth tightened only the tiniest amount. "For a week," he added deliberately.

She nodded and smiled. "Very good, sir."

Eric was feeling very proud of himself by the time Vanessa fetched him and took him to his table. He wasn't sure he wanted to sit with Knox and Justice—and Vachel—right at this moment, but he could see the place would soon be full, so table space was at a premium.

She smiled and blushed when he gave her a saucy grin, but she held his gaze as she led him toward the back, next to the kitchen. Vachel refused to look up or acknowledge Eric in any way, but he was used to that.

Eric caught her before she left and said, "Vanessa, do you know what your pit viper of a concierge is doing as a sideline?"

Justice stopped eating, her fork halfway to her mouth and Knox's head snapped up. They leaned in opposite directions to look around Eric and Vanessa as Ms. Geier worked the queue, talking and chatting.

Knox's jaw clenched; Justice's eyes narrowed. They traded significant looks. Vanessa looked amongst them, totally lost.

"She's getting fired tonight, Vanessa," Knox muttered, then took a sip of his orange

juice.

“I don’t understand,” Vanessa murmured helplessly. Eric wrapped his hand around the side of Vanessa’s neck and drew her in to his body, his mouth in her ear.

“She’s a workin’ girl. She’s doing one or more of your guests on a regular basis; she works the line to find more clients. You can’t possibly be paying her enough to wear the dress she’s got on—and I’ll bet those diamonds are real. What I can’t tell for sure is if she’s stealing from your guests or not.”

Her face betrayed her utter shock, but true to form, she didn’t immediately turn and gape.

“Now or later, Vanessa,” Knox growled. “Your choice.” He stared up at Vanessa, his face hard and cold. No one defied Knox when he had that look and that included Vanessa.

Vanessa sighed. “Now. Cottage five.”

Knox threw his napkin in his plate and said, “Let’s go, Eric.”

“Sucks to be her,” Justice murmured as Knox arose and strode toward the lobby. Eric offered his arm to Vanessa and led her back to the line of guests waiting to be seated.

He kissed her cheek and whispered, “I know what you’re wearing under that pretty outfit.” He smirked when she blushed and looked away with a smile. By the time Eric headed outside, Knox and the pit viper had disappeared. He could only imagine what she’d thought when Knox had offered her his arm and led her out.

Eric called 911, told the dispatcher who he was, and had her put him through to the Wright County prosecutor. It wasn’t long before an unmarked car came up the drive.

The air around the cottage turned blue with the curses the woman flung at Knox. Eric walked in the front door, followed by a state trooper, to see Knox sitting in a chair, watching her pack and saying nothing.

She stopped dead in her tracks when she saw Eric and the trooper. “Oh, I get it. You’re fucking Vanessa so she wants her competition fired and sent you and Hilliard out here to do it.”

Eric’s eyebrow rose. “Actually, what I am is a prosecutor up north and I found your very expensive wardrobe and jewelry collection noteworthy. Color me cynical.”



Knox laughed and she cast him a glare. “I’ll sue you for wrongful termination.”

“Knock yourself out.”

Eric smiled benignly. “I’m the one who made you and I’ve already spoken to the prosecutor here, which is why he so kindly sent this fine officer along for the party. You might want to shut your mouth while you pack—and count your blessings I don’t toss this place to find a reason to throw your ass in jail and confiscate everything you own.”

It was a long three hours. At the two-hour mark, the prosecutor, to whom Knox referred only as Cooper, showed up when he’d gotten no updates. That made the packing process go along a little faster. It seemed she had little tolerance for four men sitting around shooting the breeze and laughing while she was in the process of being unexpectedly forced out of her cush situation.

The trooper took off to follow her out of town, but not before Knox said, “C’mon back for a steak when you’re done. On the house.”

By the time Eric, Knox, and Cooper had gone back into the dining room, it was nearly deserted though the kitchen would be open for another hour. Justice and Vachel were eating apple dumplings with ice cream and chatting amiably.

“Where’s my steak?” Knox demanded, his hands on his hips as he glared down at his wife.

“Ate it,” Justice murmured as she took a bite of her dumpling and closed her eyes in ecstasy. “Ya snooze, ya lose.”

Knox snorted. “What about the squirrel and ’possum?”

“Yeah, ate that too.”

Knox looked up at the prosecutor. “Medium, right, Coop?”

“You know it. Wish I had some of that memory of yours, Hilliard.”

When Knox turned to go to the kitchen, Eric said, “I’ll do it. What do you want?”

“Rare,” Knox answered with alacrity as he glanced at Justice and pulled a chair out for himself.

Eric had grown so used to Knox looking at Justice that way that he took it for granted, but now he saw it with fresh eyes. Knox was totally and completely head over heels in love with Justice, the way Bryce was with Giselle.

He wondered how he looked at Vanessa and what other people saw.

Eric strode through the kitchen doors and found Vanessa sitting on a high stool over her marble baking table writing in a book furiously. “What can I get you, mac?” Alain asked.

“Prime rib. Two rare, one medium rare, one medium. Spuds, the works. No salad.”

He walked over to Vanessa and laid his hand on her back. “You okay?” She held up a finger and continued with whatever she was writing. He looked over her shoulder and saw her putting down details of the night’s guests as fast as she could, so he didn’t speak again until she was finished.

Vachel came through the kitchen, cast an ambiguous glance at Eric, then proceeded up the stairs. Not long after, he returned in buckskins and hiking boots, a slack bow and a quiver of arrows slung over his shoulder.

“Going out for deer tonight, Aunt Vanessa,” he muttered, sullen, as he passed by them on his way out the back door. He would look at neither Vanessa nor Eric. “Be back in the morning.”

Vanessa interrupted her chore and looked up. “Be careful, please, sweetie. Do you have your phone?”

He grunted and slammed the back door.

She only sighed and went back to writing, which ate up most of the time it took to get the steaks and potatoes ready, and then she stopped writing and looked up at him. He could only think of one thing by then and he crushed her mouth with his. It only took her a microsecond to close her eyes and follow his lead. He turned her so he could press her against him, the back of her head in his palm.

The kitchen staff whooped and whistled, but Eric didn’t care and apparently, neither did Vanessa.

“Dammit, Eric, I’m hungry and here you two are making out.”

Their eyes popped open, but Eric wouldn’t let her pull away from him.

“Pot. Kettle,” he muttered against Vanessa’s mouth, but loudly enough for Knox to hear.

Knox’s laugh boomed throughout the kitchen and then the clink of plates really did interrupt things. Eric pulled away from Vanessa once he realized Knox hadn’t been able to carry all of the plates himself, although why a waiter wasn’t doing it, he didn’t know.

“When do you eat?” he asked softly.

“Usually after the kitchen closes and then I eat with my staff, but not tonight. Alain has my plate ready.”

He and Vanessa took their own plates and found that Knox had pulled two tables together; he and Justice, the trooper and the prosecutor were already eating, and then Eric and Vanessa sat across from Knox and Justice. The dining room was empty except for the six of them, and the kitchen was officially closed.

A waiter did come by to apologize, but Knox waved that away.

“Owner has to be willing to do what everybody else does,” he muttered around his bite.

Soon they had their drinks and visited until Cooper and the trooper had finished and taken their leave.

“How did you know about Shelly?” Vanessa asked, disrupting the fatigued lapses in conversation, her voice suddenly betraying her exhaustion. Eric knew that sensation all too well.

“I see it all the time,” Eric murmured. “She’s good; very subtle. I knew something was going on there from earlier today, but I don’t think I would’ve put it together if she hadn’t checked out my suit so thoroughly. I could tell when she figured out how much it cost.”

Knox grunted. “I never caught that.”

Justice snorted and nudged him. “You don’t pay attention.”

He slid her a glance. “You didn’t catch it, either.”

“Oh, I saw her check you out, but I thought it was because you’re beautiful.”

He laughed then and leaned over to kiss her.

Vanessa sighed. “So much to learn. Still. Some days I feel like I’m new at this. Caught the bartender stealing from the till last week. The minute I think I can loosen up and delegate something, I get smacked in the face.”

“How much did he get?” Eric asked.

“As near as I can figure, about a thousand.”

“Chump change,” he murmured. “Businesses like these get ripped off by the staff; it’s just a fact of life and overseeing every detail every minute of every day isn’t going to

make it stop happening.”

“Eh, it won’t be hard getting another concierge down here,” Knox muttered.

Vanessa cast a glance at him and murmured, “Did you have someone in mind?”

“No, but you’re good at that. You won’t have any trouble.”

Vanessa’s mouth tightened almost imperceptibly, and Eric looked to see if Knox had caught that, but of course, he hadn’t. Looking straight at her, too.

“Yo, Knox, how’d you get anybody hired before I made myself your executive?” Eric asked casually.

He looked at Eric. Then, “I don’t know,” he said with a perfectly straight face. “They just kind of started showing up one day after I started teaching at UMKC, so I put ’em to work.”

“You have no idea how to hire a concierge, do you?”

“Uh, no,” he said, staring at Eric, completely bewildered. “Should I?”

“I hired one,” Vanessa said smoothly, though she slipped her hand into Eric’s and squeezed. “She starts on July first. So . . . just a couple of months without one. No problem.”

Eric looked at her. “Had you been planning . . . ?”

“No,” she said softly. “I wanted a graveyard concierge.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he replied just as softly.

Her pretty eyes opened a little wider, and Eric figured he could fall right into those eyes, the color of the Morning Glory Pool at Yellowstone.

“Okay, well, I might not know how to hire people,” Knox said, then stood and stretched, “but I do know how to *fire* them and it wears me out.” He held his hand out to Justice, who took it and the two of them strolled away toward the elevator snuggling, talking quietly, their fingers laced.

Eric looked at Vanessa, who watched him thoughtfully.

“What did you mean, ‘don’t worry about it?’”

“I’d like to help you find a concierge, if you’ll let me,” he murmured, raising his hand to run his thumb over her bottom lip. He damn near lost it when she pressed her lips against it. “Since, you know, I got the other one fired. Will you, Vanessa?”

She stared at him, kissing his thumb, and he knew that at that moment, she

understood he was asking about a whole lot more than the hiring of a concierge. What, exactly, he was asking about . . . well, even he didn't know that.

"Yes," she whispered. "Please."

"Do you ever take a day off?" he asked softly.

She snorted rudely and pulled away from him to take another bite of her food. "I only take days off for my family's funerals. If it's not one thing around here, it's another. Everyone within a thirty-mile radius screamed at me for leaving them for the funerals, even."

It occurred to Eric that he might not actually mind coming here to help her as often as possible. After all, he had a staff of assistant prosecutors and had nearly completely withdrawn from his dojo.

"How much control does Knox have here?"

She gestured toward the lobby with her fork. "As you can see, as much as he wants."

"Or as little."

She shrugged. "He does do the dirty work if he's here and catches it himself. If he's not here—well, before he moved to Utah, I mean—if I told him what dirty work I needed done, he'd come and do it."

"And you've been doing everything else and that too since he went to Utah."

"Oh, it's okay. I manage."

Eric opened his mouth to argue, but got distracted when a waiter approached bearing six candles. He placed them on the table and lit them, then took the dishes away. At that moment, another waiter appeared with a silver tray upon which sat a glass with a shot of a pale green liqueur, an elaborate slotted spoon, a bowl of sugar cubes, and a carafe of ice water.

She smiled as he put it on the table. "Thank you, James. Go ahead and clock out."

"Thanks, Vanessa."

The lights in the dining room dimmed and Vanessa leaned toward Eric to kiss him lightly on the lips. He would have deepened it, but she drew away slowly. "I want to share something with you," she whispered.

"What is it?" he asked.

“Absinthe.”

“Isn’t that poisonous?”

Vanessa laughed then and placed the spoon on top of the glass, then a couple of sugar cubes in the spoon. She picked up the carafe and carefully dripped water over the sugar, drop by drop.

“Poisonous, no,” she murmured. “Illegal to import, yes, if it has wormwood in it. But I won’t serve the fake stuff.”

“How do you get it?” he asked, now more curious than shocked. It was taking a very long time for the sugar to dissolve.

She glanced up at him. “Be patient. This can’t be rushed.” They sat silent for a moment, and Eric tried to be patient. “My . . . supplier . . . gets it on overseas trips. Here,” she murmured after all the water had dripped through, giving the glass of now-cloudy white liquid to Eric. “Taste it.”

“Oh, wow,” he said reverently after he’d taken a sip. “That’s delicious.”

She put it down again and slowly poured water in until it had filled the glass, then waited until all traces of green were gone. Then she stirred it slowly with the spoon.

“This,” she whispered, her lips almost to his, “is the green fairy.”

They drank from it slowly, taking turns sipping from the same spot on the glass, kissing in between, sharing the slightly bitter licorice taste.

“How did you find this?” Eric murmured against her lips once they’d finished the glass.

Vanessa paused, said nothing for a moment, then murmured, “Do you really want to know?”

He stared at her, hints of jealousy seeping back into him because he knew one of *them* had introduced her to it and he had a pretty good idea which one.

“Sebastian.”

She shrugged, just a bit.

“I’m still jealous,” he admitted quietly.

“Please don’t be,” she whispered, leaning toward him, those fabulous turquoise eyes earnest, as if to make him understand. “This is about me and you. No history. No other lovers.”

Eric watched her warily. “Vanessa, I know I have no right to feel that way, but I do and I can’t help it. Can you bear with me?”

Vanessa smiled and rose slowly; Eric would have risen too, but she put a hand on his shoulder. His eyes widened when she began to pull her pink skirt up until the tops of her stockings, then her garters, could be seen.

“What about guests walking through the lobby?”

“I can be a bit of an exhibitionist,” she whispered. “Do you mind?”

“And Vachel won’t come back unexpectedly?”

“No. When he sets out for deer, he tries not to come back without one. Or he may come back with a couple of coyote.”

Eric grinned slyly when she straddled his thighs and rested her arms on his shoulders. She caught his mouth in a kiss that seared him to his soul. He didn’t know how it could be possible to have a deeper, more meaningful kiss than this one they shared—each shift of their mouths, each slide of tongue on tongue, each pull and nip of teeth and lips.

Tasting of absinthe.

Her breasts pressed into him and his cock strained at his fly. “Vanessa,” he whispered, “take me to bed.”

She did—but Eric’s slow lovemaking was a little too slow. He took so long to get Vanessa thoroughly relaxed that she fell asleep. Eric sucked a nipple into his mouth to awaken her, but she giggled and sighed, then turned over.

“Shit,” Eric muttered, then stripped and climbed in bed with her. He figured there were worse things than being naked in bed with a naked Vanessa Whittaker, holding her while she slept.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **26: SUCCESS GETS TO BE A HABIT**

Vanessa was exhausted by the time seating began Saturday evening, which was normal. She'd awakened Eric at 5:30 after her phone rang with an emergency and put him to work immediately extinguishing the everyday fires of Whittaker House with Knox's guidance.

She ended up quibbling over a dish with Alain, searching through the humidor for a rare Cuban cigar the waiter couldn't find, and having an impromptu meeting with the mayor of Mansfield out in the orchard about the next county zoning meeting. She also baked the night's requirement of her famous chocolate chip cookies, only available after Saturday's dinner.

When at one o'clock Vachel came in with an entire evening's worth of trout, she said, "Go find Eric and teach him how to clean and fillet them." That annoyed both of them for different reasons, but the chore would put Vachel in a power position over Eric, which the boy desperately needed right about then. Eric understood, although he curled his lip at the thought of gutting fish.

Eric had been in the shower when she came in to dress for dinner and, as they had the day before, they washed each other. It was the only physical contact they'd had all day. Eric, unused to dawn-to-midnight physical labor, looked ready to fall asleep against the shower wall. She told him he could go to bed, but he'd have none of it unless she meant for them to go there together and make love all night long.

She chuckled. "Unfortunately, no, that's not what I meant."

He dressed her the way he had the day before, soft, slow, languid and she thought she would die. She didn't know how much she had hoped he would do so until the moment he set her on the edge of the bed to put her shoes on.

He spread her legs wide to drink from her again. She arched her back, her fingers threaded through his hair to keep his mouth right *there*, his lips and his tongue doing marvelous things to her. His big hands grasped her hips, his fingers splayed out over the skin of her buttocks, and brought her forward, a little bit over the edge of the bed.

Then Vanessa went over the edge, coming with a gasp, whispering, "Eric. Oh, *Eric*." She couldn't think, could barely speak. Her legs were weak.

"I could do that all night, Vanessa," he murmured as he released her and rose tall on



his knees so that he was nearly eye to eye with her sitting on the edge of the bed.

And, like the day before, he kissed her deeply, lazily, sweeping her mouth with his tongue so that she tasted herself. And she sighed.

“Much as I love that,” she whispered, “I want to feel you inside me again. That I could do all night. I’ll close the windows and lock the doors this time so Knox can’t pull any more pranks.”

She caught a glance of her clock and sighed. “Time to go to work.” Eric still knelt between her legs, as dark and naked as he had been the day before, his arousal between them. He stared at her with an expression she couldn’t decipher and she watched him back, his black eyes glimmering like onyx and his short, short hair almost dry.

“Bad boy Eric Cipriani turned *GQ*,” she murmured, and he grinned. He stood and pulled her up to him, then finished dressing her without further ado.

Vanessa was knee deep in guests, greeting and seating, when she realized that Eric had begun to greet and seat guests too. Suddenly, she panicked. *Why* was he doing that? When she tried to catch him to ask him what the hell he thought he was doing, he ignored her.

The guests were as confused as she, and she wondered what he told them that made their faces clear, then look at her pityingly and nod with great concern.

Deeply troubled, she went into the kitchen to get an order. She didn’t like what he was doing *at all*, and it took several deep breaths to calm herself. Then she marched herself right back out to the dining room, served the couple whose order she’d brought out to them, and went about schmoozing and seating guests when she needed to. She served a few more dinners herself and stopped to talk to the regulars and ask them about their week.

Eric, following her lead, serving food, talking to people, getting to know them. Vanessa wished he’d stop doing that, as it upset her routine greatly and finally she figured out why she didn’t like it.

It made her want things . . . Things that had nothing to do with Eric making love to her.

Almanzo and Laura, working together to build a more grand Whittaker House, building a life and maybe a family together. It could never happen. Her wants had

nothing in common with Eric's.

*Attorney general. Then governor. Then the White House.*

Then something else occurred to her. Was he *campaigning*? Here? On *her* turf?

Knox and Justice cast Vanessa questioning glances occasionally as they ate, but she could only shrug helplessly. Vachel slumped down in his chair, glared at his plate, picked at his food.

One elderly couple, faithful diners every Friday and Saturday night since she had opened the dining room to the public, caught her attention. Eric stood talking to them, and they waved her over, Eric watching her with a smirk and a cocked eyebrow. Did he have no clue how distressed she was?

"Vanessa!" Mrs. Parks gushed. "This young man is simply amazing. Did you know he teaches karate for a living?"

*Hi. My name's Eric Cipriani. I teach karate.*

*Not campaigning.*

"Ah, no, I didn't. He was an itinerant I found under a bridge. I brought him in, cleaned him up, and put him to work."

Eric barked a laugh and Mr. and Mrs. Parks snickered madly. Mr. Parks put his hand to his mouth and Vanessa bent to listen to him.

"I think he's sweet on you, Vanessa."

Unfortunately, he was nearly deaf, so his whisper sounded more like a trumpet in her ear and was loud enough so that several surrounding tables heard and chuckled. She didn't dare look at Eric.

Now embarrassed beyond belief, yet warmed—sad—because it was so wonderful to hear a third party say that Eric was "sweet" on her, she smiled and patted Mr. Parks on the shoulder.

"That's good, because I think I might be sweet on him, too, maybe."

For the rest of the evening, she and Eric went around together and spoke to people. It wasn't as if she had a choice since Eric decided to attach himself to her. She was about to jump out of her skin.

She started when another regular said, "So, Vanessa, are you planning on going somewhere again?"

“No, why?”

“Eric here says he’s your trainee in case you need to take a break from Whittaker House. I had no idea you haven’t had a vacation or a day off in years.”

The concern in his voice was echoed by several other diners and she teared up a little bit. Eric offered his handkerchief and she smiled.

“Just to go to my family’s funerals.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“Ah, well, I s’pose we can stand to have a fill-in now and again so you can get away.”

All evening, Whittaker House guests received Eric with an exceptional enthusiasm. He knew how to talk to people, to make them feel at ease. He could charm at a glance with his quiet charisma and warm smile—

—which was what had gotten him in so much trouble when he was a teenager.

Eric would win every election he ran.

With the grief of impending loss, Vanessa watched him work the room. Like precious water running through the fingers of a person dying of thirst before she could drink her fill, Eric would be gone, off to fulfill his potential for greatness.

The only other way to keep Eric Cipriani was to give up Whittaker House and go with him if he asked, which Vanessa wouldn’t even consider. She would never leave what she’d built. Not for anything, even love.

Even Eric.

By the time the dining room closed and everyone had cleared out, she had wound herself up into a tizzy, about to cry because she wanted something that was just not possible. How could she allow herself to get any deeper with him when it wouldn’t lead anywhere but a dead end?

“Go ahead and eat with the kitchen staff, Eric. I need to go out to one of the cottages to check on something.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“No, that’s all right. It’s an easy check.”

She brushed past him and he caught her arm unexpectedly, pulling her around to

him. She looked away.

“Vanessa,” he whispered, looking around at her face, the pads of his thumbs working to clear her cheeks of tears. “Why are you crying?”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” she muttered and broke away from him to go out into the cool Ozark mountain air. She clicked down the stairs and walked as fast as she could into the night. She stopped and hopped to take off her heels, then ran as fast as she could toward the playground. He wouldn’t find her there.

Vanessa collapsed onto a swing, dropped her head and she sobbed.

It had been a mistake not to leave him in Chouteau City, to let him come here, to put him to work and see him in her world. To see him fit in as if he belonged, as if he had always been here, with her, and know that it couldn’t be.

He owned a karate studio that depended on his knowledge, just like Whittaker House depended on hers. He would have to give that up anyway to move to Jefferson City if he were elected attorney general, but that wasn’t for another two years.

*Then governor. Then the White House.*

He was now one of the most powerful men in Chouteau County. He’d turned the county’s bad reputation into a good one, and the people he served believed in him the way they’d believed in Knox.

With every success, small and large, he would take another step eastward away from Missouri, away from Vanessa.

“You’re a hot mess.”

She took the handkerchief Knox waved in front of her face and he sat down on the swing beside her. Neither spoke for a long time and Vanessa mopped up her tears, blew her nose.

“I got mascara on your handkerchief,” she finally said.

“I don’t care about the mascara. It’s the snot I’d rather not stick back in my pocket.” She laughed reluctantly. After another long while, he murmured, “A man will move heaven and earth for the woman he loves.”

“He doesn’t love me.”

“Yeah, about that. You don’t see how he looks at you.”

While that might have been comforting . . . “It’s gratitude, pure and simple. Or lust,

I don't know. It's not . . . *me*. It can't be. He doesn't know me well enough. The minute he figures out his feelings aren't real, he'll start resenting me—" Her voice broke. "—for taking him away from his life."

Another long pause. "You underestimate him."

"He's a county prosecutor. I'll bet he can barely leave his karate studio the way I can't leave Whittaker House because too many people scream too loudly. He wants—" She waved a hand. "—He wants to be the governor of Missouri. *The president of the United States*. I don't see him not getting where he wants to go and I can't take that away from him."

"Why are you assuming what he would or wouldn't think or do?"

She bit her lip. "Because I know what I would do. I wouldn't leave Whittaker House and follow a man to Washington—or even Jeff City. What would I do? Stand there and be pretty? I don't want to get mixed up in all that bullshit for no monetary gain. I can kiss ass here and make a mint. And I certainly wouldn't go back to Chouteau City. Not for *anything*. Not *ever*. I don't really understand why *he* went back."

Knox laughed. "Honey, I don't understand that, either." He sighed. "Vanessa, I love you two like my own, but I'm at a loss here. I may have done you both a disservice by helping you be just successful enough that you got trapped."

"Didn't you feel trapped when you were the prosecutor?"

"Naw. I didn't have to go anywhere for the woman I loved. I did, however, drop a quarter of a million dollars I didn't have to get her out from under her father's farm. And then she left me."

"Wha—?" Vanessa looked at him then. She could see his profile in the moonlight, and he didn't look at her. "Did you get your money back?"

"No. That wasn't part of the deal and I couldn't renege on the deal without getting my ass thrown in jail."

"What happened?"

He slid her a look then. "She came back to me. She yelled at me for buying her." He chuckled. "Then she went to her father and got almost every penny of it back at gunpoint."

"*Lawdy*," she breathed, and gripped the chains of the swing tighter.

“Vanessa, I would have done anything to have her, but I let her go because that’s what she wanted and I couldn’t refuse her.”

“If that was what she wanted, why did she come back to you?”

“Because she wanted to try. Wanted to see where our relationship could go if she were with me of her own free will, on equal ground. It almost ruined me financially. I would’ve lost everything I owned.” He gestured vaguely back toward the mansion. “Whittaker House was the only thing keeping me afloat for months. You knew that, but you didn’t know why. If she hadn’t come back to me, it would have been for nothing. If she hadn’t gone to her father to get it back, I still would’ve lost everything, but it would have been worth it to have her in my life, to have her love, freely. And she doesn’t know any of that, so if you breathe a word of it I’ll turn you over my knee.”

He would, too.

“I don’t want to hope.”

He sighed. “I can appreciate that.”

Vanessa swallowed and bowed her head again, watching her mascara-tinged tears fall on her pink skirt, staining it.

She didn’t care.

“You need to get waterproof mascara. You’re scary.”

She laughed through her tears.

“Just tell him, Vanessa. Tell him what you told me. Let him decide.”

“That would be too easy.”

“You’ve had a crush on Eric since you were twelve years old.” Vanessa gulped. “Yet here you’re ready to let go of a chance at something you wanted? Makes no sense. Most people don’t get that second chance, Vanessa, and if they do, it only takes a little while to figure out it won’t work. I’ve been watching you two. I see the way you look at each other, the way you interact. I don’t know why it didn’t occur to me to get you together, because I can’t think of anybody better suited to you than Eric, and vice versa. Kinda like it didn’t occur to me to ask if you’d think about becoming Vachel’s legal guardian.”

She sighed.

“You know,” he said thoughtfully, “Vanessa sees what she wants. She goes after it.

She works out the one and only route she wants to take, and if things don't fall exactly into place right when she thinks they should how they should, she gets pissy."

"*What?!*"

"You had it all mapped out," Knox murmured, gesturing vaguely into the night. "You thought he would stay in town and you'd grow up and go get him. Your grand plan went to pot because he left . . . But, all these years, you haven't been able to let go of him.

"And okay," he went on, ignoring Vanessa's squeak of protest, "so you have him now, but you don't know what to do with him because it's fifteen years later and life happened and he suddenly dropped in your lap, and not only wasn't it part of your original plan, he's got his own plans."

"That's not fair!"

"Truth is rarely fair." He paused. "I had a plan once, but I abandoned it. If I'd stuck to the original script, my uncle would never have tried to kill us. My wife wouldn't have had the nerves in her feet cut to shreds, my daughter wouldn't be deaf, I wouldn't have opened my eyes in a morgue to see a scalpel about to cut me open."

"That makes *my* point, not yours."

"Shut up and let me finish. What I should've done, since I was too stupid to stick to Plan A, was tell Justice I loved her and wanted to marry her. If I'd told her who I was, if I'd laid my situation out for her, she would've married me in a heartbeat, but I was afraid she'd say no. I didn't have to jump any of the hoops I jumped through, and worse—what I did was pure evil. I can't *ever* atone for that, especially when all I needed was a little courage to tell her how I felt, instead of doing what I did. It would have been *that* easy. So . . . think about that for a while."

He rose then, dropped a kiss on the top of her head, patted her shoulder, and left.

By the time she went back to her cottage, it was two in the morning and Eric was asleep. She dropped her clothes where she stood, climbed in beside him, and wrapped herself around him.

She fell asleep to the sweet rhythm of Eric's heartbeat.

\* \* \* \* \*

## 27: THE LAST SLEIGH RIDE

Vanessa awoke to the feeling of a hard naked chest half underneath her and a large arm wrapped around her. Eric's breathing was shallow and regular; he was still asleep and she was sprawled on top of him, her knee barely brushing his morning arousal.

*Just tell him.*

She had been following Knox's advice for years and he had never led her astray. She was well educated. She was very well off by some standards and downright rich by Mansfield standards. Knox was not a man who gave bad advice, so why shouldn't she take this advice?

Because she *was* afraid. She was afraid of what *wouldn't* happen more than she had ever feared anything in her life.

*Please come stay with me at Whittaker House forever.* Her heart broke because she hadn't the courage to say it.

Vanessa felt Eric's hand begin to caress her upper arm and shoulder, and his breathing changed a bit.

"I have a chubby."

That was so unexpected it surprised a laugh out of Vanessa. "I couldn't tell," she drawled.

He drew her toward him so that her mouth barely brushed his and they kissed lightly. "I want to do something about that today, Vanessa," he murmured against her lips, his eyes open and watching her watch him. "Preferably now."

"I can't right now," she breathed. "Much as I'd like to. Knox and I have a meeting with my architects this morning in—" She looked at the clock. "—an hour and it'll take me a while to get ready. That's why he's here."

His forehead wrinkled. "On Sunday? For what?"

"The golf course. This was the only time we could all get together. Now that we



have our zoning, we can finalize the plans.”

Eric’s eyes narrowed and she smiled when he murmured, “I can’t tell you how ballsy I think that is, but now that I’ve been here, I don’t see why you need one.”

“In case you didn’t notice, most of my regular guests are elderly.”

“I did, as a matter of fact.”

“Elderly people die and then they don’t come to my place to spend their children’s inheritances. Their children sure aren’t going to come here to soak up the nostalgia.”

He began to laugh and then he was laughing so hard he was choking and coughing.

“A few years ago when we were just starting out, I hosted a couple of corporate retreats to have some mid-week off-season income. I really liked that experience and I knew I wanted to make that my main source of revenue, become known for that. Go after the deep corporate pockets. But then . . . nobody ever booked a corporate retreat here again no matter what I did, so I had a research firm see if they could find out why.”

“No golf course.”

“We haven’t been in a financial position to build one until OKH bought Knox’s share. The corporate guests didn’t—don’t—care about me or my food. They came here for a complete ‘respite from the information age,’ but when it came right down to it, they couldn’t go without a golf course.”

“What do you mean, ‘respite from the information age’? You’ve made two counties a hotspot all by yourself.”

“Well, I have to be. This is where I work. The people who are foolish enough to come here and crack their laptops find out the whole place is wired, but then they get mad at me because they didn’t have a restful vacation.”

“What do you say?”

“I say, ‘It states very clearly on the website and in my brochure that Whittaker House is not responsible for the quality of your stay if you insist on bringing your work with you.’”

“Does it really say that?”

“It most definitely does. It’s part of the waiver or disclaimer or whatever it is that they sign to stay here. It’s not in fine print.”

“What do they say when you tell them that?”

“I can guarantee you there’ll be at least one that does it to me today, so you can watch. I tell them to go to hell, but only in the nicest way.”

“What about this afternoon?”

She shook her head. “I fired my bartender last week and I have two interviews coming today. Shelly’s not here and it’s a month and a half before the new concierge shows up. I have six guests checking out today and four checking in. I might have butchering to do today; I don’t know if Vachel bagged anything last night. I still have to arm wrestle Alain over next Saturday’s dish and I need to make about ten dozen chocolate chip cookies for the county commissioners as a thank you. It’s going to be nasty busy today.”

With that, she rolled out of bed and headed to the bathroom. Eric left her alone to shower, which was rather disappointing, but it was necessary because she needed that time to prepare for her meeting.

He was still in bed but on his phone when she turned off the shower and came out of the bathroom, a towel wrapped around her body.

“He did what?” he snapped, and Vanessa got a sharp, tingling sensation of dread behind her breastbone.

“No. Have Connelly take it . . . Dammit, can’t I leave for one fucking weekend without something happening?”

Vanessa swallowed and went into her closet. Shuffled blindly through her clothes while she listened.

“You all couldn’t possibly have let me know this when I was spending the last month running around trying to get my schedule cleared? . . . No, he didn’t tell me . . . Yeah, okay, whatever. It’s going to have to wait until tomorrow morning . . . Yes, tomorrow! . . . I don’t give a shit! Go to Wilson and get a continuance . . . Whaddaya mean, out of continuances? He *said* that? . . . All right, fine. Nine o’clock. I get it.”

She winced when she heard the phone hit the wall hard enough to possibly put a hole in it, then pieces clattering to the wood floor. When she emerged from the closet, she saw Eric lying on his back, an arm thrown over his eyes.

Sitting on the bed beside him, she didn’t say anything. She just began dressing, and suddenly, she wished Eric were dressing her. She didn’t dare ask.

“You’re welcome to come to the meeting with me, Eric,” she murmured when he still hadn’t said anything.

“I have to go home today.”

Vanessa’s heart broke.

“I heard.”

Vanessa got up and Eric grabbed her arm, pulling her down on top of him. He wrapped his other arm around her shoulders and held her to him to kiss her urgently, deeply so that she lost herself somewhere in him.

“I *will* come back to you, Vanessa,” he rasped as he kissed her harshly and she met each stroke of his tongue, each shift of his mouth on hers. “Don’t doubt that.”

Oh, she doubted that very much.

She walked down to the mansion attempting to pull herself together. This was important and would cost millions of dollars. She couldn’t afford to be thinking of anything but this, but that was difficult while the thought of Eric going home a week earlier than expected looped in her head.

The morning kitchen staff greeted her and she nodded as she walked up the back stairs into her office. Knox lazed in his chair at the conference table reading *Twilight* as fast as he could turn the pages, his open laptop ignored.

Once the architects arrived, they would all be served breakfast.

She took a seat across from Knox and opened her laptop, but saw nothing.

“You don’t look any happier now than you did last night.”

She pursed her lips. “He has to be in court tomorrow morning,” she finally murmured without looking up from the screen she stared at.

Knox sighed.

Eric showed up just before eight dressed as sharply as ever and sat down beside Vanessa. “May I?” he asked politely, and Vanessa slid her computer to him.

“What happened?” Knox rumbled.

Eric didn’t look up from whatever he was doing. “One of my new hires decided to quit. Unfortunately, he told everyone but me two weeks ago. And—get this—nobody saw fit to mention it to me until today. Davidson decided he ought to double check with me since he went into the office this morning and the dude’s crap was gone. He was in the

middle of a trial and everybody else is stacked up to their eyeballs in their own cases.”

Knox pulled out his cell and punched a couple of numbers. “Hey . . . Oh, sorry. Can you come to the office for a minute?”

Vanessa could feel her heart begin to lighten, but she didn’t dare look at Eric in case it didn’t pan out.

Soon a very rumpled Justice appeared in an oversized black bathrobe, a very crabby toddler tucked under her arm like a football. She sat and the baby decided she wanted her daddy.

“Am I late for something?” she asked warily, casting a suspicious glance at Knox, who rolled his eyes. As Mercy played with his lips and his ears, he said,

“Would you be willing to go up to Chouteau City this afternoon and catch a case midstream tomorrow morning?”

Her brow wrinkled. “Why?”

“Romeo and Juliet here are two days into their week-long fuckfest and there’s already a crisis.” He speared Eric with a glance. “You need to get yourself an executive. You’re the reason I could actually have a life.”

Justice yawned and shrugged. “Okay.” She looked at Eric. “Do I have to be reinstated as an employee first or can we get away with backdating the paperwork?”

“Really?” Vanessa squeaked. “You’d do that for us?”

“You have no idea how bored I’ve been since we moved to Utah and back again.”

“The forms are in the big filing cabinet in my office, top drawer,” Eric murmured as he dug in his pocket for his keys. He took one off and gave it to her. “You know the drill. Davidson will probably be there until late tonight and can let you in, but go ahead and get that key duplicated.”

She looked at Knox. “Are you going to take me to Springfield to catch a plane?”

Knox snorted. “Of course.”

Justice rose and she looked at Eric and said, “You already said you’d hire me back so now you’re stuck with me.”

He laughed, and it was the most wonderful sound Vanessa had heard since she’d come out of the shower. “*Thank you*, Justice. I owe you. Just try not to terrify the new people, please.”

Justice yawned while reaching out to take Mercy, but the child protested vehemently. “Too bad, my wee faery princess. Daddy’s got business and Mama wants to go back to bed.” Knox handed her over with a loud smack on her chubby little cheek. Mercy squalled and kicked all the way back to the elevator.

Both Vanessa and Eric opened their mouths to thank him and Knox held up a hand. “Don’t.” He looked at his watch. “I’m now officially annoyed.”

\* \* \* \* \*

## **28: BUSMAN’S HOLIDAY**

Nia Desmond, the architect who had built Whittaker House and painted it in oils, and Corey Leonard, the landscape architect who had designed the grounds and determined the placement of the cottages, shops, and outbuildings, rolled into the office twenty min-

utes late, which was about twenty-one minutes past Knox’s patience for tardiness.

“And this is Eric Cipriani, my, uh . . .” Vanessa stumbled over her introduction.

*Lover.*

Eric shook their hands and said, “Here helping out for the week.” Knox coughed and Vanessa flashed Eric a grateful smile.

“Vanessa,” said Leonard while he unrolled golf course blueprints, “These plans are by four of the country’s leading golf course designers. Out of all the ones we got, these are the ones I felt best suited your land. Everything’s ready to go as soon as you choose the blueprint and we get them finalized.”

Then he launched into the plans. Eric watched Vanessa and Knox attempt to follow along gamely, but they both grew more and more bewildered by the features, the jargon that explained each, and why one plan’s feature was better than another’s. Leonard was so obviously in love with Whittaker House and the chance to build its golf course, that he

completely missed the fact that the owners were lost—so lost they didn't even know what questions to ask.

"Okay, hold up," Eric finally said, when Vanessa and Knox's confusion got too painful to watch. "Stop. We're going to start over again. Slowly, this time."

Both architects and Vanessa and Knox stared at him, surprised.

"This," Eric said, pointing to a blue spot on the plans, "is a water trap. I don't like its placement." Then he shuffled through the plans to another with the water trap in a place he liked. "I do like it here because it makes the course more difficult." He flipped back to a different plan. "This," he said, pointing to a yellow spot, "is a false front. My partner is really good at spotting those and it's one reason his handicap is so high. This is the only plan that has one."

Warming to his topic, he took the plans and spread them out on the floor. "I'm a golfer," Eric began. "Not as good as Bryce, but I haven't been playing as long as he has. If you want a course that will attract a prestigious tournament, you have to make it difficult or winning won't mean anything."

The landscape architect arose to stand by Eric and look down at the plans.

"Knox, hand me that pencil, will you?" Eric looked at Leonard and said, "Do you mind?"

"Uh—" Leonard looked to Vanessa whose mouth quirked. "Um, okay. Sure."

The morning flew into afternoon as Eric, on his knees, very lightly drew arrows and connected the different plans by the features he liked and didn't like, ones he knew his various golf partners liked and struggled with. Eric felt Knox looking on, interested in what he had to say, and felt Vanessa watching him. He glanced up at her once, saw her intense focus, and knew she had no interest in the architecture of her golf course.

Her interest was in *him*. She trusted him with her plans, trusted that he knew what he was talking about and wouldn't let her spend millions building a crap course out of ignorance. Her expression held no lust, no desire or longing.

Trust.

A little heartbreak. He knew that expression only too well, and felt himself responding to it.

But then she relaxed back into her chair with a smile, and Eric turned back to the

plans with a deep satisfaction that he had pleased her.

At 1:30, Knox's phone buzzed and he looked at the text message. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said as he rose. The architects followed his lead, and shook his hand. "I need to take my wife to Springfield. You don't need me here anyway. You and Vanessa always work together well, and apparently Eric has an eye for good golf."

"Thanks, Dad," Vanessa said softly, and Knox's mouth twitched.

"You're welcome." He looked at Eric, snorted and shook his head as he walked toward the door. "Pot. Kettle," he called over his shoulder and Eric laughed, then, more lighthearted than he remembered being in a long while.

\*

As promised, one of Vanessa's guests did indeed fault her and Whittaker House for his lack of rest.

"I apologize for whatever we did," Vanessa replied to his pronouncement that he wanted his money back. "Could you be more specific as to our shortcomings so I can address them with the staff?"

"Well, for one thing, this place is one big hotspot."

"That's absolutely true. We need it to be in order to do business. Of course, the only way one would know that we're wired would be to open one's laptop to work, and I'm quite sure you wouldn't do something like *that*."

"You could put a lock on it."

"Mr. Rorys, my inn is a respite from work. There are no phones, no TVs, no computer room, no gadgetry of any kind, not even clock radios—for a reason. People come here to rest and relax the old-fashioned way. It's not one of the services we offer to guarantee that our guests don't work."

The man's eyes narrowed. His mouth pursed.

She gently wrapped her arm in Mr. Rorys's elbow and snuggled up against him while guiding him slowly out the door, down the stairs to the driveway where his packed car stood running, waiting for him. A valet held the car door open. "Perhaps Whittaker House is not up to providing the services you need? I would completely understand if you

find us not to your standards and choose not to return.”

By that time, she had snuggled him all the way around his car and handed him in.

“My dear,” he purred. “You *are* vicious, aren’t you? Yes, it was my own fault. Happy now?”

Vanessa flashed him a mischievous grin. “Bless your heart.”

He drove away after kissing the back of her hand and promising to return after all because he couldn’t resist her.

Eric had stopped at the edge of the porch and leaned against the post, his arms crossed over his chest as he watched her work that charm, that graciousness. It amused her to play such games, to get the result she wanted with as little effort as possible.

The afternoon dragged as one thing after another kept Eric from hauling her back to her cottage and making love to her, as she’d warned him. He could even give her credit for casting him frustrated and apologetic glances when the crises piled up.

There was no bartender—Vanessa had fired him last week.

The concierge was gone—Eric had thrown her out.

Knox had left—to do Eric a favor.

He couldn’t complain that Vanessa was too hounded to spend the afternoon in bed with him.

At four, he decided to handle some of these matters himself. Management was management, and he’d managed people since he was a teenager managing the feed store. Then he’d shown up at the Chouteau County prosecutor’s office fresh out of law school to manage Knox. If a Whittaker House problem didn’t involve food, he intercepted the messenger.

The staff looked at him strangely, hesitant to tell him anything at all, but he asserted authority as if he had some, and took over. In half an hour, he had them coming to him directly, and the thing they learned to say first was, “It’s not about food.”

Eric copied Vanessa’s style in telling another workaholic guest to go to hell when she demanded her money back. He had her flirting with him by the time she drove off.

He dealt with a housekeeper’s childcare issues.

He found that a waitress, pressed into service as bartender, was about to fall down from hunger, and sent her to the kitchen for food. He mixed customers’ drinks from the



Whittaker House recipe book, and grinned to himself when presented with one particular order. He carefully prepared a sterling silver tray with two shots of absinthe, two drip spoons, sugar cubes, and ice water.

He interviewed the two bartender candidates, who'd shown up on time, though Vanessa was nowhere to be seen. He hired both of them for different shifts, offering them salaries he thought might be a little high. It took some doing for him to find the appropriate forms, but he couldn't help that all the file cabinets in the room looked like fine furniture. When he asked if either could start right then, they were both shocked, but one—Yolanda—was absolutely delighted. He sent her off to the bar to mix orders. He'd help her deal with the tabs later.

He was stopped by a guest or two (since he was dressed in a suit on a Sunday evening, he must be official) to answer questions and chat.

Eric hadn't seen Vanessa once all afternoon and into the evening, but he was so busy that he forgot about his goal of getting laid before nightfall.

Then it was dinner time for the regular guests and shift change. He wasn't quite sure how shift change was supposed to happen, but there was a protocol list in Vanessa's office that he compared to what he observed the staff do. Occasionally, he asked questions as to why something was done in a certain way.

He went back to the bar and sorted tickets. He figured out Vanessa's system, such as it was, pretty fast with the help of the waitress he'd relieved earlier, who was thrilled that she didn't have to tend bar anymore.

Vanessa's way of doing things was somewhat efficient, but incomplete, as if she'd been interrupted in creating a protocol and had never finished it. She expected her staff to cross-train in all positions so no one job ever went vacant, but often, stragglers didn't know when to take over and when not. While looking for employment forms, Eric had found a to-do list—well, three of them—and a handful of sticky notes here and there. They were prioritized. Somewhat.

Not really.

For a single control freak running a 24/7 operation, it was about as efficient as it could be, but that left Eric a whole lot of room to improve.

A small family checked in and Eric found himself having to wing it completely, but

at the point he began to feel overwhelmed with this process, Knox walked in with Mercy in his arms. It only took one look for him to assess the situation, then take over, training Eric the way he trained everybody to do anything.

Once that family was settled and on its way to the playground, Knox looked at Eric speculatively for a long moment, then said, “Management’s management.”

Eric nodded. “Yup,” he replied and walked off to take care of the next task.

The new bartender on duty signaled to Eric, and he ended up serving drinks to an older couple out on the veranda who were inclined to chat. So he did, graciously, attentively, and for quite a long time.

By 9:30 that night, Eric had doffed his jacket and tie, and rolled up his sleeves. He was back in Vanessa’s office sifting through résumés for concierge (most went into the shred bin) when Vanessa walked in about an hour later. She stopped short when she saw him there, lounging back in her chair, his feet up on her desk. He watched her as a series of expressions flitted over her face, none of which he could identify. He wasn’t sure there was a favorable one amongst them.

*When* had she started being able to hide her thoughts from him?

Suddenly he felt like an interloper. He took his feet off her desk and stood, uncertain what to do or say.

She swallowed and murmured, “I— You— Um, dinner—” Then she just stopped speaking and turned right back around, walking out again.

Like last night, he didn’t know whether to follow her or not. Last night, he’d decided Vanessa was a grown woman who spoke her mind. If she said she wanted to be alone, that was what she meant.

*Shit.*

Well, he was hungry, so he went into the kitchen hoping, but not expecting, to find Vanessa there eating. She wasn’t. Vachel sullenly moved over to allow Eric a chair that was convenient. Soon Eric was laughing and joking with the kitchen staff, though with some reserve because he couldn’t get the look on Vanessa’s face out of his mind.

Vachel finally stood, grabbed a couple of five-gallon pails, filled one with ice, and walked out the door into the night without a word.

“Where’s he going?” Eric asked.

“Check his crawdad traps.”

“Reeeeeeally.” He looked at a clock and was surprised to see it was eleven. He waited until the kitchen staff was gone then caught Knox in the middle of closing-down-for-the-night procedures, Mercy fast asleep in a bed of blankets. Knox only spoke to tell Eric what needed to be done next, and Eric did whatever he said without a word.

“Night,” Knox finally said. He gathered his daughter up in his arms and headed for the elevator.

“Night.”

Eric, left alone in a silent and deserted Whittaker House, looked around him in the dim light of the three reading lamps that were left on for insomniac guests. He went to the wall of books and found the Little House series, figured out which one to read first, and plopped down on a sofa to begin reading.

“Eric.”

He knew that voice. He knew where he was. He knew that yet another night had passed without spending it burying himself inside Vanessa.

“What time is it?” he croaked without opening his eyes.

“Five-thirty.”

He licked his lips and smacked his tongue, trying to get rid of the cotton in his mouth. He opened his eyes slowly to see her in jeans, her beautiful Brunette-and-blond hair up in a ponytail. Her bright turquoise eyes had a trace of . . . something . . . in them he didn’t understand.

“Are you mad at me?” he asked warily.

“Not mad,” she murmured. “I’m sorry about last night.”

“No, I’m sorry. I can see how that must have looked.”

She gulped. “You worked hard yesterday. Why don’t you go to bed?”

“Will you come with me?”

“No. I have an appointment with one of my vendors this morning.”

He sighed. “Vanessa, if my being here is going to be a problem for you—”

“It’s not!” she gasped, those fabulous eyes wide. “It’s just— I’m— I’m having to think about— About some things I’d rather not think about. *Please* don’t go.”

He sat up then and patted the sofa beside him. She sat stiffly. “Vanessa, is every

single day like yesterday?”

“Pretty much. Thank you for your help and for the new bartender.”

“Two new bartenders. One full time, one part time.”

At least this time he could read her surprise, but he didn’t know if it was good or bad. “How much did you pay them?”

He told her, expecting her to be annoyed if not downright angry, but she only nodded. “That’s not quite as much as I would’ve paid them, but if they work out, I’ll give them raises.” She paused. “What were you looking at last night?”

“Applications for a concierge. I told you I’d find you a new one, and I will. Most of the résumés were old or useless. I’m going to find a headhunter today.”

She said nothing and he looked at her, still trying to decipher her thoughts. Finally, she said, “I’ll make a list of the benefits I offer.”

“All right,” he said slowly. “Other than what’s on your to-do lists, what do you need done?”

Vanessa smiled slightly. “The staff will let you know. You apparently impressed everyone yesterday with your willingness to work and ability to manage crises.”

He shrugged. “Management’s management.”

Her smile was tight when she finally got up and strode away.

Eric dropped his head in his hands and wondered what he’d done to make her so upset. He thought perhaps he should have gone home last night after all. Being in court with half-assed preparation halfway through a case had to be better than a week of Vanessa being upset with him.

Now he didn’t care about making love to her.

He just wanted to make her smile at him—once—before he left.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Vanessa, we’re heading home.”

Vanessa looked up from a table full of headless and skinless skunks to see Knox standing in the door of the butchery, snuggling a very tired toddler. “Okay.”

“If we leave now, we can get home in time for dinner, and Eric seems to have everything under control.”

“Thanks for everything, Knox.”

“You’re welcome. Vanessa—” She waited for whatever he was going to say, but he only pressed his lips together, shook his head, then sighed. “Never mind. Have a good week. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

Vanessa breathed a sigh of relief once he was gone and waited until the SUV rolled past the butchery door before letting herself cry. She shouldn’t cry when wielding two-thousand-dollar scalpel-sharp Japanese knives, but—

Last night, when she’d walked into her office to see Eric lounging at her desk, obviously engaged in Whittaker House business, it had shocked her beyond belief. Oh, not that he had taken it upon himself to do so or that he’d made free with her files (she had nothing to hide), but because he looked so *right* doing it.

At that massive desk, in a halfway-unbuttoned dress shirt with no tie, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, and in suit pants, working. To Whittaker House born.

*Attorney general. Then governor. Then the White House.*

She was a fool to think she could have a relationship with Eric Cipriani.

Vanessa picked up an animal and considered it carefully, focusing on the lines of the muscle. Once she’d decided on her approach, she placed it on the table and sliced.

What were Eric’s joys and pains? Besides karate and golf, what did he enjoy doing? What music did he listen to? Did he have any siblings? Did he have a faith? She knew his birth date: May 3, 1977. She knew his middle name: Niccolò. She knew his mother was Osage and his father an Italian immigrant who’d left soon after Eric was born. She knew his alma mater. She knew his politics.

She knew he wanted her, but he didn’t love her. How could he? He didn’t know her any better than she knew him. He didn’t know her likes or dislikes, her music, her beliefs,

her philosophies. He didn't know why the majority of her clothes were pink.

Skunk medallions, perfectly pan-fried, served with a side of caramelized turnips sliced paper thin and a spinach-and-zucchini mousse garnished with fresh peppermint. The success of the dish depended on how well she cut the medallions. Every carcass was different, and one slip of the knife could make a piece of meat unsuitable for anything but stew.

Giselle had given her the best sex education a girl could've gotten, and Vanessa had done such a good job following her advice that she'd thrown the possibility of love right out the window, and went straight for the sex.

Like a man.

*If you want to have sex, wait and be very careful about who you choose. Do it sober, while you have your head on straight.*

Sebastian had given her a magical initiation into sex, taking great care to please her and teach her, and her time with him had made her just that much pickier. Nash had given her pleasure and three years of comfortably distant, low-maintenance companionship.

Skunk stew was delicious, though, the perfect cold-weather dish, and one she could put together on *Vittles* easily enough.

As far as she could see, love just muddied up waters that didn't need muddying.

So when did she start thinking about wanting love to go along with the sex?

Why did she feel so . . . *addicted*?

By dusk, the animals were in the freezer, the butchery clean once again and her paper coveralls pitched. She began to box up all those beautiful black-and-white pelts for the morning's shipment.

"Aunt Vanessa?"

She turned at the sound of Vachel's voice. She looked him up and down: buckskins soaked with blood up to his knees, a bow in his hand. "What's up, Vachel?"

"Is Eric going to come live here?"

"No." It broke her heart to have to say that. "Why?"

"He . . . works hard," Vachel said slowly. "He's nice. He doesn't bitch. I—I respect him." She blinked. Studied him. He looked at the ground and then off into the distance. Fidgeted. "Maybe he . . . Um, maybe he could come here?"

Tears welled in her eyes again. “Vachel, he— I—” She sniffled. Wiped her nose with the back of her hand and wiped it on her paper coverall. Sniffled again. “I want him to, Vachel. I do. But . . . he has his life mapped out and it doesn’t include me. Us. Whittaker House.”

Vachel’s mouth tightened.

“And we’re not leaving to go with him, even if he asked us to, which he has no reason to.”

Vachel gulped. Nodded. “Yeah.” He walked away and she heard the opening of a garage door. The next thing she heard was the roar of an ATV being started, revved, and then driven out and down the orchard, away from the main property west to fetch whatever animal Vachel had just dressed.

The sun had set by the time Vanessa headed for the kitchen to grab a plate and take it to her office. Fortunately, Eric was not there, but she knew he was around and working because she’d spent almost an entire day in the butchery without one crisis to tend to.

She looked for and found one of her to-do lists and dug in to the tasks she’d neglected, but were no less important than anything else. She sorted, sifted, and filed for hours, and could do so, she realized, because of what Eric had accomplished.

It was one o’clock in the morning by the time she went back to her cottage, which was pitch black, as usual. She still hadn’t seen Eric and it wouldn’t surprise her if he ended up on the couch in the grand parlor again, reading *Farmer Boy*. She daren’t go check because this morning, he’d looked so wonderful, so . . .

Seventeen. What he should’ve looked like when he was seventeen.

She closed her eyes and, halfway up the stairs to her bedroom, she leaned against the chimney.

Seventeen: Standing in a courtroom in shackles, a much, much younger Knox Hilliard out for his blood.

Seventeen: Straight black hair halfway down his back, his olive skin tanned darker, his square face carved in high cheekbone and Roman nose and his height—his Osage heritage completely overwhelming the Italian as he got darker in the sun.

Seventeen: Bad attitude, swagger, cigarettes, alcohol, drugs, leather jacket, tight ripped jeans, a dagger earring dangling from one ear, black cowboy boots with silver toe

detail that the girls at school whispered (with fear and excitement) was actually a retractable knife.

Seventeen: Only too easy to believe he could rape a thirteen-year-old girl if her sister didn't know the truth and was willing to tell it.

No, she didn't want to go find him there again, looking like the *GQ* version of seventeen-year-old Eric Cipriani.

Vanessa stepped out of her clothes and climbed into bed. She didn't even know she'd been holding her breath or wishing anything at all until she felt Eric's arms wrap around her—the thirty-three-year-old Eric Cipriani, the fledgling politician, the karate teacher, the born manager-entrepreneur with a good education and a soft spot for vintage cars, designer suits, and nice girls.

His hand gently pressed her cheek to his chest, and she drew in a deep breath to catch his scent: soap, her brand, and a remnant of his cologne. She sighed and entwined her legs with his. He ran his fingers through her hair, petting her, stroking her until she went to sleep, feeling loved.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **30: THE SACRED GROVE**

Eric dropped into bed the next Saturday night, exhausted, having worked harder the past ten days than he'd ever worked in his life; having slept naked with a gorgeous woman in her bed; having showered with same gorgeous woman and dressed her and made her come with his mouth. Not once had he been able to spare a minute to truly make love with her, to seduce her the way he enjoyed, to spend the time and care she deserved.

Vanessa snuggled up against him and fell asleep with a sigh, leaving Eric awake with his thoughts.



He'd learned almost everything he needed to know to run that place except for the cooking. He'd ended up hiring six people, firing two more, rearranging shifts, finding a decent headhunter and lining up interviews for concierge, and getting out the payroll.

He'd contracted a painting crew to scrape and paint the rails, posts, trim, eaves, and shutters of every building on the property. The veranda got a new coat of floor paint, to boot.

He'd learned how to clean, gut, and fillet fish against his will; how raccoon tasted when served at Whittaker House, also against his will; how to cook and eat crawdads ("No, I won't suck the heads, Vachel")—yet again forced to prove that he wasn't, as Vachel informed him, a pussy.

Eric had finally balked, with great vehemence, at going with Vachel to get the crawdads.

*I went to law school so I wouldn't have to stick my hand in mud and get my fingers chopped off by a bunch of fucking micro lobsters. I am not touching those fuckers until they're cooked, and even then I'm going to use a fork like civilized people. With drawn butter. You do that here, right?*

He'd read the entire Little House series and understood how a twelve-year-old girl could suck up the kind of courage Vanessa had claimed from them. He found it charming that she would arrange her dreams, her whole life, around one woman's fictionalized memoirs classified as children's literature. He'd even gone to the home and taken the tour when he found himself with a free hour. In a roundabout way, he owed his life to that woman and he hoped that wherever she was, she'd heard him say, "Thank you, Mrs. Wilder."

He'd read an essay Mrs. Wilder had written on what real independence meant, how a farm wife was actually a businesswoman and needed to value herself as such, and her philosophies on the return-on-investment of time in agriculture. The nuances of her essay had escaped him at first, but as the week rolled on and he watched Vanessa work, he began to see the kind of independence she had that he didn't. Every morning, he'd awakened to hear Vanessa reciting her to-do list under her breath as she dressed, prioritizing, rearranging, and abandoning items.

However much Eric appreciated Mrs. Wilder, though, it was her daughter's work

that had punched him in the gut. Rose Wilder Lane, one of the first thinkers of the libertarian movement, gave Eric context for his beliefs: the ones old man Jenkins had pounded into the juvenile delinquent with a preternatural talent for management, the ones that had taken on new meaning over Eric's freshman history and political science classes.

"Vanessa," Eric had said Thursday morning, interrupting her morning ritual. She stood in front of him naked, her hair up in a towel, but he'd awakened with too much on his mind to care about sex. "Do you read Rose?"

"Oh, sure," she returned as she began to dress, stepping into panties and capris, then bra and pink tee shirt. "But she's more conceptual. I need day-to-day guidance and that's what Laura gives me." She plopped down on the bed to put on her Keds. "Rose and Laura," she grunted as she tied her laces, "didn't get along. In some places, you read that Rose was completely out of control and others you read that Laura was manipulative and controlling. It's kind of like they spent Rose's whole life in this big catfight. I don't know what to believe, but I'm not sure it makes any difference. I want to dismiss Rose because it tarnishes my view of Laura, but I can't. Not really. I mean, the Little House books wouldn't have happened without Rose's editing and some people think she edited them so heavily she may as well have written them herself, so . . . *That* was a hard pill to swallow."

Vanessa stopped and looked at Eric. "Don't you know? Rose is one of the three women credited for starting the libertarian movement. I mean, if you think about it, it's pretty amazing that an entire political philosophy based on unfettered liberty has no fathers. Just mothers."

"No, I didn't know," Eric murmured, now embarrassed by how much he didn't know about his philosophy's history. They didn't teach that stuff in political science classes, and it got lost in the day-to-day politicking. "Who are the other two?"

"Isabel Paterson and Ayn Rand. They were all contemporaries and they were all fans of each other until they had a falling out, but . . ." She shrugged. "You get women like that in the same room and let them talk for a while, they're going to come to blows eventually. That's why I don't take the Rose-versus-Laura debate too seriously. If their issues went that deep, I think it was because they were both free spirits and stubborn to a fault."

“What was the falling out?”

“Rand and Paterson had the falling out. Rand— She’s such a drama queen, I swear. I just can’t take her seriously— Rand was livid that Paterson wouldn’t let go of the idea of a creator deity and just kind of flounced out of her life.”

“What do you think?”

She grinned. “I grew up Irish Catholic and Mormon, reading Laura, then went to an Irish Catholic university. What do *you* think I think?” Then she’d turned and pointed out her window to the manicured fields beyond, bounded by forest, and all barely tinged in the peach shade of sunrise. “Look at that. In its raw state it looks chaotic, like it could’ve just sprung up out of nothing, but when you start looking at the patterns and arrangements of a forest, of the scales of a fish— Sebastian taught me about the Fibonacci sequence in nature and art, and ever since, I see it everywhere. So I just don’t know how anybody could think it wasn’t created. I don’t find Rand . . . ” She paused and gestured as if searching for a word. “ . . . applicable to my life. She was a pure idealist and *not* a nice person. Paterson, now. She’s helpful, but still conceptual. Rose encoded her philosophies in the Little House books, but Laura was more about doing and then explaining the practicalities of how and why afterward, in her farm newspaper articles. That’s really all I reference now.”

Eric had to think about that, because it was so simple, yet so profound. “And you just . . . do.”

Vanessa nodded. “I have too much to do to debate philosophy. It doesn’t mean I can’t; it means I’d rather do something else with my time that’s more productive.”

“Like Laura did.”

“Right.”

“Don’t you think it’s weird we both came to the same philosophy independent of each other?”

“Not really,” she said thoughtfully. “We might have had different catalysts and motivations, but we had essentially the same influences. And it’s not like we agree totally, either. *You* find value in being a public servant and I don’t get that. *I* find value in maximizing my profits while protecting my resources as well as I can. You don’t seem interested in profit.”

“I am, too,” he protested. “I do have a business, you know.”

“Well, yeah, but you’re not dedicating your life to that business. You’re dedicating it to being a politician.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

Vanessa shrugged. “Politics— *Politicians* get in my way and I resent that. I had to work way too hard to get my golf course approved. It’s my land. I paid for it. I pay taxes on it. I employ people—who also pay taxes—on it. I take care of it. This county makes a lot of money off me, so why can’t I do what I want with it?”

“Think about it, Vanessa. It’s because of politicians like me that you got your golf course. We work to keep the politicians you don’t like out of your way.”

She stared at him for a moment. “Well,” she murmured, turning away, her mood visibly darkening, “I can’t argue with that.”

“Vanessa,” he said, swinging out of bed to catch her before she went down the stairs, “what did I say? What’s wrong?”

“The same thing as it’s ever been for us, Eric,” she answered wearily before she left the cottage with a slam of her screen door. He sighed with the knowledge she was right and dressed for that day’s work.

Sunday morning, Eric awakened to find himself alone in bed, alone in the cottage. As he had every morning for the past week when he’d awakened to crises that needed tending, he threw on shorts and tee shirt and tennis shoes. He walked down the driveway to the mansion, past the garage, only to find it empty of one purple Prowler.

He stopped short.

“She went to see Laura.”

Eric turned to see Vachel in buckskins, walking out of the orchard, filthy, with a rifle slung over his shoulder. Six o’clock in the morning: Vachel’s normal bedtime.

“What does that mean?” Eric asked when Vachel drew abreast of him.

“She goes out to Rocky Ridge Farm. I don’t know what she does there. Usually she takes cookies to the ladies in the gift shop, but it’s too early.”

“Then how do you know that’s where she went?”

“She was crying. She goes there when she’s upset. Night.”

Eric grabbed his car keys, fired up his engine, then headed up the highway to

Mansfield proper. He roared through town and out to Rocky Ridge Farm. There, in the lot across the highway from the gravel drive sat one purple Prowler.

He parked and headed toward the museum. With one vault, he was over the gate, then jogged up the hill. At this time of morning in May, the grass was soaked in dew and the air was chilly. The woods surrounding the farmhouse-museum-gift shop complex fluttered with the sounds of birds and other woodland creatures, the breeze drifting through the leaves to rustle them.

Eric hesitated to disturb this peace and, in fact, it stopped him from going farther. It was different from the peace at Whittaker House, where Vanessa's cottage was removed from the day-to-day noise of business but still part of it. This was complete.

If he had not had business to tend to, he would have found a solitary place to meditate and pray. "Oh, Vanessa," he whispered, understanding now.

As quietly as he could, he walked around the farmhouse and went into the woods, methodically tracking her, following a path that didn't exist.

There, kneeling in a small grove, her hands fisted on her knees. Her head bowed.

Shoulders quaking.

Eric's heart stopped.

She gasped when he dropped to the grass beside her. He watched her red, tear-stained face as she tried to find words, but what came out—

"I wish you hadn't come," she whispered.

"Vanessa," he croaked, shocked, hurt.

"I don't want you to go."

Eric's mind spun, totally unable to make sense of any of this and said the first thing that sounded halfway reasonable. "I'll come back."

"No, you won't." She sniffed. "You *shouldn't*. You have your life. You've worked hard for your life and you're going places. When you go home, you'll see it with fresh eyes and be grateful for it. Grateful it's not as hard as this, not constant crisis management and hard work—some of it backbreaking. I've been thinking about what you said about politicians like you and you're right. You're important. *Governor* Cipriani. *President* Cipriani. It's just— Here, it's— This isn't where you need to be. You have so much to give to the world, things it needs. Leadership. Philosophy. Sacrifice.

Protection for people like me, while I . . . cook for rich people.”

“Vanessa—”

Her lips tightened and she shook her head. Eric leaned in to her then and touched his mouth to hers, tasting the salt. She opened her mouth with a soft sigh, wrapped her arms around his neck, and pulled him down into the wet grass.

Vanessa kissed him with the hunger of a woman long denied, her hunger matching his. With her soft curves pressed against him, a wave of violent need rushed through him—not the need of sex or love, but something deeper—the need to connect with her here in the woods of the Ozark mountains, early on a spring morning, the sounds of wind and water and wildlife their only music.

He pulled away from her a bit and she opened her eyes to watch him warily, but her expression softened when he pulled her soft pink tee shirt out of her shorts. She sat up a bit to help him pull it off her, and then he simply looked at her bare torso.

Caressed her breast confined by nothing, the nipple puckered in the chill.

She released a ragged breath when he licked it, sucked it into his mouth gently, rolled it around on his tongue like a sorbet and tasted her, earth and Vanessa and soap. She clutched him to her.

“God, you’re beautiful,” Eric whispered reverently. “Wild, like the Ozarks.”

She dug at his shirt, then the rest of his clothes. Kissed him feverishly between the shedding of each garment. He unbuttoned her shorts and slid them down those long curvy legs. Once they were both nude, he dug his hand in her hair, pulled her close for a harsh kiss and rolled onto his back, taking her with him until she straddled him.

Eric released a ragged breath when she took him in hand, guided him into her.

Draped herself over him and kissed him again, connected in the most primal way. He wrapped his hands around her buttocks and her breath hitched when he thrust up into her a tiny bit, and she met him.

“Stay,” she whispered against his mouth. “Don’t move. Listen.”

*Yes, listen.*

The grass whispering. The coo of the mourning doves. The notes of the breeze that flowed over and around them.

Eric looked up into the canopy of green, the late sunrise just touching the leaves,

limning them in gold and sky.

Vanessa moved against him, the sweat between their bodies easing the friction a bit so that he felt the slope of her generous breasts against his chest, her hard nipples scraping against him, his nipples sensitive to her softness.

With Eric held tight inside Vanessa's body, no latex between them, every shift in, out, another word of their prayer, Eric couldn't imagine separating himself from Vanessa again. And with any luck—

She kissed him again, hard, and began to move in earnest, whimpering with each thrust, Eric's hips meeting hers with exquisite precision.

They were not making love, he abruptly realized. They were meditating together, praying to a God more ancient than religion, more ancient than Eric's people, more ancient than anything man had ever built, as the sun rose over them.

*"Eric!"*

Her cry echoed around the forest, bounced off the rough shale walls that rose up behind the copse.

He rolled her over once again so she cradled him.

"You fit me so right," he breathed, filling her time and again, hoping for more . . .

Eric felt himself growl, animal, possessive, when he came, burying himself in her one last time.

"Stay," she whispered again while holding him to her, as he kissed and licked the skin in the crook of her neck, tasting the salt of sweat, of sex and . . . tears. He didn't know if she asked him to stay inside her or stay with her in the Ozarks, but he couldn't do either.

He could only promise to return.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **31: BEGGING HANDS**

He kissed her well before he left. In the garage. Before he climbed in his car. She held her fingers tight to her lips and blinked tears away.

Eric watched her in his rearview mirror, her beautiful turquoise eyes filled with the same devastation he'd seen when she was thirteen and he had walked away from her.

He had to go, but he would come back.

*Management's management.*

How many times had he said, thought, heard that sentiment these past ten days, the phrase respectfully targeted at him as he went about Whittaker House business as if he had an actual investment in it.

It had taken one afternoon of cleaning fish under Vachel's tutelage for the boy's residual resentment to begin to fade. This boy—not the one who had borne Eric's name for the first twelve years of his life and made himself a pain in the ass just to get some attention—this boy Eric liked. And respected. As a man.

As the week progressed and Vachel swaggered in and out of the mansion dressed in either buckskins or a leather kilt, tending to his self-appointed Whittaker House tasks, Eric had realized that Vanessa wanted to spoil the kid, to give him whatever he wanted, asking only for obedience in the very few things that were important to her. Yet what Vachel wanted most was to feel valued—and it was important enough to him that he'd reluctantly approached Eric and hinted around about his distress until Eric figured it out.

Eric had found her in the butchery.

“Vanessa, you have to ask him to carry his weight. He wants that from you more than anything else.”

“He's thirteen,” she snapped as she wielded her knife with great precision. “He doesn't need to. He needs to be a child and play video games and surf the 'net and have friends come over and have pool parties. He bags all the wild game for my dishes, from chipmunk to deer. He catches all the fish and crawfish we serve. Do you know how much that's worth? How much he's added to Whittaker House's profits? That's more than enough, Eric. Too much. I don't even like that he feels obligated to do that much and I had to fight him so he would take payment.”

“He doesn't want to be paid! He doesn't understand what you're trying to teach



him. His goal is to earn your approval and he doesn't get that cash is your way of showing approval. His goal is fighting with your goal and neither one of you are getting anywhere."

"Well, he's just going to have to get over it. He can't go through life giving his work away to everybody who shows him a kindness."

"You don't understand. He wants to know that he's not a burden to you."

She'd looked up from the carcass, her mouth hanging open and her eyes wide. "A *burden*? Is that what he thinks? I'm his guardian. His *parent*. I swore to take care of him in a court of law and that's what I'm trying to do the best way I know how."

"Vanessa—"

She held up her hand and he stopped. She stared at the ground and chewed on the inside of her mouth—just like Knox did. Then she sighed. "Okay, look. Give him a job, put him on the schedule somewhere. I don't care what it is. I'll . . . go along with it as long as he's willing to do it."

"I'm not going to put him on the payroll. It'll balance out what you pay him for game."

She shook her head, her mouth tight. "Oh, all right," she huffed. She wiped her forehead with the back of her hand, her knife flashing in the air. "But set up a trust for him and arrange for his wages to go in that. And don't tell him."

Eric almost smiled. "Being sneaky again?"

"Well, it's not like I use my powers for evil," she mumbled.

That made him laugh. "Okay. That's a decent compromise. Vanessa," he went on, figuring he might as well hit her with it all at once, "you need to let go of some of this stuff. You don't have to oversee everything yourself *and* design dishes *and* butcher *and* do a TV show *and* seat guests on Fridays and Saturdays, too. Whittaker House is way too big for that bullshit and it's only going to get worse once you build that golf course. Your procedures are half-assed and your employees aren't sure when they can and can't step in. You need a general manager, a chief operations officer."

She'd looked up at him the minute he said it, held his gaze for long seconds as if searching for some ulterior motive on his part. Opened her mouth. Snapped it shut again. Braced her hands on the table and slowly looked down at the half-butchered carcass.

*Ask me to come stay with you, Vanessa. Ask me to be your COO. I need to know you want me here. I want to be where you are, to help you do what you do, to have a hand in Whittaker House's growth and success.*

"I'll think about it," she'd whispered without looking at him.

He didn't know where that stray—*instantaneous*—thought had come from, but it bugged the hell out of him. He had a plan, financial and political backing, and a rabid national grassroots constituency that wanted him to represent them.

Vanessa—*Whittaker House*—didn't figure into his plans, but . . .

Halfway home, he began to wonder if he really had fallen in love. He had never felt this urgency with any of the girls he'd dated seriously at BYU nor with Annie; he didn't understand this need to be so totally in sync with a woman. Annie had had her career; Eric had his. It never mattered that they kept their professional lives separate, because they had made a deliberate decision to live their lives together.

Vanessa had her own life, one she had shared with Eric—one he liked—but it was two hundred and fifty miles away from his. He couldn't give up his investment of time and other people's money to pursue a woman who lived so far away, one he may or may not grow to love—if that kind of love even existed. Perhaps this was simply a manifestation of his connection to her because everything he had was because of her, and everything she had was because of him.

He'd worked hard his entire life and those years were beginning to bear good fruit. He didn't want to put that in jeopardy on bad odds: too many risks, both personal and financial, with too little information and not enough opportunity to gather more information.

Still, he called her when he got home, but she was too busy to talk much; indeed, she sounded a little too distant for his comfort. He emailed a little note and hoped she could spare a moment to reply.

Eric strode through the prosecutor's office Monday morning without a glance at or word to anybody, into his private office, and slammed the door closed. He'd awakened this morning at seven—an hour and a half later than he had at Whittaker House. He was able to take his time showering and dressing for the first time in a week and a half. He'd thought about what he had to do today and his list was frighteningly barren; of course, it

could be he'd have issues all over the office once he got there.

So here he was at eight o'clock with nothing to do, looking at an empty desk and a clean office. Where were the new case files that should've been here? He checked his email. No reply from Vanessa.

He stormed back out to the common area.

"Davidson, where's Hilliard?"

Davidson looked at him like he'd lost his mind. "Is it eight-thirty yet?"

Eric growled. Davidson did have a point and damn Justice's propensity for tardiness that Knox had never been able to break. "Okay, look, what's come in this past week?"

It was Connelly's turn to look at him funny. "Justice divvied them up the way you do. There's nothing unassigned."

*What?* "What about the case she came back for last week?"

"She won that in two days and she took over the rest of what's-his-bucket's caseload; pled half of them out, tried another one but lost, and has the rest under control."

Eric thought his head would blow off. "Do I even need to be here?"

Connelly and Davidson looked at each other. Eric could sense the rustlings of the attorneys around him. One glance around was all it took for Eric to get the feeling that everyone thought he'd completely run off the rails.

"Fuck it," he muttered as he walked out of the office. "I'll be across the street if you need me."

Upon opening his dojo's door, he stopped short as he looked around. It was clean. Organized. *Dammit!* The walls had a couple of coats of fresh paint, and the carpet had been steam cleaned.

He walked cautiously back to the office and saw that it, too, had been organized, cleaned, and painted. There were stickies here and there, explaining what had been done—all written in an elaborate copperplate. In fountain pen. Each signed with a delicate scrollwork "G."

Another sticky, in Dirk's hand, let him know the bookkeeping had been done, the checking account reconciled, the reports sent to Sebastian, and all the bills paid, including the cleaning and painting crews.

The bell on the door startled him and he leaned way to the left to see who was

invading his misery this early in the morning.

“What are you doing here?” he grumbled and sat back as she came in the office door, a sleeping carrot-topped tyke in her arms.

“Well,” she said. “I have a meeting with the principals of the elementary school and high school at nine to talk about an after-school program for the more, ah, intractable children. Dirk had court and couldn’t make it. If I’d known you were going to be here instead of across the street, I could’ve saved myself the trouble.”

“I’m sorry, Giselle.”

She dropped into a chair across from his desk and it was only then he realized she was in her gi. She caught his look and said, “I’m representing the dojo. Martial artists in dresses don’t impress, much less command any respect.”

That was probably true and he nodded, although he was pretty sure that Giselle could scare anybody no matter what she wore. “The baby might blow your image, though.”

She chuckled a bit, but then sobered. “What’s the problem?”

He lounged back and raised a hand, helplessly dropping it on the desk. “I don’t even know where to begin. A year ago I was pulling my hair out because I couldn’t do everything and still get a couple hours of sleep at night. Today, I come back from busting my ass down to midnight for a week and I have nothing to do. I’m . . . irrelevant.”

She said nothing for a moment as she shifted the baby around so he and she were more comfortable. “It’s Monday,” she finally said. “In an hour, your desk will be sky high.”

“You know, I don’t even care. Same shit, different day. Same criminals. Same crimes. Even the nasty dirty ones aren’t fun anymore.”

“I suggest,” she murmured slowly, taking her time and thinking, “that you give your life another month or so to shake back out. Whatever you did in Mansfield last week? People pay money to have vacations where they go do work that’s different from what they usually do. You might not like it on a sustained basis, over months and years. What you’ve got right now are the post-vacation blues.”

“*She* does it on a sustained basis,” he muttered, feeling about three years old.

“That’s her life’s work, Eric. She’s living her dreams, her goals. Every day she adds

a layer of polish on those dreams and goals, and she's rewarded every time she ends a day falling into bed bone tired." She paused, then proceeded very, very carefully. "You said you worked, and you're a little too upset about not having anything to do right now. Did . . . you . . . ?"

"Once," he admitted huskily. "Not enough time for more. That place is a twenty-four-seven operation, so— Too tired to do anything when we had a minute and a half."

Giselle pursed her lips. "Do you resent that?"

His brow wrinkled. "No. Why would I?"

She smiled suddenly and for a second—only a second—he found her profoundly beautiful and envied Bryce all that much more for what he had that Eric didn't. "I see," she said with a pleased smile. "So you found joy in the work itself and joy in working alongside her."

Eric gulped. "Yes," he said quietly. "I did, but she hasn't asked me to come back. She didn't really want to talk to me last night and she hasn't returned my email. By now she's probably knee deep in fresh collard greens."

Giselle's mouth tightened a bit. "So your feeling of irrelevance is because you felt necessary at Whittaker House and you came back here to find out you're not as indispensable as you thought."

"Yes. Like I'm just marking time until the election."

"Hmm." She pursed her lips. Looked at the floor. "Are you in love with her?"

"Aw, hell, Giselle, I don't know. I want to get to know her better, be with her. The way she acted all week, it was like she couldn't decide if she wanted me there or not, and then— I want the chance, but . . . " He waved a hand in the air. "I want— Shit. I don't know what I want. Just not— Not— This. This *limbo*."

"What about your career?"

"What about it?"

She looked at him funny, but shook it off with a sigh and said, "Well, Eric, for right now, either stay here and meet these people with me or go back to your office. Pick a job, do it, let things settle for a while. If, in a month or so, you're still restless, you can revisit how best to approach the problem. I would advise you not to make any major decisions for a while and do *not* pressure her. She may need some time and distance to think. Your

choice, naturally.”

He sat for a long moment and let that settle. Then he sighed and rose. “I’m on county time, so I should go there, I guess.” He walked around the desk toward the door, then stopped and looked down at her when she caught his wrist in a light grasp.

“You know very good and well why you don’t resent not getting laid last week. Think about that. Once you’ve been back in your life for a while, when you have some distance, you can afford the luxury of figuring out if it’s something you want to give up without a fight and how much you’re willing to sacrifice to have it.”

\* \* \* \* \*

## **32: THE BREWSTER SCHOOL**

It was all Vanessa could do Friday night to keep from crying while she seated and served guests, who all remembered “that charming young man” from the past two weekends and wondered at his absence. “He lives in Kansas City,” she explained repeatedly, graciously, though each repeat

came harder than the last. Two hours before the kitchen closed, she gave up and caught Vachel.

“I need you to seat and serve for me the rest of the night, if you wouldn’t mind.”

Vachel’s eyes lit up at the opportunity, and Vanessa hurt even more. It was selfish, but she was so exhausted and heartbroken that she was willing to use Vachel’s need to prove himself to her to escape the constant reminders that Eric wasn’t there.

With her.

Running Whittaker House.

Building a life together.

*Don’t ever mistake sex for love because that’s when girls start getting stupid.*

Ten days. It had taken her no time at all to fall in love with a man she had only met

a couple of times under less than favorable circumstances.

And one Sunday morning in the grass, her secret place. Her church.

“Stupid stupid stupid.”

They had no history together. Between her crush on a much older bad boy and Laura’s influence, she had been motivated enough to approach the prosecutor everyone in the county feared, terrified, knowing she’d be in a lot of trouble with her mother if he believed her.

She had never seen that boy again.

She didn’t know what had become of him.

The man who bore his name, though—

The man who had arrived thinking he’d have a fun week with a woman he wanted to get to know, possibly getting laid—

The man who had ended up not only *not* having fun and *not* getting laid but once, who had worked alongside her all week without complaint—

The man who had asserted his authority amongst her staff as if he had some—

The man who had looked around to see what needed done and done it—

She had not known that man.

That man, *that* Eric Cipriani, was a man of strength and kindness, humor and patience.

*You need a general manager, a chief operations officer.*

And she’d had one. For ten days.

She hadn’t known quite what part of Whittaker House would occupy Eric’s attention all week while she went about doing what a chef and owner of an inn did, but never would she have expected him to work like he had.

So exhausted he had no energy for making love, yet not resenting her for it; getting up at five every morning to start over again, knowing he probably wouldn’t get laid that day, either; promising her he’d come back even after a week of backbreaking labor with no reward.

He would never be back.

This life, while it richly rewarded Vanessa, would never reward him the same way his career rewarded him, the way reaching every next goal rewarded him.

And his rewards were two hundred and fifty miles away from hers.

She dashed tears away with her fingertips.

Once Vachel swaggered into the dining room in his best kilt and semiformal jacket, Vanessa left. She slogged through the kitchen and out the back door and across the veranda and down the steps and up the driveway to the path that would take her to her secluded cottage.

Vanessa didn't remember ever being this tired on a Friday night. She didn't remember ever having thought about a way to take the next morning off without having an ulterior business motive: going shopping in Springfield for clothes or décor or food or flowers or local wines, or going to shows in Branson to look for new talent.

On the other hand, she was the boss and answered to no one.

The always-urgent to-do lists wouldn't get any more urgent for waiting a morning and besides, Eric had made such a significant dent in them that she could afford a morning alone.

She had a teenage kid begging her to let him work harder, do more for her, learn and grow, feel needed and wanted, his contributions valued, his intellect challenged. Until Eric had forced her to see it, Vanessa had never thought Vachel might need more than a stable home, a warm atmosphere, and a guardian willing to give him anything he wanted.

She had a clientele who had been gracefully conditioned—by Eric—to expect that sometimes, just sometimes, Vanessa would not be available as usual because she, too, needed a break.

She wondered what it would be like to lie in bed on a Saturday morning and read, perhaps re-read, *Little Town on the Prairie*. Or sleep. Or pretend Eric would return any moment.

Cry.

She slogged up the steps to her porch and opened the door and walked across the floor and climbed the stairs in the dark.

She unbuttoned, unzipped, and undid.

*Vanessa.*

Her chest collapsed at the whisper that caressed her skin like a lover's touch, and then again when the faintest whiff of a rich cologne drifted across her nose.



She closed her eyes.

Choked in fear that she was hallucinating.

He wrapped his hand gently around her wrist and pulled her down to him on the bed, pressed a soft kiss against her upper arm while his other hand slid under her blouse and caressed her back.

Neither said a word as she finished undressing with his help.

Neither said a word when, once she was bare to his hands, he pulled her down and rolled her over onto her back and slid his body into hers, now wet simply because he was there.

She sighed and wrapped her arms around his ribs, her legs around his hips, kept him as close to her as possible with her heels dug into his buttocks. In the pitch dark, she found his mouth with hers and they kissed for moments upon moments.

Oh, how *right* he felt, lying in her bed, being inside her, stepping into her life.

He buried his face in the crook of her neck, and drew in a long breath against her skin. Vanessa's back arched as if she had no control over her body whatsoever, her only connection with reality the feel of his hands caressing her body, the weight of his body on top of hers, the feel of his body so deep inside he touched her soul.

Slow butterfly kisses, so light, over her jaw, down her throat, up her neck. She furrowed her fingers through his silky hair, ran her hands down his nape and over his strong, smooth back. He sighed at her touch and his body shivered, just a tad.

*I love you, Eric.*

*Be my lover always, Eric.*

*Stay with me, Eric.*

*Marry me, Eric.*

His hips nudged back against her heels a bit and she accommodated him so that he could accommodate her.

She had never been touched, loved, with such reverence. He began to stroke in and out of her at just the right angle—and she gasped, surprised, when she came so rapidly, unexpectedly. Immediately. It hit her with the force of a shotgun blast and she felt him smile against her cheek.

Salt stung her eyes.

Joy.

She had never known *that*.

Until last Sunday.

He touched her tears with his tongue, kissed her eyelids, her cheeks, the tip of her nose, all while picking up his pace, thrusting harder and faster.

Joy.

He came with a rough sigh that brushed her damp skin. Vanessa tightened her hold around his torso, pulled him hard up into her with her heels again.

Kept him close, as close as possible.

Smiled against his jaw.

And drifted off to sleep.

\*

“What’s on tap today? It’s seven o’clock on a Saturday morning and we’re still in bed. Phone hasn’t rung. Nobody’s shouting through the window at you.” Eric’s warm whisper in Vanessa’s ear made her smile. She didn’t want to open her eyes in case it was just a dream, that her deepest desire hadn’t actually come true in the night and she’d have to face another day alone.

“Nothing,” she murmured, her voice hoarse. “I was going to take this morning off. Not that I’ve informed anyone of that yet, so I’m surprised no one has come knocking on my door.”

He started. “A morning off? Why?”

She didn’t want to admit it, not really. It would put too much of herself in his hands. “I haven’t slept all week. I’m . . . tired.”

He said nothing for a moment, then, “I missed you, too.”

“How long will you be here?”

“Today,” he said slowly. “Tomorrow. A huge case got dropped in my lap late Monday afternoon.”

*So I should be in my office right now, working on it.*

He didn’t have to say it. She could feel the tension in his body, hear the conflict in

his voice.

“Did you bring your work with you?”

She felt the bob of his Adam’s apple against her head. “Yes,” he finally said. “I want to help you, but . . .” He paused again. “I just— I needed to see you, to be with you. At least in the same county.”

And tomorrow evening, she would have to watch him leave again and she didn’t know if she could stand it.

“What are we going to do, Eric?” she whispered, hating the catch in her voice. “How does this work?”

“I don’t know,” he sighed.

“I— I don’t want to be friends with benefits,” Vanessa said, tears stinging her eyes. “I can’t do that with you, Eric. It would hurt too much. This is— With you— I’ve never had—”

His hold on her tightened when she didn’t continue. “I understand.”

“Aunt Vanessa!”

Vanessa closed her eyes at the long-expected bellow from outside her window, not as grateful as she should have been that they had been left alone this long. She gathered her breath. “Gimme a couple of hours!” she bellowed back. “You take care of things for a while!”

“Really? Cool! Okay!”

The faint sound of footsteps in wet grass got more faint as Vachel trotted back toward the mansion.

“Taking my advice?”

She shrugged. “Trying.”

“I thought you were going to play hooky this morning?”

“I was. Then you were here and— But now . . .” She sighed.

“Because I have work to do.”

She nodded. “You can use my office. Just having you here— Getting some sleep . . .”

“Vanessa?” he whispered. Her breath caught, but she didn’t know exactly why. “We haven’t used condoms.”

“I’m on the pill.” His body tensed a bit, but she went on. “I’ve always been careful and I’m going to have to assume you have.”

“Yeah,” he said absently, then, hesitantly, after a beat or two, “Um . . . kids?”

“No. At least not in the next couple of years. And I don’t even want to think about children until we figure out how to deal with—” She bit the rest off.

“So the default position is that if we didn’t have those problems, you’d be willing to try a long-term relationship with me? Maybe . . . ?”

Vanessa blinked, not surprised they’d gotten this far this fast—they couldn’t afford not to—but surprised at how comfortable she was with it.

How much she needed it.

“Yes. But we can’t think about it that way because we do have those problems. And they’re not little ones. This isn’t just you and me, Eric. I have a partner, a bunch of employees, dozens of vendors, and two rural towns that depend on me. You have a county government and a constituency that trusts you, tens of thousands of people who see you as their philosophical salvation, and a clientele that’s loyal enough to you, your partners might not be able to make money without you. I can’t— I can’t . . . *abandon* my life to follow you and you’re too deep in your own future to get stuck here.”

He sighed. “You’re right.” He pulled her hair away from her neck. Kissed her softly. “I hope you were planning to spend the next couple of hours making love with me.”

“Mmmm, yes, I was,” she purred as she turned over to face him, looking at that dark face and black eyes. “But I thought you didn’t like quickies?”

He snorted. “I’ll learn to like it, trust me.”

Vanessa smiled. “Welcome back to Whittaker House, Mr. Cipriani.”

\* \* \* \* \*

### 33: TIMING DRILLS

“Shit,” Eric muttered, his elbow on the conference table in Vanessa’s office, his forehead in his hand, completely frustrated in his attempt to build the foundation for his case to put a woman on death row. The gore, the stench of death that had lingered in his nostrils since Monday after-

noon— He could win this case, and fast. What he needed was a running head start.

But—

“Hey, Eric, Vanessa’s out in the butcher shop and there’s a guest who needs . . .”

“Eric, phone.”

“Yo, Eric, there’s a dude downstairs who wants to apply for concierge and Vanessa’s getting ready to tape a show. He says—”

“Why is she taping on Saturday?” Eric interrupted, thinking that was the most idiotic thing he’d ever heard.

The bellhop looked at him funny. “She always tapes on Saturday. It’s the only time she can get a crew down here.”

“Does she pay ext—” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Never mind.”

“What do you want me to do with this guy? I mean, I can tell him to wait until she’s finished if you want. He says he didn’t have an appointment.”

Eric sighed. “No, send him up.”

It was constant, the chatter, the people who felt free to parade through Vanessa’s office to him if they couldn’t find her—

*I don’t work here! I have a job! I’m trying to do it!*

They didn’t know that, though, and he’d done a magnificent job in training them to come to him first if it didn’t involve food.

Worse, Dirk was this defendant’s attorney and he knew where Eric’s mind was, where his body was, and would use every chink in Eric’s armor to get her acquitted, and one of those chinks was time. Dirk wanted to push her case through to trial as fast as possible to capitalize on Eric’s distraction. What Dirk *didn’t* know was that Eric wanted to get it over with so he wouldn’t have to look at the pictures any longer than necessary—

—and so he could get back to Whittaker House business, which was a whole lot more attractive at the moment.

He interviewed the concierge candidate, hired him, assigned him a cottage and gave

him a set of keys, finished his employment paperwork, emailed the payroll information to Knox for setup in the system, then sent the man on his way to get settled in.

By the time dinner rolled around, he finally got some peace because every employee at Whittaker House was occupied with Saturday dinner, but—

“Yo, Cooper,” Eric said when he called the Wright County prosecutor. “I’m down here for the weekend, but I got that capital case I’m working on— You hear about that? Would you loan me your office for the rest of the weekend? I’m—”

“Whittaker House got you tied up?”

“Yeah.”

“I heard you got your eye on AG.”

“Yep.”

“That case’ll put you over the top if you win it.”

“Arguing against Jelarde.”

“You got your work cut out for you, then. So, Vanessa . . . ?”

“Cooper . . . ”

“Well, sure, boy. I’ll tell my desk sergeant to let you in.”

Gratefully, Eric packed up his work and got ready to head into Mansfield proper, aching for some peace and quiet.

“Eric, I’m done. Let’s go to be—”

He looked up to see Vanessa in the threshold of her office, looking between him and the banker’s boxes, the laptop case. The brilliant smile that had been there, the wide one that made the corners of her eyes crinkle, melted.

“Oh.”

“I’m . . . going into town,” he muttered, helpless. “Use Cooper’s office. I can’t— I have to—”

She nodded, almost too eagerly. “No, I understand,” she said in a rush. “It’s an important case?”

He swallowed. “Um, yeah. A mother— Four kids. She was traveling and stopped, uh, in that motel where you stay when you’re in town.” She nodded again, her face clear of any expression except appropriately interested innkeeper. That was a bad sign. “She —” His mouth tightened when he looked down at the boxes, and a wave of resentment

surged through him. “She slaughtered her children,” he said tightly. Vanessa’s face betrayed her shock and horror.

“I ended up at the crime scene for . . . hours. All night, actually. It was the most horrible thing I’ve ever seen and I really just want to— Knox— Uh, Parley— Everybody’s expecting me to snap like he did, but uh, I have to do it the right way. And that takes time.”

“Oh, Eric. I’m sorry. Of course. You . . . shouldn’t have come. Your job, it’s— You’re important. You— Um, go home. Don’t bother Cooper. You need to . . . Just go home and work on it where you have your tools. I know what it’s like to be stranded in a job without the right tools.”

Going home was the right thing to do, but his unease with it made him twitch. “You won’t mind?”

“No, no,” she said in a rush. “You need— The county needs you. Those children need you. Your job, it’s—” She swallowed. “It’s so much more important than mine. I’m a . . . luxury. You’re a necessity. You should, um, just stay there until it’s over with. You know, no distractions.”

He stared at her for long moments, trying to read her (but he couldn’t), trying to decipher her words (but he couldn’t). “Why do you tape TV shows in the summer and on Saturdays, instead of in the winter, or on Sundays or in the middle of the week, or at midnight? Or, better yet, do a year’s worth of shows back to back in October or January?”

The abrupt change of subject startled her, which he’d meant to do. “Oh. Well, because I can’t get a crew down here any other time.”

“Yeah, that’s what I heard. What, they charge more for a weekday, maybe nights, than they do for Saturdays?”

“Well, I— I don’t know. They said Saturday . . . ”

“And it was easier to go along with that than think it all the way through to the end. Uh huh. Did you ever ask Knox to see if he could get that rearranged for you?”

That got a reaction out of her. “Knox wouldn’t know how to do it,” she snapped. “He has no clue what goes into producing a TV show.” Eric stared at her until she fidgeted. Looked away. “You should probably get going. If you leave tonight, you won’t

be in the middle of lake traffic.”

True, that. Traffic from Springfield to Kansas City on Sundays in the summer was a nightmare and the Lake of the Ozarks season was in full swing.

“You’re really mad at Knox, aren’t you?” Eric murmured.

She suddenly looked completely horrified. “Um . . . No?”

“You’re allowed, you know. He’ll admit it when he screws up, but if you want him to understand he screwed up, you can’t mince words or it’ll go over his head.”

“I can’t be— Um, I’m not—”

“Yes, you are. He has no idea how hard you work, does he?”

Vanessa’s mouth tightened.

“Do you not trust him to take over more or do you just need to have your hands in every pie?”

“He can’t even get his quarterly reports in to Eilis on time. Why would I ask him to do more when I can’t depend on him now?”

“Oh, bullshit. He can work on a deadline if he knows it’s important and I bet Eilis doesn’t even look at those reports. He probably knows that and doesn’t worry about it.”

“He left me!” she flashed, then clapped her hands over her mouth, her eyes wide.

Eric blinked. “Left you for a wife and family,” he asked warily, “or for a different job?”

She swallowed. Didn’t answer for a moment. “A job,” she finally whispered. “In *Utah*. He went—” Her nostrils flared. “Didn’t ask how that would affect me. Never talked about it at all except to tell me how excited he was. Just . . . left me with so much more work to do . . . Twelve hundred miles. No plane flies fast enough.” She drew a long, shaky breath. “I hope my staff didn’t bother you today.”

Only every fifteen minutes like clockwork.

“No, not at all. I’d just . . . rather be helping you.”

“Go home, Eric. Neither of us are going to get anything accomplished and those children need justice more than I need a weekend general manager.”

*More than I need you.*

“I’m coming back, Vanessa.”

“Okay.”



But she was gone before he could catch her to kiss her and he didn't bother to look for her.

She didn't want to be found.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **34: A GOOD CROP OF WHEAT**

Friday night dinner. Vanessa had her nose down, squirting a pale yellow dandelion flower glaze over a plate in an abstract pattern in preparation for the plating of a new peach and pecan confection that was far more popular than she'd anticipated. The demand for it had completely overwhelmed the pastry apprentice and Vanessa had nearly ended up seating and serving in her whites.

The low thrum of a souped-up engine zooming past on the highway vaguely pierced the din of the kitchen, but Vanessa paid no attention until it got closer and more familiar and—

Vanessa's head snapped up to look out the back door.

—an electric blue Corvette roared right past the mansion and up the driveway toward the butchery and private garage, its red taillights glowing bright and round in the dark.

Joy spread through her so hard and so fast she thought she'd burst.

"Keep your head in the game, Boss," Alain called.

Right. She bent back to her work, but now she had something to look forward to, as did the rest of her staff, who had taken to asking her if Eric would become a permanent weekend fixture.

He made everyone's jobs easier, more efficient, including hers.

Last week, when she had stood in the door of her office and understood that he was leaving her a day earlier than intended, she hadn't expected him to come back. He was a

lawyer, a prosecutor, with a very serious problem on his hands. He had an *important* job for which he didn't get paid near enough.

Her job, well— She was a luxury. Yeah, people had to eat, but that was what McDonald's was for.

Still, he was here. Now. Waiting for her. He'd shower. He'd get in bed to wait for her, pull out his iPhone and maybe read a book—

"It's the only way I can read books anymore," he'd explained when she asked him what had him staring at his gadget. "Put it in my pocket and go. Always available."

Vanessa ended her evening as early as she could, again requesting Vachel's assistance, which he gave her with a delight that made her flinch. *How* had she not seen what he so obviously needed?

Eric was indeed in bed by the time she'd run down the driveway, into her cottage, and up the stairs. But when he pulled her down to him, he rolled her over until she lay on her stomach. He straddled her, nearly sitting on her butt, and she sighed, understanding immediately. She closed her eyes to await his big, warm, oiled hands on her shoulders.

No words were said and, except for the sound of soft, plaintive bluegrass coming from a corner, Vanessa could only hear the crickets outside and the hoot owl that lived in the orchard just behind her cottage. A sweet breeze ruffled the gauze curtains that framed her open windows. She took a deep breath through her nose to catch every nuance of scent, from fresh-mown and dew-laden grass to the blooming lilacs.

She grimaced when the heel of Eric's palm found a knot in one of the muscles of her shoulder. She must have shied away from it, because he lightened his touch a bit.

"You're tight as a drum," he muttered.

"Thank you," she sighed.

He leaned down, his mouth brushing her ear. "You need to learn how to relax."

She thought she was perfectly relaxed already, but she couldn't muster the energy to open her mouth or move her vocal cords.

"Have you ever been to Silver Dollar City?"

*Don't make me talk.*

"In high school," she mumbled into her pillow.

"You've lived here how many years and you haven't been again?"

“Branson. Scout talent. ’Sall.”

He said nothing more, but his hands continued to work their magic until he reached the lower part of her back, just above her buttocks. One press of a thumb and she nearly came off the bed with a screech, her eyes filling with tears.

“Geez, Vanessa,” he murmured. “I barely touched you.” She swallowed, the tears coming now, and her mind flashed through her to-do list. “Stop it,” he said. “I know what you’re doing. Deep breath. In through your nose and hold it.” She did that until her lungs felt they would burst. “Now out through your mouth.” Vanessa obeyed. “Do it again.”

But her list wouldn’t leave her head. Emotion flooded her: the remnants of her little-girl hurt, her regrets and insecurities, her anger with Knox and the guilt it caused, and her fears—for Whittaker House, for Eric, for Eric’s far more important future. Finally, she began to sob into her pillow, but Eric said nothing. He continued to dig deeper into her muscles, down lower into the flesh of her bare buttocks, and then her sobs had nothing to do with pain.

Just release.

With every knot he found and worked, she sobbed harder.

“Breathe, Vanessa,” he whispered from time to time, and only then would she realize she’d been holding her breath.

Slowly her tears dried up and she was too spent not to relax, not to let him do whatever he thought needed to be done. She’d never cried in front of her lovers before; she’d had no reason to.

They weren’t Eric.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **35: MINUTES IN IDLENESS**

The warmth of the sun streaming in through her windows and touching her face

awoke her. Vanessa sat up abruptly and looked beside her to see Eric on his back, asleep, one arm over his forehead and the other hanging off the bed.

She turned the other way to look at her clock and she gasped. Eight o'clock! She scrambled to throw off the covers, but a warm hand wrapped around her wrist and pulled her back in bed.

"You're taking the day off," Eric rumbled from where he lay, still relaxed, his eyes still closed. "Lie down. Loosen up."

"But—"

"Vachel's in charge today."

She gaped at him. "You went behind my back!"

"I did."

Her anger was instant and hot. "Eric—"

"Oh, shut it, Vanessa," he snapped. "You're going to work yourself into an early grave and you know, I don't want our whole relationship to be based on your to-do list. I want to have fun with you, see if we can have fun together— Fuck, if you even know *how* to have fun."

Her brow wrinkled. "I have fun every day."

"Yeah, I know. Maybe it's time you tried a different kind of fun. You know, like trying a different food from your favorites in case you're missing something."

The anger gave way slowly, teensy bit by teensy bit, as she reluctantly opened her mind to the idea of spending the day with Eric like two normal people involved in some semblance of a courtship.

"What about your murder one case?"

He shrugged. "It'll still be there on Monday." She stared at him, confused, until he opened his eyes and looked up at her. "See, *that's* what you don't get. Not really. It'll still be there." Then he went in for the kill. "What would Mrs. Wilder say about your work habits?"

Vanessa glared at him. "Don't you use her against me!"

Eric flashed her that pretty, pretty smile that had always made her want to smile, too. "Which only means you know exactly what she'd say." He tugged at her until she reluctantly lay beside him, his arm around her, holding her close. "C'mon, Vanessa," he

whispered against her temple, kissing her there. “Relax. I didn’t get all your knots out last night, but I got a good start. Don’t waste it.”

She sighed against him, adoring the way his hard, dark chest felt against her. She ran her fingers through the dusting of fine black hair and ran her finger around the flat of his nipple until it puckered for her.

“Deep breath,” he said, “in through the nose, out through the mouth.”

If Vanessa were honest with herself, she did feel languid enough now to understand better how tense she’d really been. She’d never had a massage before; when she’d had the time, she hadn’t had the money. Once she had money, she hadn’t had time.

“This feels funny,” she murmured against his skin. “The way my body feels. I’m not sure if I like it or not.”

“You need to get used to it. For cryin’ out loud, Vanessa. You built a spa across the street and you don’t use it?”

She sighed.

“I’m taking you to Silver Dollar City today,” he said. “And we’re going to hold hands and ride rides and see the shows and eat cotton candy and funnel cakes and ice cream and hot dogs. If you have a problem with that, well, that’s just too damned bad.” Vanessa laughed. Just a little. “Tomorrow,” he continued, “we’re going to Fantastic Caverns.”

Vanessa started to rise again in protest, but he tightened his hold. “*Tomorrow?* But —”

“No buts. Look, if I have to call Knox and get him to come down here, I will.”

“That’s dirty,” she growled.

“I’m playing to win here, Vanessa, and no, I’m not above playing dirty.”

She huffed.

“And I have no compunction about telling him to dig in and give you some real help. I have been telling him what to do for six years. So either come along quietly or I’ll haul out the handcuffs.”

Her nostrils flared. “I don’t know if I can have a good time with a blackmailer,” she grumbled, then scowled when Eric laughed.

“Technically, it’s extortion.”

“Whatever,” she snapped, but couldn’t put any real emotion into it. Fun. Silver Dollar City. Holding hands and riding rides and eating cotton candy. “Okay,” she sighed, letting the whole concept seep into her mind.

Intellectually, she knew she worked too hard, but she really did enjoy her work, her routine, especially because it was productive. She didn’t know if she could enjoy herself doing . . . well, nothing . . . when she could be having fun doing *something*.

“I want to know something,” Eric murmured, his fingers tracing across her back, making her shiver and sigh.

“What?”

“If you’re—” Vanessa screamed with laughter when his fingers attacked her ribs. “—ticklish.” She squirmed and rolled onto her back, trying to curl up, breathless with laughter, but he followed her. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

But he stopped, knelt over her, and she looked up into that handsome face. She laid her palms on either side of his face and said, “I remember— That day, I wanted you to give me a little kiss, a peck. On the cheek, maybe on the lips.” His smile faded and his black eyes glittered when he lowered his face to hers, barely brushing her lips with his.

“Like that?” he whispered.

“Yes,” she breathed. “It never occurred to me you’d want to avoid little girls altogether. I’m sorry.”

“We’re here. It’s all good.” Then he bounced off the bed abruptly and said, “Move it, lady. I’m going to teach you how to have some good, clean fun.”

She sat up and a pair of white denim shorts smacked her in the face, then a pink gingham peasant blouse landed on the top of her head. Vanessa jerked her clothes off her face to see him disappear into the bathroom. Water began to run in the shower and the sink, almost simultaneously. “Clean?” she called.

“Clean,” he called back. “No sex for you until you demonstrate that you know how to have fun.”

She squeaked, at once offended at his audacity, yet deeply touched. It didn’t take him long to shower, and he came out with the towel half covering his face as he dried his hair, but then he stopped short when he saw her.

Vanessa stared at him, eyes narrowed, and defied him to resist her, the way she had

leaned back against the wall, her knees up and legs wide so he could see her neatly trimmed mons—and the fact that she had both her hands there, stroking herself.

Eric gulped, riveted at her show. “Oh, *God*, Vanessa,” he breathed.

“I can have sex if I want to,” she said in her best nanny-nanny-boo-boo voice. “Even if I have to have it with myself.” She cast a pointed glance at his rapidly engorging cock. “I dare you.”

He snapped to, looked in her face, and began to laugh. “Oh, no. That doesn’t work on me, sweetheart.” Vanessa, at once aroused and amused and frustrated, watched as he turned to drop on the side of the bed and start dressing. Boxer briefs over those long muscular tattooed legs—

“You don’t go commando?”

“Naw,” he muttered, then cast her an ornery glance. “Sensitive skin.”

Vanessa burst out laughing and gave up. “All right, all right. You win.”

Eric was fully dressed in a simple tee shirt and cargo shorts when she came out of the shower. He still sat on the bed, hunched over his iPhone and, from the looks of it, reading a book.

She dropped her towel and walked right in front of him. He looked up at her from under that dark brow, and his mouth twitched. “You’re beautiful. But you know that already.”

She huffed and grabbed her clothes with feigned anger. “How can you do that?”

“Do what?”

She sat down on the bed beside him to dress. Snuggled up to him. “I was masturbating for you and you just . . . blew it off.”

He chuckled and kissed her cheek. “Along with everything else I picked up at BYU, I figured out how to control myself. I had to learn how to have really creative dates without any expectation of sex, and I dated a *lot*. Had loads of fun even though I knew I wasn’t going to get laid.”

Vanessa stared at him, dumbfounded. But why should that surprise her? He’d slept with her nude for a week without sex . . . “Did you get laid at BYU *at all*?”

“Not much, no,” he said. “Dirk’ll tell you different, but I exaggerated a lot just to watch his head explode. He thought I was taking advantage of all the sexually ill-

equipped Mormon girls in Provo. But . . . I did get enough practice to stop being the selfish asshole I was in high school. Getting a really skittish girl into bed is mostly more trouble than it's worth, but with some— It was frustrating at first, but I learned how. It's kind of, well, an art."

"Like tickling trout."

He stared at her.

"Tickling trout. You can seduce a trout right out of the water by hand if you're patient and you stroke him just right. Curtis taught me how, taught Vachel. It's a dying skill."

"Oh. Well, okay, yeah. So think of it that way."

"Did you date seriously?"

He nodded. "Even a couple of girls I would have been willing to wait until marriage for, yeah, but they decided they couldn't marry a non-member."

"So you've been engaged before Annie?"

"No, but almost. Thing is, you're surrounded by a bunch of girls— *Gorgeous* ones, too. God, Mormon girls are *hot*. Anyway, you've acquired a taste for nice girls, so you know before you even ask one out that she wants to get married, right? And you know they want to be virgins when they get married, right? After a while, it doesn't seem like such a sacrifice. You go out, you get to know each other, you talk. It turns out not to be such a bad system and the great thing about it is that you're looking at a career in politics, and you're going to stay squeaky clean by default."

"Okay," she drawled warily, "so what did you do?"

"I told you. Had fun. Bowling. Mini golf. Regular golf." He shrugged. "Karate. Laser shows at the planetarium. Long weekends in Vegas and L.A. Camping in Yellowstone. Shooting the Snake River. Skiing. A lot. I miss that. Symphonies, plays, concerts. And you're sober the whole time 'cause drinking's verboten, so you have fun without alcohol. Without sex. Oh, and dances— I learned how to dance at BYU. Mormons . . . it's like . . . what they do, dance. The hottest girls are in the ballroom dance classes, so I took one every semester."

"No, I mean . . ." She blinked, unable to fathom what he was telling her, so unable to reconcile this sensual—*sexual*—man beside her with the visual of a nice boy dating



nice girls. *Ballroom dancing?* “What did you *do*?”

“Oh. Made out.” He smirked. “Necking and petting. I got laid more in high school than I did at BYU. But don’t tell Dirk. He’ll laugh at me.”

Her mouth opened. Closed. Opened. “You— High school— You did half the females under age thirty in town.”

“No, more like under age forty.”

“But at BYU— You didn’t—? That—” She pressed her knuckles against her mouth to try to stave off giggles, but didn’t succeed. “That’s just so . . . *surreal*.”

He cast her a grin. “You’re going to be an entire Dalí painting by the time I’m done with you this weekend.”

Snickering, she finished dressing, her body feeling much lighter than usual, as if she’d just set down a thirty-pound backpack full of textbooks.

She couldn’t say why.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **36: SEVEN DAYS WAS ALL SHE WROTE**

It was eighty miles from Mansfield to Branson and it took Vanessa exactly ten of those to fall asleep. Her rich turquoise eyes had dimmed as her eyelids drooped, and her smiling mouth had relaxed. She still smiled in her sleep, but only faintly.

Eric didn’t mind. She deserved it.

And—surprisingly—she hadn’t put up as much of a fuss over his commandeering her for the weekend as he’d expected. Was it possible that she hadn’t been on a *date* before? Or at least since she’d moved to Mansfield?

Yet there she sat in the deep leather bucket seat beside him, trusting his driving enough to allow herself to fall asleep. After the knots he’d worked out of her back and very delectable ass the night before, he doubted that happened a lot. In fact, he doubted

she ever allowed anyone else to drive her anywhere.

*I've never held hands with a boy before.*

Twenty-eight, sexually adventurous and completely uninhibited, but hadn't held hands? That didn't scream "boyfriend" to Eric. About the time Sebastian had hit his third shot of tequila, he'd started to wax sappy about his wife, recounting his entire history with her in excruciating detail. Not a word about Vanessa, even in his blinding intoxication; thus, Eric had had to concede he had no reason to resent Sebastian. *Wild, Wild West* was eight years old. Sebastian had married his blonde bombshell muse, kept her perpetually pregnant, and rarely went anywhere without his children. Monogamy and fatherhood definitely agreed with the man.

Nash Piper had thrown Eric for a loop, but when one man cheerfully and immediately steps aside in deference to another man, the relationship has to be considered a wash. Considering Piper's destination, mode of transportation, and his apparent goal of removing the "ex" from "wife" once he got there, Eric knew that man had no lingering interest in Vanessa whatsoever.

The possibility that Vanessa's relationships with them hadn't been . . . well, *relationships* . . . hadn't occurred to him. Eric had met very few women who didn't equate sex with love, at least for a little while, or who didn't use sex to earn love. After Heather's library-only companionship, the girls who knew the score held less and less appeal for Eric and the girls who didn't were sitting ducks for a man of Eric's prowess. He'd grown uneasy with that kind of power imbalance, so he'd been fairly careful in the girls he'd chosen to have sex with—and had had to learn how to seduce with patience and care and strategy, acquiring what he considered to be a valuable skill. As for the girls he'd dated seriously and long-term without sex, well, he liked that for what it was: a real chance to get to know a woman without sex to disguise incompatibilities.

Vanessa had a classification of her own and it was entirely foreign to Eric. Had neither Sebastian nor Piper ever taken her anywhere? Taken her out, showered her with fun and conversation and laughter? And if not, why not? Had that been at her insistence or theirs?

Considering Vanessa's eagerness to get down to business the minute he'd shown up at Whittaker House, he now began to wonder if either of them had even bothered to

seduce her at all—or had just railroaded her into bed. Sebastian was sixteen years Vanessa's senior, his sexual history splashed on canvases around the world, and she'd been twenty. Piper was ten years her senior and would have been used to groupies and immediate satisfaction. Eric could see how she could have been completely overwhelmed by both men, with no chance to think, much less say no.

Eric had tried that tactic a few times himself, but it had never turned out well.

He looked to his right and saw this woman, sleeping. Snoring. Just a little. His mouth quirked.

There was no trace of the little girl whose hope had shone bright in her face, the one he'd walked away from.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Eric had thought, perhaps, his obsession with Vanessa would wane if he spent enough time with her. That, perhaps, it really was gratitude driving this train and that it would fizzle out before it crashed, and if not that, then he'd end up tripping over that damned painting, the *Esquire* and *Maxim* covers. Whittaker House.

Her fame, her beauty on display, her accomplishments, all of which might have intimidated him, except . . .

*Your job . . . it's so much more important than mine . . . I'm a . . . luxury. You're a necessity.*

. . . this successful woman valued him, his accomplishments and goals, believed in his potential.

She shifted toward him. Snorted.

Eric hadn't planned to come to Mansfield this weekend at all. Being alone all week with his thoughts, very little email or phone contact between them—and none initiated by Vanessa—had fostered doubts and insecurities in him he hadn't had since he'd run up against uncompromisingly chaste Heather his first week at BYU.

A couple of times, he had allowed himself to fantasize about living his life with Vanessa. It was so easy to see her at his side, the nice, pretty lady he'd met at Chouteau Elementary that night. Vanessa would lend him credibility because of what she had built, because of her unflagging graciousness and charm, because of her exquisite sophistication. There would be no stern looks from the governor as to the behavior of

Eric's dinner companion, that was for sure.

Still, there was *Wild, Wild West*. The magazine covers. Eric could think of a few ways those could be spun—all bad, which boiled down to the fact that it wasn't appropriate for someone with conservative values to pose semi-nude, though neither he nor Vanessa could be defined as true conservatives. For those who understood the difference between a libertarian and a conservative, it would make no difference and, in fact, might enhance his standing. The religious right would have a "moral" problem with Vanessa, but without a right-wing candidate who could win, they would take what they could get.

And, as Glenn had pointed out, if it came out that Vanessa had been the one to provide the proof of Eric's innocence, well . . .

His opponents and enemies would have a field day with that.

Eric sighed.

It didn't matter. No matter how much he wanted to, he knew he couldn't ask it of her. She would never leave Whittaker House for him, for his career, had said as much.

Annie had what he needed in a wife, but he couldn't go back to that type of relationship. Not now. Now Eric was spoiled. Greedy.

He wanted it all: a political powerhouse of a wife he could love, quiet companionship, hot sex.

With Vanessa, he could have had that.

But by Thursday afternoon, elbow-deep in cops, evidence, and witnesses—with Vanessa reluctant to speak or write, and Eric knowing she'd been right all along about the reasons not to get involved—he'd decided just to break it off, leave it alone, and get on with his life.

*You should, um, just stay there until it's over with. You know, no distractions.*

Exactly. He could not afford to spend time building a relationship right now. Even if she came to see him, even if she were willing to communicate long distance, she would distract him. He'd spend every second thinking of her and make stupid mistakes: the little ones, the ones that would stack up until they were insurmountable, which he wouldn't realize until he tripped over his stupidity in front of a judge and jury, on a capital case that was as important to his career as it was to the county and the principles of justice.

But . . .

**r u coming fri?**

One line of text on his phone sent from a Mansfield number, but not from one that belonged to Vanessa.

Vachel.

That could mean only one thing. If Eric knew nothing else about that kid, it was that if he wanted Eric to ignore him, he would go to ground. If he wanted attention, he'd go to great lengths to get it, but he had never requested anything of Eric straight out. He had to want Eric to come for the weekend to be so direct.

**yes dont tell v—dont hunt or fish.**

**u work dinner fri & close.**

**run wh sat-sun.**

**going away 4 wkend.**

Eric didn't know where the hell that had come from, but it had flowed from his thumbs so easily.

He found himself on the road Friday at five o'clock sharp, letting his staff deal with some of the minutiae of the case that was starting to draw media attention. He had to win that woman's conviction. If he didn't win it, the county would want him to deal with her some other way—the way Knox had taken care of Parley.

But Knox had been young and inexperienced when he'd lost the trial that set a serial killer free, and he'd reacted in naïve outrage. Eric was a seasoned trial attorney with a bright future. He couldn't afford to do it even if he wanted to; he not only needed to get a guilty verdict, but to win a sentence on death row for the county.

It was a painstaking process.

Eric really shouldn't have gone anywhere, but he needed the break and Vanessa needed to be taken care of.

Clear as day.

Vanessa could take care of everyone—

She could rescue Knox whenever he'd found himself strapped for cash, then let him go on his merry way without a word to let him know she still needed his help. She could take on a troubled teenage boy as his legal guardian, make sure he got everything he wanted and needed to become a productive member of society. She could take care of the old man at the back of her property without his knowledge, because he'd resent it otherwise. She could hide a country star so well that for three years the world was convinced he'd died. She could supply employment for half a Mormon ward, and room and board for the area's missionaries. She could provide business opportunities for the area's craftsmen and get their products showcased nationwide.

—except herself.

They rolled into Branson and Vanessa stirred. Awoke. Looked around to see where they were. Without a word, she pointed the way to Silver Dollar City. Yawned. Stretched.

He parked and tugged her out of the car, then twined his fingers with hers. She smiled shyly and looked away.

"Nice nap?"

She blushed. "I'm sorry."

"Not a problem. You needed it."

"I'm sore," she said. "In my butt. I think you rubbed too hard."

"Yeah, and you need more of that. Go to your spa next week."

Vanessa sighed.

"Have you ever been on a date?" he asked abruptly, snapping her attention back to him.

"Well, yeah," she said after a few seconds. "Guys asked me out, if that's what you mean."

"What'd you do on your dates?"

She shrugged. Pursued her lips, as if she had to think about it. "Dinner. Movie. The usual."

"Did you have any boyfriends?"

She huffed. "Why are you still harping on that?"

"No, I don't mean them. I mean *boyfriends*. Dating. Going out, having a

relationship.”

Her mouth tightened, but then she sighed and her body released its sudden tension. “Well, no. I haven’t. Nobody asked me out after two or three dates, when they figured out I wasn’t going to sleep with them for a while. If ever. And no, I haven’t been on any dates like what you talked about. *Bowling*. Miniature golf. Good Lord. I guess I never really thought about it.”

“Knox told me you weren’t the most accessible woman in the world.”

She shrugged. “I got spoiled early, but— Honestly? Most men bore me. And I just saw too many smart women get stupid over a man and I am not stupid. Or at least, not that stupid.”

“Do you think this is stupid?”

“I’m here, aren’t I?”

His mouth twitched, satisfaction washing through him in a wave. “So . . . I’m your first.”

Vanessa laughed. “Yes, I guess you could say that.” She turned and walked backward in front of him, keeping firm hold of his hand, looking into his eyes. “You know, I *really* don’t like how you swooped into my business and took over, but you work hard and help me out. You got so much done for me I could kind of take a breather for a while. What you got done— It’s why I can’t be mad about today. I’ve never had that. I appreciate it and I . . . enjoy being with you. That week— I know I was acting weird. But I liked knowing you were near, even if I didn’t have a chance to talk to you or see you. Liked knowing I’d get in bed and there you’d be, even though we didn’t do anything. I trusted you with my baby and I started to depend on you. It was very . . . odd . . . for me. It still is. Mostly because I know I can’t allow myself to get used to it.”

Eric studied her. She returned his gaze second for second until she stopped walking and allowed him to press into her with his next step. He bent to taste that sweet mouth of hers, knowing he was falling in love with her—*wanting* to—yet still without a clue how to arrange his life, his goals, to include her. He could see her with him, that gracious innkeeper sitting next to him at a state dinner giving him strength and credibility even as he took care to give her the fun and laughter she’d never had, to work out the knots in her back, to seduce her slowly over days and weeks and months and years.

Their kiss deepened and he released her hands to cup her face between his. She sighed through the tangling of their tongues, making him ache for her, all of her, not just between the sheets, but by his side.

At midnight.

Holding hands.

On a stage with an American flag behind them, red, white, and blue balloons falling around them, confetti flying, staring into the faces of thousands of people packed into a convention center chanting “U-S-A,” enormous vertical banners with his name and the states’ names bobbing above the crowd, the arena speakers blasting adrenaline-pumping rock which kept the floor thundering from feet stomping in time.

*Marry me, Vanessa.*

*Come with me, Vanessa.*

Nine years ago in Utah, he’d packed a U-Haul and driven twelve hundred miles straight home, parked it in the Chouteau County courthouse parking lot, and gone into the office he’d last seen as a seventeen-year-old loser nobody, fresh out of jail.

Newly minted diploma in hand, he’d walked through the bullpen, into Knox’s office, and dropped it on the desk in front of him.

*Hilliard, I want your job.*

*Why?*

*I got a plan.*

*Which is?*

*Attorney general. Governor. President of the United States. As of your fortieth birthday, you hand off your job to me. If not before. In the meantime, you make me your executive.*

*Why have you not informed me of this before now?*

*You were too busy grilling me about my grades. I could never get a word in edgewise.*

*Mmmm. Okay, well go find a place to live and take a shower because you stink. Then I expect to see your ass planted somewhere in this office tomorrow morning at eight, in court at nine for arraignment. File cabinet’s over there. Find those fucking employment papers and do whatever you’re supposed to do with them.*



The kiss softened and he opened his eyes to watch her. Her eyes still closed, she whimpered into his mouth, which meant only one thing—and for that, they could have just stayed in bed.

He knew how she tasted, how she felt, how well he fit inside her. How she made love and fucked and had sex—and she was very good at it. He had only worn a condom with her once, and the lack thereafter didn't bother him.

He knew how she worked, how she made money without the benefit of location-location-location, how she drew people to an inn with no technology available as part of the package and, in fact, advertised her lack of technology as an attraction. How she tended guests and treated those she considered her family, how she loved them: Quiet. Solid. Constant. In deed, without pretty words.

He knew how she coddled the volunteers who worked at Rocky Ridge Farm's museum and gift shop, with her offerings of cookies and gossip. He knew the grove where she went to meditate, to find some measure of peace in her chaotic world, how she cherished those moments in the woods behind Rocky Ridge Farm where she sat and spoke with Mrs. Wilder as if she were right there—in the grove where they'd worshipped together early one Sunday morning in May as the sun rose, and she'd cried his name to the gods.

Eric needed to know how Vanessa laughed, how she played. He needed to draw out her entire range of emotion, something other than the carefully controlled innkeeper's face she presented to the world, something other than the heartbreak he had seen all too often directed his way.

"Vanessa," he whispered into her mouth. She opened her eyes and pulled away just slightly. "I could kiss you forever."

She began to smile.

"But I can't kiss you and ride roller coasters at the same time."

She laughed and turned, tugging at his hand. "Then let's get that done so we can go back to kissing."

They reached the entrance of the amusement park, and she stopped. Looked around, as if seeing the world for the first time. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Eric watched her enjoy the sweet Ozark air and the feel of having no responsibility for the

day, her body relaxed if not because of his massage, then because he'd given her permission to have fun with no purpose.

She opened her turquoise eyes and smiled at him, the corners of her eyes crinkling. "Thank you, Eric," she whispered. "This is the nicest thing anybody's ever done for me. Well, you know," she amended with a laugh, "except for Knox rescuing me from LaVon and giving me a life."

He grinned, and lifted her hand to his mouth for a kiss.

They walked into the park, and once Eric looked around to see exactly what Silver Dollar City was, he sighed. Knott's Berry Farm all over again, with its 1800s Ozarks hillbilly feel, log buildings, period dress, train around the park, stores and stores of handicrafts—and very few rides. He hated parks like this, but it was the only thing he could think of on short notice when he didn't know the area. On the other hand . . .

*She* was having a blast.

Eric watched Vanessa soak it up, every detail, her grin wide, her eyes crinkling. He loved her crinkly eyes.

"I'm hungry," he announced.

"I've heard good things about that restaurant right there," she said, pointing to what seemed a decent place to eat. "I mean, you know, for a place that serves regular food."

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

She laughed.

The day passed in a blur for Eric, not because he wasn't having fun, but because he spent it watching Vanessa do exactly what he had wanted to see her do, what he had brought her here to do. They stood in line for the saloon show and she tucked herself in his arms. "Have I adequately demonstrated a willingness to have fun yet?"

He burst out laughing. "Are you trying to fake me out?"

"Oh, no, I'm having fun. I just want to know what your standard is so I know what I have to look forward to tonight."

"Eh, I told you. It's not always about the sex."

She harrumphed. "That's supposed to be the girl's line, isn't it?"

A costumed saloon dancer pranced by, in deep purple satin and black lace, hollering at the crowd to get everyone excited. "I could see you in that dress."

“Not in purple, you can’t.”

“Okay, pink.”

“That’s more like it. Maybe I’ll have one made for the masquerades this year.”

“Mmmm, I want to see that. So what’s with all the pink?”

“Do you remember how Laura hated the pink ribbons? How she wanted to wear the blue ones Mary got to wear?”

“Yes.”

“I have brown hair. Like Laura. So I wear pink. Like Laura. Whether she wanted to or not is irrelevant. She wore it and I like it.”

Vanessa had to sample food from every booth and restaurant and shop. She took one look at a kiosk tucked into a corner of a garden and said, “Stay here.” He watched her jog toward it, pick out several pieces of what looked like jerky, pay, then trot right back.

“Try this,” she said, and shoved a stick of it in his hand. He looked at it warily; something about beige jerky didn’t seem kosher to him.

“What is it?”

“Try it.” She proceeded to bite off a huge chunk of hers and closed her eyes, chewed slowly, sighed in over-enthusiastic ecstasy.

But he took a bite of his. Chewed. Wondered what the fuss was about. “It tastes like spices and . . . something chewy. This could be tofu for all I can taste anything.”

She opened her eyes, scowled at him, and took a bite of his. She blinked. “Oh, you’re right. Too bad, too. Interesting concept.”

“Well?”

“Yours is kangaroo. Mine’s crocodile.”

Eric gaped. “I ate a kangaroo?”

“No! You ate a *bite* of kangaroo.” She offered him hers. “Want a taste?”

“Fuck no, Vanessa. I don’t have a cast-iron stomach.”

Vanessa laughed wickedly and said, “Want to know what’s on the menu tonight?”

He rolled his eyes. “Rattlesnake.”

“How did you know?”

“Are you serious?”

“And cottonmouth. With an apricot glaze. Over native rice. Served with a Caesar

salad, ho hum, but it goes well.”

“How do you make that sound halfway decent?”

“It’s my job.”

She ordered quantities of jarred preserves and fruit butters, marmalades and pickled everything. Every time she arranged for shipment to Whittaker House, the clerks got stars in their eyes. One chef came out of his kitchen to speak with her and she was as gracious as she ever was.

More than a few of the park’s guests recognized her. The first time she dug a Sharpie out of her little purse to sign autographs, Eric started.

“I don’t go anywhere without a couple of these,” she muttered once the little crowd dispersed.

“You’re not supposed to be working,” he grumbled.

She shrugged. “I’m not going to be rude to people; it’s just not good business. And I like food. I like to eat. I can’t sample every single thing right here, right now. When I get home, I’ll sift through it all and see what I can use and what I can better and what I can’t stand.”

“Why’d you become a chef?”

“You read my *Esquire* interview. You know why.” He stared at her and her mouth twitched. “It’s not the *right* question.”

For the life of him, he couldn’t figure out what the right question was.

She pursed her lips and drew in a deep breath. “I was starving to death by the time Knox rescued me. I weighed maybe sixty, seventy pounds tops. LaVon spent her time sitting in the diner smoking and eating. I guess it didn’t occur to her that if she wanted me to get my own food, she should probably go shopping for some. I was grubbing around in trash cans at night, when no one would see me, and the bad part was that my father made a good living. It wasn’t like we didn’t have money.

“Pops was at work at the GM plant in Fairfax, so he ate there and by the time he got home, he was too beat to notice what wasn’t happening in the kitchen. He must have assumed LaVon had taken care of dinner. Simone— Well, Simone had the survival instincts of a tomcat. Sometimes Dirk’s mother would notice me and get me to stay for dinner, but I was proud and refused more often than not—until I got so hungry I couldn’t

say no.”

Eric shook his head. No matter how crappy his life had been, he had never starved.

“Anyway, after the first time Knox fed me, I determined I would never go hungry again. Like Scarlet. I didn’t have any pride left. I was too hungry and I would’ve gone to Dirk’s mother and begged.”

“So the right question is: Why did you decide to specialize in cooking weeds and roadkill?”

Her eyes crinkled. “No matter what happens, I can go into the woods and have a decent meal.”

“*Esquire* asked you that, too, and you just said you wanted to be unique.”

She shrugged. “Guilty as charged.”

“So that’s also why you learned how to butcher animals. But you don’t hunt.”

“I *can* hunt, and I can fish with my bare hands. I just don’t like to. Anybody can kill the animal. Butchering it’s, well, it’s an art.”

“And what you love most about cooking.”

“Yes.”

They strolled along, still holding hands, but Eric knew where he wanted to go next.

“Pink,” he said as he handed her a saloon girl outfit at the tintype shop. “Not that anybody’ll be able to tell what color it is.”

He watched her shimmy the outfit over her blouse and shorts, then put her hair up with the pins provided and slide a large feather into it. Instant hard-on. Eric loved undressing her, seeing her bare body, but it was when she dressed provocatively that he could barely resist her. The painting. The *Maxim* and *Esquire* covers. When he’d dressed her three weeks ago.

That costume had him straining against his fly—and she was fully clothed underneath it!

He chose the piano player costume and they posed for the camera in classic cheesy Americana nostalgia: he sitting on a chair and her standing beside him, her knee up, her booted foot on the chair between his legs.

“Hold on,” Vanessa said abruptly and put her foot down on the floor. In front of the line of people behind them, she ripped open Eric’s fly and pulled out part of his shirttail,

then rumbled his costume a bit more. She took the bowler hat off him, mussed his hair—  
—and all the while the people in the line behind them began to hoot.

Eric rolled his eyes when she chuckled.

“Okay,” she muttered as she arranged herself on his knee, spreading her legs wide and hiking her skirt almost to her torso. She chucked her neckline down until all that gorgeous golden skin was exposed almost to her nipples, then grasped Eric’s hand and drew it over her shoulder. “Here you go,” she breathed, sliding his hand into her bodice until she had it curled around her breast, her nipple nudging his thumb.

“Uh, Vanessa . . .”

“I told you I was an exhibitionist,” she whispered and wiggled her butt against his hard-on. “Play along. You know you want to.”

The photographer whistled as he waited for Vanessa to finish, and Eric really didn’t mind so much that she took his other hand and wrapped it high around the inside of her thigh. She draped the skirt fabric over his hand and he used the opportunity to slide it all the way up and inside her shorts and panties. She gasped and she looked at him, wide-eyed.

Choked when he slipped his fingers up inside her, but then she regained some measure of composure.

He looked straight back at her and raised an eyebrow.

Smirked.

The people in line hooted louder.

“Turnabout, et cetera,” he purred, thinking there were worse kinks than this.

She huffed and grasped his crotch, then looked at the photographer.

“Ready now.”

The wolf-whistling and hooting crowd had attracted even more attention and by the time Eric dragged Vanessa out of the shop, each with their digital “tintypes” in hand, he couldn’t think of much else but getting inside her.

“Okay, you’ve adequately demonstrated your willingness to have fun,” he muttered. “Find me a place to fuck you silly where we won’t get arrested.”

“Oh, no!” Vanessa squealed, laughing as she danced out of his reach. “Payback is hell, *bad boy*. Weren’t you the one all proud of your ability to control yourself?”

“Yeah, that was before I found out my girlfriend was about to come in the middle of an amusement park while twenty people watched me finger-fuck her.”

She stilled and her smile melted a little.

*Oh, shit.*

She tilted her head a bit. “Girlfriend?” she asked softly.

Hard-on gone. Just like that. He looked at her. “I’d like to be able to say that about you, yes,” he answered carefully. “I thought we covered this out in the parking lot.”

“Oh,” she breathed, as if it hadn’t occurred to her that if *he* was *her* boyfriend, *she* was *his* girlfriend. “Um . . .”

“Look, Vanessa,” he said matter-of-factly, “the only evidence anybody has that you slept with Sebastian is that painting and he’s not admitting anything. Even if he did, it could be chalked up to a figment of his imagination. Loads of plausible deniability. Nobody knows about Piper except me because if they did, it would’ve been in the tabloids long before he left.

“You’re here, with me, in public. You haven’t made any effort to hide me and we practically had sex in your dining room, where anybody could have walked in. Everybody at Whittaker House knows where I sleep when I’m here, *including* Knox and Justice *and* Vachel. If I didn’t mean something more to you, you’d have tucked me away somehow, minimized me to some secret little tryst the way you did Sebastian and Piper.”

She opened her mouth, but he held up a hand and she snapped it shut again. “And I don’t want to hear about whatever gratitude complex you might think I have.”

Vanessa’s expression hardened with irritation. “I don’t think that.”

“Are you *sure*?”

She stamped her foot. “Eric, I don’t know that boy. I don’t know what happened to him. Intellectually, I know you’re him, but . . . not. You— *You* are real. The more time I spend with you, the less real that boy is and I don’t care about him anymore. He’s *gone*. He doesn’t matter because he doesn’t exist and he may never have existed. Maybe it was a dream I had and can barely remember now.” Eric heard the urgency in her voice, watched her grand gestures to emphasize her words, and hope exploded in his chest.

“And I’m not that little girl anymore, either, with a crush on the big badass of Chouteau High. I’m a woman, spending time with this, this wonderful man. But it . . .

with *you* and *me*—because everything I have is because of you and everything you have is because of me—it feels different than I thought it would. It’s just— *Girlfriend*. It’s so . . . *official*. I’ve been a lover and a muse and a friend. I can maintain my independence. I have never been a girlfriend and I’ve never been with a man who wanted a girlfriend.”

“Because you don’t do official.”

“Not unless I declare it official myself, no. This,” she mumbled, waving a hand at him. “This is strange. We do things on your terms and I . . . I go along with it. I don’t know why.”

“*My* terms?” he asked, incredulous. “If I asked you to come up to Chouteau City, just once, would you?”

“Absolutely not,” she snapped, then rolled her eyes when he began to chuckle. Huffed again.

Eric reached out, took her hand, pulled her into him. She relaxed against him when he wrapped his arms around her. He kissed the top of her head.

“C’mon. We have rides to ride.”

Two roller coasters and a plume ride later, they strolled toward the train depot, Vanessa curled up against Eric’s body, his right arm around her. She had his left hand enfolded in both of hers, pressed into the valley between her breasts.

They kissed softly with nearly every slow step they took.

“Tell me about your father,” she said whispered against his mouth.

Shocked to his core, he stiffened and tried to withdraw from her, but she tightened her grip, kept him close. “Eric,” she murmured, “I thought you were all about the relationship? Please tell me.”

Dammit, she was right. Annie had always known not to ask. Not even Knox had dared pursue it after Eric had snarled at him for asking.

“He left when I was one,” he muttered. “Everybody in Chouteau County knows that.”

“There’s more,” she returned, just as quietly. “You’re too angry that I asked.”

Yes, he was, he realized with some surprise. Yet . . . he knew that, too, would be up for grabs once he started campaigning in earnest. He might as well start practicing on a



sympathetic audience.

He shrugged. “My mother, she was young. Pretty, I guess. She says she had her head in the clouds, married him. What she didn’t know was that he was married to two other women in two other states—with other kids, to boot.”

Vanessa tensed, but Eric only shrugged.

“He says he had the intention of supporting us all, but I doubt he could’ve over the long haul. But he was caught, prosecuted for bigamy and fraud, racketeering. That’s why he left. He was on the run.”

“Says? He’s alive? You’ve spoken with him?”

“He’s in prison.” Eric laughed bitterly. “In Utah, of all places. He was running a few other scams. Ponzi schemes, multi-level marketing. Stuff like that. It’s easy to scam people in Utah.”

“Have you always known where he was?”

“I started looking for him when I went to BYU, and turned out he was right up the road.”

“And you went to visit him?”

“I did. A couple of times. He’s just a broken old man. He cried when he met me, he was so happy, and I couldn’t hate him. I just . . . pitied him. I write to him sometimes because he seems to appreciate it so much, desperate for any attention from his kids. Proud of me, what I’ve done. Brags on me to his cellmates. I don’t know any of my other siblings, where or who they are or how to find them. Not that I’ve tried,” he admitted.

“You look— In high school, you didn’t look Italian. Now you do. I think— It’s however long your hair is.”

“Let’s just say my mom wasn’t happy when I got my hair cut right before I left for college.”

“Because you look like your dad?”

“*Exactly* like him, she said. Except taller.”

“I bet she’s proud of you now, though.”

“Oh, yeah. She’d like it if I participated in the tribe more, but they’re in Oklahoma and I have a life that I established before I really got interested in what the tribe does.”

They continued their walk and suddenly Eric realized they were in their own little

bubble in the middle of an amusement park packed with adults and screeching children. The currents of people flowed around them harmlessly, like water around a rock in the middle of the stream.

“Your mother changed her name. Why didn’t you change yours?”

“Oh, I did. The minute I turned twenty-one. BYU’s crawling with linguists, so I found one to help me choose an Osage name. I officially ditched Niccolò and took Tsexobe as my middle name. It’s the Osage word for spider.”

“Oh, that’s pretty.”

“My mother was disappointed I didn’t change my whole name, but by that time, I’d met my father, and considering I didn’t end up in prison the way I figured I was going to, I got some idea I could turn the name around.”

He stopped. Took a deep breath. Remembered. “I sat there in those mandatory religion classes at BYU, and listened to my professors talk about heritage and genealogy. I started poking around. There’s an artist. Giovanni Battista Cipriani. He’s my however-many-greats-grandfather. I don’t care for the art much, but if people know the name Cipriani, it’s because of him, not my father, and his name is worth something. He might have been an asshole. I don’t know. At least he contributed something to the world.”

“But you identify with your mother’s people.”

“And my mother’s religion, yes,” he said slowly. “My ancestors. The warriors. The Osage were a very sophisticated people.”

“The tattoo?”

He cast her a grin then. “The *spider*,” he said, “is patient. She watches and waits and lets things come to her.”

Vanessa’s mouth melted into a delighted smile. “That’s *you*!”

“For the most part, except . . .” He took a deep breath. “Why don’t you want to talk to me on the phone during the week, return my emails?”

Her smile vanished and she looked away. “I’m busy,” she muttered.

He tucked a finger under her chin and directed her to look up at him. “Try again.”

“I—” She pressed a hand to her mouth, tears suddenly glimmering in her eyes.

When she didn’t continue, he said, “You’re scared.” She gulped. “You don’t like the word ‘girlfriend.’ You think if you get attached, you’ll lose control of your life. You get

involved with men who don't ask anything of you emotionally and aren't prepared to give you anything, either. You said so yourself."

"That's fine for you to talk," she snapped, jerking away from him. "Annie? Friends with benefits? Only not so honest as me, all done up with an engagement ring and wedding plans."

"Okay, you got me there," he snapped back, irritated that she'd pegged it so fast, irritated that they'd gone from simpatico to scrimmage in a heartbeat. "But at least we had a relationship."

"Oh? Does *she* know about your father?"

Eric's head exploded. "Don't throw that back at me."

"Ding ding ding, and the answer is no, she doesn't." Vanessa pointed at him. Glared. "Don't you lecture me on my emotional unavailability when you don't have a decent track record, either. We are *poor trailer trash*, both of us. I don't know about you, but I don't want some random attachment to drag me back into that kind of drama. I hate drama.

"I still can't look at Vachel without feeling like I just dropped back into the trailer park. Every time I see him, I hurt because there's nothing I can do to help him. He has to climb out himself and you know what? He never will. He's an insomniac. He wears kilts and buckskins and wishes he'd been born in 1790 in Scotland, and spends most of his time in the woods hunting. He has no friends his age because he doesn't want them and his only real friend is a man who was old when the Civil War started. He rarely speaks. *He sleeps in trees*. He's only thirteen, but he's a complete mess. God only knows how he's going to turn out.

"And when Knox died—" She choked, putting one shaking hand over her mouth and staring at Eric, tears streaming down her face. "Justice called me that night to tell me. I couldn't move. I just sat in the middle of my office and cried but then— He *wasn't* dead. But I still couldn't do my job very well, and I was in the middle of my busiest season, my masquerades. The man who'd rescued me, educated me, fed me—my *dad*—was hovering between life and death for two weeks, in and out of the operating room, *after* he died once already. I couldn't imagine my life without him in it and if he had— No matter how mad I get at him, I think about that night and it . . . doesn't matter.

Because I'd rather have him *alive* and not helping than *dead* and not helping."

Eric felt every word, sharp and hot, slicing through armor he didn't know he had.

"This weekend stuff and, and emails and, and phone calls— Text messages? What the *hell* is that all about? Do real people in real relationships communicate that way? I don't want that. It's not real. It's just fantasy and I don't have time to waste on fantasy. Two hundred and fifty miles, Eric. Me with Whittaker House and you with the White House. I *refuse* to play that long-distance game and call it a relationship.

"If you want a real relationship with me, you're going to have to give up everything you have—your goals, your dreams, everything—and move here and convince me that you, that a relationship with you, is worth the kind of hurt that love brings with it. If you can't do that, you can just go home right now and *stay out of my life* because it killed me when you left the first time, and again when you left the second time. And it's going to kill me now. You make me have drama! Do you understand that? *I don't want drama*. Don't bother taking me home. I'll find my own way and I'll box up your stuff and ship it back to you."

She turned and walked off, holding her tintype in one hand and dashing tears away from her face with the other. Her streaked ponytail bounced in time to the angry stride of her long golden legs. He watched her go, unable to stop her, the words she'd sighed into her pillow last night as she fell asleep under his hands echoing in his head.

*I love you, Eric. Stay with me.*

\* \* \* \* \*

### **37: LAWYER BARNES**

October 2010

"Got an overnight order, Boss. You're gonna have to tell me what to do because it

looks like a prank to me.”

Vanessa nodded at her assistant, then skillfully flipped the mess of wild onions, apples, black walnuts, and cranberries sautéed in lemon-infused

lard. She drizzled a sweet white from Stone Hill Winery over her concoction, then lit it up.

“You want to try this, Curtis?” she called over her shoulder where he sat at the staff table watching Fox News.

“Shore, honey.”

The kitchen ran on skeleton staff on weekdays in the fall, and right now, things were especially slow. There were no families at Whittaker House and few enough other guests that only six tables sat in the dining room. The permanent residents usually ate in the kitchen with the staff and the missionaries. Right now, Vanessa had lots of time to experiment and tape a year’s worth of *Vittles*, the production crew ensconced in the cottages and their meals provided. Why had she never thought of it?

With both a night and day concierge (the one Eric had surprised her with), she didn’t have to personally greet many of the guests or see to their needs herself.

With Knox coming every weekend to help her again (*Uh, yeah, Eric kind of kicked my ass. I’m really sorry, Vanessa. I wish you’d said something.*), she had caught up with those items on her to-do list that only she could do and—

“Have you ever thought about writing a cookbook?” Knox asked her one Saturday afternoon.

Vanessa paused. “Yes,” she said slowly. “But I’ve never had time.”

“Eh, well, Justice is second chair on that case Eric has, so I never see her, and my last class on Friday is at eleven. If you want, Mercy and I can come down early on Fridays. That should give you time to work on it. Would you like that?”

She blinked. “Really?”

“If that’s something you want to do, yeah. Be happy to help.”

“Oh, yes, Knox. Thank you!”

Vanessa doused the flame and slid the mess onto a pewter plate, garnished it with a couple of grapes and took it over to her guinea pig. His wizened black face topped by that shock of white curly hair bent over the plate and he sniffed appreciatively.

“Apples’n’onions,” he said reverently. “You shore can cook, Vanessa, honey.”

That meant nothing. Over the years, she’d learned that if Curtis praised a dish effusively but didn’t finish it, he didn’t like it but wouldn’t hurt her feelings. What she awaited right now was an abrupt nod and a clean plate.

“Boss? The order? Dude wants it pronto.”

She started and headed over to the packing bench to look at the ticket: *Nash Piper, Hilton-Bozeman, Montana: Three days, favorites, breakfast, lunch, dinner.*

Well, so he’d made it, and just into October, too. Fourteen hundred miles on foot, not counting however many miles he’d managed to hitch a ride, in five months.

The Whittaker House kitchen knew *Mister John Thompson’s* tastes as well as she did, so she instructed her assistant to cook the food and pack the Styrofoam-lined box accordingly. He looked at her funny, but did so. Once that was done and she bent to sign off on the packing slip, she paused and wrote,

***Not going so well here. Hope yours is better. V***

She didn’t know why she’d written that, but she had no one to talk to, and for the first time in her life she wanted—needed—a girlfriend who didn’t also inhabit Knox’s world in some way. Nash was the only person who might understand, but he was gone and she blinked away the tears.

It was done and she need not think about that anymore. At least now, thirteen-year-old Vanessa had closure, even if twenty-eight-year-old Vanessa had a hole in the middle of her chest.

Vanessa looked over her shoulder to check on Curtis’s reaction to her new dessert. “Cur—”

“Missouri prosecutor Eric Cipriani is garnering national attention . . .”

She whipped around and looked up at the TV.

Again.

But all she saw was an artist’s rendering of Eric in a Chouteau County courtroom speaking to the jury, an expression of rage on his face.

It transformed him from a suave Italian gentleman into an Osage warrior, his

battlefield a courtroom, Hugo Boss his war dress. She caught her breath at his magnificence.

“ . . . defense counsel Dirk Jelarde had entered a plea of not guilty, but today the jury convicted Tanya Williamson of four counts of first-degree murder for the June fourteenth slaying of her four children in a Chouteau City, Missouri motel. Williamson’s sentencing hearing is set for December tenth, and Cipriani has requested the death penalty. Senator Tye Afton, Republican Chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, was quoted as saying, ‘Cipriani is a fine prosecutor, a fine representative of Missouri’s commitment to law enforcement. He’s got a good head on his shoulders, innovative ideas, and a growing grassroots movement behind him.’

“Missouri’s governor also praised Cipriani after today’s verdict.”

The screen changed. The governor stood in the marble rotunda of the capitol building, his words echoing. “A year and a half ago, Eric Cipriani took the reins of the Chouteau County prosecutor’s office after Knox Hilliard made a mockery of it for the preceding fourteen years. He has turned that county around and today, I can say with great confidence and gratitude that Chouteau County has one of the finest prosecutors in the state at the helm of its jurisprudence system.”

“Governor Dixon! What do you think of Mr. Cipriani’s future in politics? Senator Afton seems to think he could be the savior of the Republican party.”

“Well, let me put it this way. I don’t care what he calls himself or what party he’s representing, I want to work with him.”

*Okay, you’ve adequately demonstrated your willingness to have fun. Find me a place to fuck you silly where we won’t get arrested.*

Vanessa watched stonily when the screen changed, showing reporters with microphones, cameras, and booms chasing Eric up the Chouteau County courthouse stairs to the prosecutor’s office. He turned on the landing halfway up and held his hands up for silence, which he got.

He looked around, his face hard, arrogant, so unlike the face she had stared into when he had eaten kangaroo jerky, ridden the rides with her, teased her about a pink saloon girl dress, and posed for a tintype with her.

*. . . that was before I found out my girlfriend was about to come in the middle of an*

*amusement park while twenty people watched me finger-fuck her.*

Today, he stood tall, proud, and broad in his navy designer suit. His Donegal beard was trimmed to its usual sharp edges, his shirt collar and cuffs still crisp, his tie immaculate.

“I want everybody to understand something,” he boomed, his voice deep and powerful. Angry. “You pull [bleep] like this in my county, I *will* hunt you down and bring you in and make *damn* sure the victims get their justice and the people of Missouri get their revenge.”

*I’m taking you to Silver Dollar City today . . . and we’re going to hold hands and ride rides and see the shows and eat cotton candy and funnel cakes and ice cream and hot dogs.*

Vanessa hurt so badly she could barely catch her breath, but she couldn’t turn away.

“What if you had lost?”

Eric’s head snapped to the reporter who’d asked that, and his eyes narrowed. “I wasn’t going to lose.”

“If you *had*,” she persisted, “would you have turned vigilante like your boss did in 1994?”

“I wasn’t going to lose,” he repeated slowly, his jaw grinding. “And that’s enough of *that*.”

*I’m going to teach you how to have some good, clean fun.*

“Mr. Cipriani! You were in the Chouteau County prosecutor’s office for six years as the executive assistant prosecutor and interim, and the last year and a half as the elected prosecutor. You’ve already begun to raise funds for a run at the Missouri attorney general’s office, and the governor has openly endorsed you for that position. Do you think you can work with a Democrat?”

He nodded abruptly. “Governor Dixon’s an honorable man and I look forward to working with him. Until I beat him in the election after that.”

“What party will you be representing?”

“Independent.”

The press corps buzzed. “But Senator Afton has been quietly championing you as an up-and-coming leader in the Republican party.”



“Then he’s been doing it without my knowledge or consent.”

“You ran and won as a Libertarian in Chouteau County.”

“I ran and won as Eric Cipriani, somebody the county knows and trusts as a prosecutor and a local businessman. I’m not completely on board with the Libertarian platform, and the difference is significant.”

“You haven’t made any secret of your aspirations to the presidency. Do you really think you can get all the way to the White House as a third-party candidate?”

“The people of this country want real change, and I’m it. When they go vote, they won’t see ‘Democrat’ or ‘Republican’ or ‘Independent’ on their ballots. They’ll see ‘Eric Cipriani’ and check the box. Okay, press conference is over, folks. I want to go home and put my feet up and pop a cold one.” With that, he turned and climbed the rest of the stairs.

*If I didn’t mean something more to you, you’d have tucked me away somehow, minimized me to some secret little tryst . . .*

The studio announcer faded in. “Eric Cipriani,” he said, “has the financial backing of some of the most powerful conservatives in the state of Missouri and the full support of conservative pundit Justice McKinley, who just happens to be on his staff. Justice McKinley’s marriage to scandal-ridden Knox Hilliard could be a sticking point in his campaign for attorney general, so it’ll be interesting to see how this all works out. See you after the break.”

Vanessa turned, numb, her head bowed. She walked over to the staff table and sat next to Curtis. She vaguely noted that he had cleaned his plate, and she tried to keep her agony to herself when he laid a gentle hand on her back.

“I guess you liked the apples’n’onions.”

“Yeup.” Good. Precisely the reaction she needed. “Cranberries ain’t native, though.”

“Color. A little zing. I can substitute something else that’s native when it’s in season, maybe sugared elderberries.”

He nodded. Got up. Shuffled, all hunched over, toward the back door, then paused with his hand on it. Turned to look back at her.

“That boy loves you, missy,” he croaked, his voice nearly broken with age and

cigarettes, whiskey and song.

Her mouth trembled and she gave him a tight smile. “No he doesn’t. I never gave him a reason to.”

The next day, the phone signaled in Vanessa’s ear and she answered it by rote. “Whittaker House. How can I help you drop out of society?”

“Yeah, you got a vacancy for a hobo with a little extra cash?”

It was all Vanessa could do not to burst out in tears at the sound of that hoarse voice, packed with heartbreak, knowing that not only had she lost everything, so had Nash.

“Yeah,” she said, sniffing.

“I promise not to call you Melanie if you promise not to call me Eric.”

Vanessa managed an entirely fake chuckle. “I don’t think that’s going to be a problem. When are you planning to show up?”

“Two, three days,” he murmured. Cleared his throat. Began again, with forced matter-of-factness. “Drivin’ a hot rod now. ’Cause I can.”

“Beats walking. Okay, I’ll clear out your suite.”

“Nah. Just clear out half your closet. Might as well make it official.”

*Don’t ever mistake sex for love because that’s when girls start getting stupid.*

She sighed, feeling very stupid.

It was too late for them, but she said, “Okay,” because she could think of nothing else to say at the moment. She’d call him back tomorrow and tell him not to return; now that she’d had the real thing, a substitute was no longer an option.

Sitting on the side of her bed that night, she carefully slid that precious, *precious* reproduction tintype out of its sleeve to look at it for the first time.

It was the only evidence she had of that flash in time when Eric Cipriani had been hers.

When he had looked at her the way she had always wanted him to.

When he had touched her with reverence and joy.

When he had taken her to Silver Dollar City to ride rides and hold hands and eat cotton candy, to kiss and stroll and talk . . .

She expected to see a leer in the tintype, some expression of lust because he’d had

his hand under her skirt, but no.

She stared at it, eyes wide, her hand shaking so badly the paper trembled.

Tears splashed onto it, onto his face, blurring the one expression she hadn't expected to see.

*I want the chance to fall in love with you.*

He had.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **38: LIMOUSINES AND SYCOPHANTS**

"Oh, you look so *pretty*," Giselle remarked when Eric limped into the dojo two weeks after he'd won that damned trial. He stopped, looked in a mirror, and grimaced. Saw half of Giselle's class—the female half—stop to stare at him. "Did Mill send you to the hospital?"

"Twice," Eric admitted, touching one of the many bruises his sensei had given him. He turned away from the scrutiny. He didn't mind the gawking outside dojo walls, but he didn't want it in his own house. "Sixteen stitches from a knife, two busted ribs."

"Sixteen? That's what he gave me. He must have his teaching slices down to a science."

"He'd better. Another quarter inch to my femoral artery and then I could've found out if Joseph Smith was right. Mill says he expects you to be working on advancement and to present yourself for your third black-belt test within the year."

Giselle stared at him. "I'm only a first."

"I told him about your little tiff with those two assholes on the Plaza and he told me to promote you to second immediately."

"Oh, so what he really wants is a detailed accounting and a choreographed recreation in front of a ballroom full of black belts."

“With handouts, including the police report. He’s got a date, a full roster, and a waiting list.”

Giselle turned back to her class with a laugh, but then snapped at them to focus on their techniques and not on Mr. Cipriani.

Eric sighed and limped toward his office.

Convicting a child-murderer hadn’t satisfied Eric’s howling need for Vanessa nor had the interviews, the photo shoots, the sudden thrust into the political and pop culture stratosphere—free publicity he needed to start on his campaign in earnest. He’d figured a week of intensive training in Salt Lake with his sensei would get his heartache cut and pummeled out of him.

No such luck.

“Fifth black, my ass. I need to be busted down to first. Maybe yellow,” he grouched as he dropped into his battered desk chair and turned on the computer. He blinked when he pulled up his accounting program, stared. Sat forward. Stared some more.

He laboriously pulled himself back out of his chair and shuffled out of his office into the workout area. He stood to the side of Giselle’s class while she taught, but as soon as she understood he wanted to talk to her she set the class to doing timing drills, admonished them to keep their minds on their assignment, and bowed herself out.

“Did our enrollment really double this last week or is that some math error?”

“Nope, it really doubled. I mean, between the governor putting you on the AG short list and you making the cover of *People* magazine, you’re in demand. ‘Prosecutor Eric Cipriani sexes up conservative politics.’”

He sighed. “Oh, well, did you explain that I’m not teaching anymore?”

He missed that.

“Yes, Eric,” she said dryly. “Your magic fairy dust has settled over the dojo. Six degrees of separation and all that. All they need is your name on the storefront. And oh, by the way, *KC Magazine* called for an interview and photo shoot, and about a dozen bloggers have had their naughty photoshopping way with your pictures. Too bad the public won’t get to see all those beautiful purple and green and puke-yellow blotches all over your face. Mardi Gras gone wrong.”

He scowled at her overt amusement.

"I just did my job," he grumbled. "No need for everybody to go all nuts over it."

Giselle's smile faded and she stared up at him. "You don't seem very happy."

He took a deep breath. "I—" He waved a hand, taking in his dojo and the courthouse across the street, the magazines with covers of his face that he just now saw piled on top of one student's gear bag. "This is fun," he said bluntly. "I like it. I'm getting where I want to go and I don't even care that I'm getting there on my looks. Just so long as I get there and I don't have to beg for money to do it."

She said nothing. Waited patiently.

"I want that. I've wanted it since I was a freshman. Maybe even before that when I had old Jenkins in my ear constantly harping on capitalism and the American way. I don't know. But I've worked for it. Kept my nose clean, did Knox's job—conspicuously. Bided my time, paid my dues, did everything right. I spun my web and waited and let it come to me so I could pounce. It's here and it's time to go to war. I *deserve* this."

"Yes, you do," she agreed quietly. "We're all very proud of you, Eric. Proud to be behind you, associated with you."

"Yeah, so why do I feel like shit?" he burst out.

She took a deep breath, in through the nose, held it, out through the mouth. Looked at the floor. "It doesn't mean much without the person you love," she murmured.

He started. "Uh, Giselle— You and Bryce . . . ?"

Her head snapped up, eyes wide. "No, no. We're fine. But when we started out together— I . . . had to give up something I wanted very badly in order to be with him. I was just remembering that. I . . . " She stared off out the front windows then and Eric could see tears sparkling in her eyes. "I would've sacrificed anything to be with Bryce, but I really had to think about it. I couldn't have them both. It was the hardest choice I've ever had to make and it *hurt*."

Even without specifics, Eric understood what she was telling him.

"Laura Ingalls Wilder," he murmured, and felt Giselle's surprise at the abrupt change of topic. "You know her work?"

"Yes."

"Not a lot of emotion in her writing."

"No," she agreed. "It's subdued. Matter-of-fact. Very, ah . . . *suck it up*." Her mouth

twitched. “Very little bitching about serious problems. No sparkle to the relationships, but strong ties and quiet love, all highly romanticized. That would appeal to a child in Vanessa’s situation, and she bought into the romance of it because she was too young to know better.”

He took a deep breath, not sure he wanted to spill his guts like this. “Vanessa said something about us, her and me, being poor trailer trash. She said she hated drama and the stupid thing was, we’re standing in the middle of Silver Dollar City, right? and she’s screaming at me, telling me I make her have drama. Don’t have a clue what she means, but *she’s* the one going totally apeshit.”

“Huh. She’s always been pretty quiet, circumspect. Always strove to be like Laura.”

“Uh . . . the painting? *Maxim? Esquire?*”

“I said she *tried*. Then Sebastian happened to her.”

Eric rolled his eyes and Giselle chuckled.

“She prays to Laura. Like a god.”

Giselle shrugged. “Well, as gods go, she’s an excellent one to have.”

Eric sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Vanessa has . . . everything. She’s smart and talented. Gracious. Beautiful.”

“The perfect wife for an up-and-coming politician.”

Indeed.

“Tell me something. Why do you think she’s still holding onto LaVon like a talisman?”

Giselle pursed her lips. “I can only guess.”

Eric inclined his head in acknowledgment of her warning.

“My Aunt Trudy—Knox’s mother—defined me the way LaVon defines Vanessa. It’s hard to break away from, especially if it happens very early in life.”

“You broke Trudy’s face,” he said wryly. “That had to’ve helped.”

Not a ghost of a smile. “Yes and no. Justice, not closure. You never really get that. You never feel . . . *clean*. Annie has the same issues with her mother.”

Eric started, his history with Annie flashing through his mind instantly. “Yeah. Her whole life is a reaction to her mom.”

*Rose and Laura didn’t get along.*

“We can talk after class if you want, Eric, but I have to get back to work.”

He shook his head and went back to his office. Talking wouldn’t help.

*You make me have drama!*

Apparently. It had been nonstop drama from the time he’d turned around one day and saw a thirteen-year-old Vanessa looking at him with *that* expression on her face.

Eric and Vanessa had been connected ever since.

Yet . . . not.

What had been his overriding goal in taking Vanessa to Silver Dollar City? To experience her range of emotion? Well, hell.

Fire

Passion

Laughter

Lust

Anger

*I’ve never held hands with a boy before.*

*Have you ever had a boyfriend?*

*No.*

Staking her claim on him publicly and with no hesitation, purposely drawing him into her fetish that, until Eric, had been hers and hers alone.

Eric sat back and groaned, rubbing his forehead and eyes as if he hadn’t already done that enough these past few months.

*I love you, Eric. Stay with me.*

*. . . stay out of my life . . . it killed me when you left the first time, and again when you left the second time.*

He was still as confused about that as he had been since he’d left Silver Dollar City five months ago. She seemed to have been trying to communicate something entirely different from what she’d actually said.

“I’ve been looking for you.”

He looked up to see Knox leaning against the doorjamb. “Just got back from Salt Lake.”

“I can tell by your scuffed-up face. See, I don’t get that. Giselle, either, but she’s a

freak anyway. Have you seen the collar Bryce put on her?”

“The ink he got around his arm is a helluva lot more permanent than a pretty choker she can take off at will.”

Knox blinked. “Take off? Serious?”

“Yeah, all is not as it seems with those two.”

“Oh, hell, he was freaky like that before he knew what it was. She just makes it okay for him to indulge his inner bad boy.”

Eric chuckled. “What’s up?”

“Well, I wanted to come congratulate the next attorney general of the state of Missouri. You’ve apparently already won the election and it’s not for a couple of years yet.”

Eric didn’t bother to respond.

“Photo shoots everywhere. You made the cover of *Details* and *GQ*, even.”

Eric grunted.

Knox took a seat on the couch across from Eric’s desk and lounged back in it, clasped his hands behind his head and stared at Eric. Chewed on the inside of his cheek.

“You spend five months preparing and trying the case of a lifetime,” he said abruptly after a moment. “But instead of going to see your girlfriend when you win, you go see your karate teacher to get the shit beat out of you. Even *I* can’t miss that. Talk to me.”

Eric shook his head and ground his jaw.

. . . *you make me have drama!*

Looked at the floor. Pursed his lips. “She . . . gave me an ultimatum. In June.” He took a deep breath. “She wanted me to pick up and move there, right then. If I wasn’t willing to do that, she’d cut me off. No email, no phone calls, no text messaging. No trying, no . . . possibility, no . . . nothing.”

“Well, I can’t blame her for not wanting a long-distance relationship.”

“You don’t get it. She wanted me to move there so we could *date*. To find out if we could have a relationship, and here I was thinking we already did.”

“Oh. Huh.”

Thinking about it suddenly made Eric mad all over again.



“You know what?” he burst out. “It was completely unreasonable for her to demand something like that when neither of us knows how it’ll turn out. And completely irresponsible of me to comply.” He sat up and glared at Knox, then poked his finger into his desk. “I may not make as much money as she does and I may not ever have anybody who directly depends on me for their livelihood, but I do have my own life and my own success. I have my own responsibilities and they aren’t any less important than hers. In fact, they’re *more* important.”

Knox’s silence only made Eric madder.

“If I had left this studio in June when she wanted me to, it would’ve crashed and burned, leaving Dirk and Giselle in the lurch. Why would I do that? I just got elected in a landslide in spite of what happened with Simone, which means that this entire county trusts me to protect them regardless of what I may or may not have done. And then just . . . resign? Are you fucking kidding me? Oh, poor Vanessa, *forced* to be all alone down there in the Ozarks with her weekend CFO and her fucked-up nephew and her pet missionaries and a filthy rich old man who lives in a broken-down cabin on the back forty like he’s a Lynyrd Skynyrd song come to life. Yeah, color me guilt-ridden.

“And you know what else? Because I didn’t give in to her then, this dojo can stand on its own now. If I left, Dirk and Giselle would do just fine as long as they keep my name on it. Nobody in Chouteau County expects me to stay now that the governor’s tapped me and the powers that be at the RNC are kissing my ass. I can just name my executive as the interim prosecutor and then she can win her own fucking election when I leave.”

Knox winced.

“Chouteau County would have a parade. The first Hilliard got rid of Nocek and iced a serial killer. His protégé put a child-murderer on death row. Who the hell knows what a second Hilliard—who’s got the nation’s ear—could accomplish, right? So whether you like it or not, whether Vanessa likes it or not, I did the right thing and I resent being the bad guy. I wanted to try. *She* wasn’t willing to compromise at all, not even so much as an email, much less come up here to see *me*.”

Eric gritted his teeth. “This is Simone all over again. I did the right thing when I spit in her face, and she punished me for it. I did the right thing in not jumping when Vanessa

snapped her fingers, and she's punishing me for it. She doesn't want drama. She says I make her have drama. So you know what? She can just continue on with her drama-less life—without me as her primary irritation. I'm a fucking idiot, getting involved with another woman in that family and don't think LaVon's any less of a nuisance than she ever was, so you can take your . . . *helpfulness* . . . and shove it up your ass."

Knox stared at him—well, *through* him. "So . . . you're just going to write her off."

"She wrote me off. She doesn't give a shit what I want."

"What *do* you want?"

Eric blinked. "I want—" And for the first time in his adult life, he couldn't finish that sentence immediately. "Too much, apparently," he muttered finally. "I want her with me on the campaign trail, waiting for me in Jeff City when I come home at night. First Lady. Of Missouri. Then the United States."

"But . . . ?"

"But I also want to be with her at Whittaker House," he admitted, low. "Taking care of the place so she can cook. Raising Vachel." He paused. "A family."

Knox stared at him stone-faced.

"There's no possible compromise that I can see," Eric murmured. "For us to have a relationship, one of us is going to have to capitulate. And it ain't gonna be me."

Knox remained silent.

"What," Eric finally snapped when the silence drew too thin for his comfort.

"That ultimatum she gave you," he said thoughtfully.

"Yeah, so what."

"You need to think about that for a while."

"What the fuck—? Hilliard—"

Knox arose and turned to leave. Stopped at the threshold. Studied the door jamb for a few seconds before speaking again. "Vanessa can be quite manipulative," he said matter-of-factly. "She constructs these schemes, see, to get people to do what she wants. Simple ones, elaborate ones. Like I do with numbers, only she does it with human nature. With asshole guests, it's a game to her, but anything more serious than that . . . With people she loves . . . She'll do it, but as a last resort. Only if she thinks she's serving some greater good and the direct approach isn't working for her."

*Well, it's not like I use my powers for evil.*

Before Eric could reply anything, Knox said, "See ya," and disappeared.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **39: NEVER BET YOUR MONEY ON ANOTHER MAN'S GAME**

Vanessa awoke with a start, her eyes popping open to the pitch black of a drizzly Ozark autumn night.

There.

Thudding knocks on her front door.

She scowled and looked at her clock. Two. Strange. Usually her phone rang, but the inn was nearly empty, the permanent residents fended for themselves, and the night concierge wouldn't wake her up unless it was something she couldn't handle herself. Then it did ring—with the ringtone Vanessa hadn't heard in months and had never thought to hear again.

She rolled out of bed and ran down the stairs, wrapping her winter robe around her.

"Eric," she whispered when she opened the door and saw his silhouette there on her porch.

"It's cold out here, Vanessa," he said, his wry tone heavily laced with fatigue. Startled into action, she moved out of his way enough for him enter. He had a duffle bag over one shoulder and a garment bag over the other. In the light of the small fire on the hearth, she watched him put his phone on the counter, drop his duffle on the kitchenette tiles, and hang his garment bag on a cabinet knob. He bent to rummage in the mini-fridge and retrieved a bottle of exotic beer before crossing the room and dropping into the club chair in front of the fire.

"Siddown," he muttered. "We need to talk."

She looked at the garment bag and back at him, where he lounged in the chair and stared at the fire, his long legs stretched out in front of him and crossed at the ankles.

Too shocked, tired—*confused*—to think, much less protest, she sat in the other chair.

“You and I,” he said, then took a long pull on his beer, “are going to a big bipartisan shindig for the governor’s birthday tomorrow night in Jeff City. Black tie. I know you have a dozen evening dresses, so don’t try to use that as an excuse.”

Vanessa studied his muscular body. Remembered how it felt.

Here he was, unexpected and uninvited and far too welcome, ordering her around—again—and not only did she not protest, she had no desire to.

“I know what you did,” he muttered, picking at the label on his bottle, “screaming at me at Silver Dollar City that day. You knew I’d call your bluff, demanding something that outrageous. Move here so we could *date*? No phone calls, no email? No communication at all? I thought you were out of your fucking mind. Pissed me off so bad.”

She wanted to see the spider web tattoo wrapped around his hip. Trace its strands with her tongue.

“Took me a while to figure it out because, as *usual* when it involves you, I get my hackles up or I get a hard-on—or both—and lose three-quarters of my IQ. So, yeah. Thank you for not letting me fuck up that trial, which would’ve fucked up my career.”

“You’re welcome,” Vanessa whispered automatically. She had nothing else to say.

He looked at her sharply. “You had that planned, didn’t you? Practiced it? Just waiting for the perfect moment to spring it on me.”

She shrugged and looked away.

“Shit, you save my ass every time I turn around the wrong way,” he grumbled, which surprised a reluctant chuckle out of her. “So,” he said after another swallow, “tomorrow. I want to see you in my world, or at least, the world I want to be part of. I want to see, just once, what it would be like if you came with me, all the way or however far I make it.”

“That’ll just make it worse for both of us,” Vanessa muttered, staring at a worn patch in her chenille robe, thinking she needed a new one.

“Maybe. Maybe not. I want the chance to convince you.”

“You just need a date,” she flashed, stung, “because your sexuality’s being called into question by the left and you’re losing credibility with your conservative base because you’re thirty-three and still single.”

“I don’t give a shit about that, Vanessa,” he snapped. “Being gay could only help me at this point, but I’m not copping to something I’m not. And another thing. I could get any date. Shit, I could get Annie on a plane down here right now if I was that desperate, which I am not, and that’s not even counting the fact that Tye Afton’s after me to hook up with his skank of a daughter.”

“*Stacy Afton?!* ” she squeaked.

“Oh, you know her,” Eric drawled smugly. “Why am I not surprised? Do you know who she’s sleeping with?”

Vanessa huffed and crossed her arms over her chest.

“Of course you do. Vanessa, I want *you*, and somewhere down deep in my gut, I feel like you owe me this. One night. One function. Please.”

She opened her mouth to protest, but shut it again. Yes, she did.

“All right,” she murmured.

“Good,” he said, finishing off the bottle and thumping it on the table. “I’m going to bed.” He hauled himself out of the chair and trudged up the stairs without another word or a backward glance.

Stunned by his familiarity, yet warmed (*thrilled*), she followed him. She dropped her robe and shivered in her tee shirt—well, Eric’s tee shirt, the one she’d neglected to ship back to him. She crawled into bed beside him, where he lay fully clothed but for his boots, already asleep, his arm slung over his forehead.

She, however, lay awake beside him and, for the first time, wondered what it would be like to leave Whittaker House to be a politician’s wife.

\* \* \* \* \*

## 40: SHOW ME

“Holy . . .” Eric breathed the next evening when he saw Vanessa at the top of the staircase in the Capitol rotunda, one of her delicate hands on the railing and the other hidden somewhere in folds of pale pink fabric overlaid in heavily embroidered-and-beaded sheer white. She’d curled her blonde-and-brunette hair and piled the curls on top of her head, then woven strands of pink pearls through them. The cut of her neckline only hinted at cleavage, but it was her elegant bare neck that grabbed and held his undivided attention for a second or two.

She looked over the milling politicians and their spouses. Waited until the noise had died a bit. Waited until every person in that room had caught sight of her and stopped speaking to stare.

Eric watched her take the first step and every step thereafter with the measured grace of royalty, her free hand gathering up just enough of her dress to keep her from tripping on its hem. She looked at him with a haughty expression that let him know she expected him to pay her immediate obeisance.

And he would.

The last time he’d seen her, she’d been darting around their hotel room in her lacy pink lingerie, hot rollers in her hair and lotion all over her face. Now . . .

No wonder she’d insisted he go on to the Capitol without her. For a woman who didn’t want to be in his world at all, she sure knew how to make it come to a dead stop.

Yet another facet of Vanessa Whittaker he had never suspected: Not the gracious innkeeper. Not the aggressive lover. Not the girl he’d taken to Silver Dollar City. Not the skilled butcher. Not the giving aunt. Not the cover-girl chef or Ford muse.

His heart pounded in his chest so hard he thought his ribs would crack.

“Well, well, well, Cipriani,” murmured the governor in his ear. Eric might have been startled but couldn’t be bothered. “You’ve come up in the world. Vanessa would be quite the feather in any politician’s cap. Stacy Afton she is not.”

He said that in such a way . . .

Eric looked at him sharply. “You know Vanessa?”

“Hell, I eat at Whittaker House as often as possible. We all do. I wasn’t aware you knew her.”

Eric’s breath left him in a whoosh and he turned back to his . . . girlfriend? Lover?

No.

Neither of those terms were right.

*Wife.*

But not.

Now, looking at this woman coming down the stairs, he figured Dirk may have been right about love, about being in love, and perhaps Eric should rethink his opinion, because what surged through him now was something deeper than intellectual and sexual attraction.

His entire life was wrapped up in Vanessa Whittaker, and her entire life was wrapped up in him. Not soul mates, no, and not fate, either, because he—*they*—didn’t believe in those concepts. The two of them existed in some state of symbiosis, bound by and ever aware of their long and strange history, yet detached from it.

No question that he wanted to spend his life with this woman.

The question was: How badly?

*I would’ve sacrificed anything to be with Bryce, but I really had to think about it. I couldn’t have them both. It was the hardest choice I’ve ever had to make and it hurt.*

Eric still didn’t know what Giselle had sacrificed to be with Bryce, but he did know what Bryce had done to keep Giselle and how desperate he had been to do it.

He knew what Sebastian had sacrificed to keep Eilis.

He knew what Knox had nearly done when he thought he’d lost Justice forever.

All of them, the most powerful men Eric knew— Powerless against their need to keep their women—and on their women’s terms.

The lesson wasn’t lost on him, but at the moment he had other things to think about. Vanessa had set this little drama in motion to present Eric as a serious contender, and he would play his part to the hilt.

He took three steps to the base of the staircase, and held out his hand. She placed hers in his palm and he lifted it to his mouth. She smiled benignly and allowed him to tuck her hand in the crook of his elbow.

“You look nice,” he murmured. *Stunning*.

“Thank you,” she murmured in return.

“I wish you’d introduced me to Queen Vanessa before now.”

The corners of her eyes crinkled, even though she wouldn’t look at him nor crack her wide smile.

“Vanessa.”

But she *would* smile at the governor. “Ray.”

The governor’s mouth twitched as he looked between them. “Does this mean I can collect on my bet?”

Vanessa curled her arm further into Eric’s. “Not necessarily.” She looked up at Eric. “My politics are the best-kept secret in southern Missouri,” she said wryly. “There’s a large number of people engaged in illegal gambling over where my loyalties lie.”

Good God, how could an entire state be that blind? Eric smirked. “Maybe we could pass ourselves off as the next Matalin and Carville.”

She laughed then and Eric watched her, enchanted. “Prettier, I hope.”

“So, uh,” ventured the governor, pointing vaguely between them, “is this permanent?”

All amusement left her face and Eric didn’t feel much like smiling, either. “We don’t know yet,” Vanessa murmured reluctantly. “We’re . . . trying to figure it out.”

“We’d like it to be,” Eric said, looking at her, daring her to deny that.

“Yes,” she agreed.

“Whittaker House is the fly in the ointment, I guess.”

Vanessa nodded.

“I can see how that might present a problem,” said Dixon soberly, then clapped Eric on the back. “Well, when you figure it out, let me know. Otherwise, I’ll expect you in the AG’s office in two years, young man.”

Eric nodded, but turned back to Vanessa simply to study her, and she stared back. For long moments they did not speak.

“I love you, Vanessa,” he finally murmured, unable to keep it to himself any longer.

Her hand tightened on his arm. “I love you, too,” she whispered, her turquoise eyes too moist.



“Please don’t cry.”

“We’re going separate directions.”

He swallowed his bitterness at the knowledge that she was right—had been right all along. “You’re killin’ me here, Vanessa.”

“And you’re making my watches melt.”

He couldn’t help his chuckle, despite his . . . pain.

That was it. He hurt.

He would take her back to Whittaker House tomorrow and leave her.

“Vanessa, come with me,” he said, desperate. “Please,” he begged. “Come with me to Jeff City, all the way to Washington if I make it that far. Please.”

“You come to Whittaker House and be my partner,” she retorted. “It’s a lot more certain than winning an election or seven. Spending your life and a lot of other people’s money on crap shoot after crap shoot.”

“More than a crap shoot,” he snapped, angry she didn’t see his goals as important enough for her to gamble on. “Whittaker House can function on its own with a carefully chosen management team.”

“I am the chef,” she hissed and vaguely gestured toward the clusters of people who had resumed their conversations, but kept eyeing them speculatively. Glasses clinked and laughter rang out and conversation hummed. “I am its face. These people—all of them—go to Whittaker House for *me*. If I am not there, it dies. You have a business with your name on it. *How* do you not get this?”

“I’ve always known I was leaving it behind, Vanessa,” he growled back. “I’ve made plans for its survival, which you could do with Whittaker House. I only have a narrow window of opportunity to get where I want to go. I need a wife to get elected and I don’t want to marry anybody but you.”

“And I want you to help me run Whittaker House and raise Vachel.”

His nostrils flared. “So that’s the end of the conversation.”

“I told you that in Kansas City, and when you left me the first time, and again at Silver Dollar City, and a fourth time last night, but you keep not believing me, thinking somehow I’m going to change my mind and leave my life behind regardless of what it’ll cost hundreds of people if I do so.”

“And the hundreds of thousands who already believe in me? I’m not Almanzo Wilder, Vanessa, much as you’d like me to be. There are a lot of people out there who’re counting on me to fulfill their hopes, who believe in me and my leadership, and are willing to work to get me there.”

She gulped. “I guess this is where you start sacrificing what you want for the greater good of a cause you believe in. You want to be a public servant? This is where you start serving the public.”

The next hour couldn’t have seemed better. Vanessa stayed with Eric and nursed a cocktail. She kept him close, posed for pictures with him, smiling, always smiling, Chef Granny Whittaker rising to the occasion with her signature graciousness. Eric listened to her chat amiably, intelligently, on a wide range of subjects, always flirtatiously sidestepping semi-playful questions as to her party loyalties. It was a game for her to keep everyone guessing, he realized, just another part of the mystique of Vanessa Whittaker: Ford muse, cover girl, eccentric chef. They couldn’t see past her public personae to the philosophies she had read and internalized from the pages of every Wilder book on the wall in her grand parlor.

Eric drifted away from her, guided by a couple of politicians who needed to speak in privacy for a few moments, but he kept Vanessa in sight and she him.

“Say, son, nice to see you here.”

Eric had vaguely noticed Senator Afton approaching from his left, Stacy in tow, but had been too far gone in thoughts of Vanessa to care. He glanced at her across the rotunda where she stood chatting, and tried to think of a graceful way to catch her eye.

“Senator,” Eric murmured.

“Hi, Eric,” Stacy said brightly.

“Stacy.”

“I saw you alone, thought I’d rescue you,” Afton murmured. “It’d be to your benefit to have a date tonight, seeing as there’s some press here. And we need to have a little chat about that potshot you took at me last month.”

“Wasn’t a potshot, Afton,” Eric muttered. “It was a declaration of war. You put me on the hook for the Republicans after I’d already told you what I decided. You knew I wasn’t going to play ball, and thought you could force my hand.”

“Then you’re more naïve than I took you for, boy. You’re never going to win on a third-party ticket. Any third-party ticket, Libertarian, Independent, Green. Doesn’t matter. You’ll be the next Ross Perot, splitting the right-wing voters down the middle and giving it up for another Democrat. Lose it for you *and* the Republican candidate.”

“Maybe so, but either way, it’ll be bad for you and your cronies if I don’t come along for your ride and I’m here to tell you: I’m not coming along for your ride. What the Republican party needs is a clean shot through the heart. Or a big dose of Viagra. You and your good ol’ boys are just too old and feeble to get it up without help.”

Afton’s nostrils flared. “You don’t want to make an enemy of me, Cipriani.”

“Politics is all about enemies, Afton.”

“You—”

“Senator,” Vanessa purred from beside Eric. He felt her hand on his back and her breasts press against him even as she held her hand out for Afton to shake. Eric wrapped his arm around Vanessa’s waist and pulled her closer. Stacy’s slightly red-rimmed eyes narrowed a bit as she looked between them.

“Vanessa,” Afton said smoothly, taking her hand gently but letting it loose quickly. “I didn’t know you and Eric were . . . an item. In fact, I wouldn’t have guessed you two knew each other at all.”

“It’s not so strange. We have Knox in common, after all,” Vanessa murmured. “Hello, Stacy.”

Stacy sneered and walked off. Eric watched her slightly wobbly gait for a second or two before looking back at Afton. “I don’t know why you’re surprised,” Eric said low. “I told you I wasn’t going to be her nanny. I also told you to get her cleaned up. She may be dressed a little better, but she’s high as a kite right now.”

Afton’s glance slid to Vanessa, who stiffened at his sudden look of contempt, before addressing Eric again. “You have some nerve,” he said tightly. “Calling my daughter a whore when this one—” He jerked his chin toward Vanessa. “—made her fame on her back, spreading her legs for King Midas.”

Eric’s left fist glanced off Afton’s chin.

Just a touch, really.

So fast no one had seen it.

Eric had no trouble keeping his cool in the face of Missouri's Who's Who turning to stare at the commotion Afton created by having fallen for no reason anyone could see.

"Are you okay, Senator?" Eric said loudly, faking great concern. "Here, let's get the *hors d'oeuvres* tray around here. You're probably starving."

Afton struggled to get to his feet, glaring at Eric when he offered his hand and refusing every offer of help.

"You little motherfucker," Afton hissed after he'd straightened himself and waved a hand to indicate that he was fine. He wasn't. He'd have a nasty bruise on his jaw in an hour. "You're going to regret that."

"Remember who you're dealing with, Afton," Eric murmured.

"A punk kid who raped a thirteen-year-old girl, is who."

"You keep singing that song and I'll put you down for good."

Afton's nostrils flared. "Are you threatening to sic Hilliard on me?"

Eric affected an amused chuckle, just for the passersby. "The thing about pissing off a prosecutor is he can get to files and records journalists and other bloggers can't, especially if he's in bed with the FBI. Hello, scandal of the century if anybody finds out where all those real estate funds went and who you're fucking—'cause you'd never survive *that*."

"Nobody'd believe any lie you tell," he sneered.

"Lie? I think not. Knox—you know, one of the best white-collar prosecutors in the country? He's been through all those old real estate deals. And there's a weasel of a reporter up in my county who got a mysterious package of pictures of you visiting your mistress."

Afton turned a little green around the gills.

"Think about who I have behind me, Afton. They *all* know what I know, and they have a score to settle with you anyway."

The man stood in front of Eric trembling in frustrated rage.

"I'll fight dirt with dirtier," Eric said. "And I'm not afraid to do it publicly if you push me too far. Now apologize to my lady."

His nostrils flared and he flashed a glare at Vanessa, then stalked off. Eric looked down to see Vanessa's flushed face and the vacant stare she directed at Eric's shirt studs.

“He’s right, Eric,” she whispered.

“Vanessa, don’t,” he begged, his frustration mounting.

“No. I would just bring you down. *Maxim. Esquire*. Those are bad enough. But *Wild, Wild West*— That Sebastian’s backing you, even though he and I— And everybody knows it— No, I can’t subject you to that, with you wanting to defend me at every turn and worse, using me to get to you about Simone . . . I can’t hack that, watching you fight off accusations you wouldn’t have to deal with if I weren’t in the picture.”

“Vanessa, you don’t understand. Afton can’t touch us—you—now.”

“I know that,” she snapped. “I’m not worried about him. I’m worried about your constituency, you know, the moral majority types. The religious right. Any way you cut me open, I won’t be acceptable to them, and that’s who matters.”

“All they’ll see is a charming woman with a collar as blue as theirs who worked hard and made it on her own. They’ll see the woman who built Whittaker House, which is a survivalist’s wet dream wrapped up in a five-star experience. They’ll see an entrepreneur who takes care of her land as well as she takes care of her people. The religious right will get over it the minute you open your mouth and *talk* about what you believe, and then they’ll fall head over heels in love with you.”

“But—”

“And in case this hasn’t occurred to you yet, the religious right isn’t exactly singing my praises. They’re willing to compromise on a couple of things, but none of those are deal breakers. If they can deal with *me*, they won’t blink an eye about *you*.”

“But—”

“You are an *asset* to me, Vanessa,” he whispered furiously, now aware that their argument was beginning to attract attention. “Don’t you get it? You had a famous lover when you were twenty. You posed *semi*-nude for an artist and two magazine covers. Big deal. There is no other dirt that can be dug up on you. On the other hand, *I* am going to be hearing about the thirteen-year-old girl I raped for the rest of my life, and every one of my opponents will be pointing at Vachel as proof. If you’re outed as the one who proved my innocence, I’m going to be accused of having raped you, too.”

“Oh,” she breathed, and he knew he’d just pushed her back into the trailer park.

“Don’t,” he growled, taking her face in his hands and kissing her. She melted into

him, that pretty lady he'd met at Chouteau Elementary.

Flash after flash went off around them, but he kept hold of her when she attempted to tug away from him. "Good press," he muttered against her mouth, then felt her smile and relax once again.

Another long moment of kissing.

He had been too long without her.

"Eric," she sighed.

"Please, Vanessa."

"No."

"Vanessa—"

"Don't push me."

Eric knew to outsiders they seemed to be exchanging the most tender of words, only reinforced by the fact that he wouldn't let her out of arm's reach. She seemed no more eager to let go of him, but they were seated with different people at dinner, so far apart they were unable to make eye contact, much less touch.

Dancing followed dinner.

Eric sought her out as soon as politely possible, and she met him, turning into his arms without a word.

"I bet Knox taught you how to dance."

She smiled, but it was sad.

Hours later, Eric helped Vanessa into her full-length hooded skunk fur cape, touching her soft skin. She turned her head and kissed his fingertips where they lay over her shoulder. More camera flashes, but neither of them cared.

Her eyes glittered when she looked up at him.

Eric had never hurt so badly in his life as he did late into the night, holding her while she cried into his chest, after they'd made love for the first time in months.

He drove her home the next day, and they kissed for long moments, each touch a memory to be stored away.

"Goodbye, Eric," she whispered when he climbed back into his car.

"Goodbye, Vanessa," he whispered, as her reflection in the rearview mirror got smaller and smaller.

\* \* \* \* \*

*It All Evens Out in the End*

\* \* \* \* \*

## **41: RAINING FISH HOOKS AND HAMMER HANDLES**

November 2010

“VANESSA!”

Vanessa sighed, stomped to her bedroom window, and threw it open. “I’M COMING! God, Knox, could you use the phone?”

“Your phone is *off*, Vanessa. I’m not out here in the cold and rain because I *like* it. Get a move on. The natives are restless.”

And Vanessa was listless.

She stared at herself in the mirror, and where stood a hot saloon girl all done up in magenta satin, black lace petticoats, black stockings held up with pink garters, and black leather granny boots, she saw only an embattled and heartbroken thirteen-year-old girl.

The elaborately framed reproduction tintype hung on the wall above her bed, and she glanced at it, wishing her piano player were here to see her, but of course, that was impossible.

Never had she dreamed that she would *not care* how well a masquerade did, no matter that this one had pulled in as much revenue as her previous four masquerades

combined. In fact, she resented this Thanksgiving's turnout for one simple reason:

Eric Cipriani, the cover boy savior of conservative politics, who'd shaken up the political landscape by blowing all definitions of "conservative" out of the water, whose love affair with Vanessa Whittaker, the cover girl chef and former Ford muse, had exploded all over politics and entertainment news the last two weeks.

Neither of them had fared well.

He was getting hammered for not having a "proper" girlfriend—one without obvious conservative philosophies, who had *also* posed semi-nude for a famous artist and two men's magazines—or, worse, for hiding his homosexuality behind a woman, thinking the old trick of having a beard would actually fool today's savvy and diverse electorate. He'd delighted the left with his apparent self-loathing, deeply offended libertarian types by not trusting them with the truth, and outraged the religious right for not embodying and promoting its definition of "conservative."

Once the media decided to rehash Eric's "rape" of Simone, it took two weeks before Vanessa was outed as Eric's savior, and their relationship had taken on a whole new dimension. As Eric had predicted, the whispers began as to whether he had also raped Vanessa—

*There is no other dirt that can be dug up on you.*

—and who was Vachel's *real* mother?

Who had *really* killed Simone Whittaker in that bar brawl in Raytown, Missouri? Had the Jackson County prosecutor covered for his colleague, the prosecutor of a neighboring county, by intentionally putting the wrong person on trial? Was it entirely unreasonable to think that the protégé of a man who'd turned vigilante would follow in his footsteps?

Craig Wells, the Jackson County prosecutor—a man who bore a deep hatred of both Knox and Giselle, and hated Eric simply for his close association with them—found himself defending Eric in order to save his own reputation.

Was Vanessa a victim? Was Eric forcing her to front him somehow, using his mentor's tricks? Was she a willing accomplice, out to further her own interests, whoring for Eric Cipriani the way she'd whored for King Midas-slash-Ford?

Vanessa's apparent affair with Sebastian had been thoroughly dissected, although



both Vanessa and Sebastian refused to comment.

Knox hadn't escaped unscathed, either, though the charges leveled at him came as a devastating shock. Had *Knox* had a sexual interest in twelve-year-old Vanessa beyond the information she'd provided to prove Eric's innocence? Had Knox delivered a naïve twenty-year-old Vanessa up for thirty-six-year-old Sebastian Taight's usage when he was done with her? Was Knox's interest in Whittaker House solely a business relationship or was there something else going on? Did Knox's wife, conservative pundit Justice McKinley—younger than Vanessa by two days—have anything to do with it? But Justice had a mouth and an audience, and a brass-balls-to-the-wall approach she'd learned from her husband. It didn't take long for detractors to wish they hadn't attracted her attention.

Then Eric's bigamist father, a broken old man begging for a scrap of attention from anybody, sat down with a reporter and poured out his whole sad history into a recorder. Clearly he was simply proud of his son, but the story had been sensationalized until it was unrecognizably filthy.

Eric's mother refused to speak to the press at all, delivering her disdain for what they were doing to her son, Vanessa, and Knox in a well-articulated statement read by the chief of the Osage nation.

One Bozeman blogger, whose day job was delivering overnight packages, took one look at Nash Piper's ex-wife and pointedly, *publicly*, wondered why Nash received so many shipments of food from Whittaker House. *Where were you all those years, Nash? Shacking up with Doc Mel's doppelgänger?* Unfortunately, that story sprouted legs and walked on water.

Then the feminist groups weighed in. Was Vanessa simply a recurrent victim of older, more powerful men's appetites, bouncing from one to another like a pinball with no way to free herself, always stuck in a repeating loop of learned self-destructive behavior thrust upon her before she even hit puberty? Should she be considered an object of pity instead of derision?

Vachel had suffered the most. At school—a place he hated anyway—he became a minor celebrity and the constant groups of people crowding him worsened his claustrophobia.

*No, Vanessa is not my mother; she's my aunt and my guardian. My mother is dead.*

*I don't know who my father is, just that it isn't Eric Cipriani.*

He changed his phone number twice, abandoned three email addresses, and went to great lengths to avoid the classmates who began to drop in at Whittaker House. Then one day Vachel had made a smart-ass quip in class that delighted his growing fan club so much they rushed him after class, making him the bottom of an overenthusiastic dogpile. Vanessa raced to school to get him when that triggered a full-blown panic attack.

The school nurse had him almost calm by the time she got there, but—

*Please don't make me go to school anymore, Aunt Vanessa. Please?*

Laura had done it for Rose when school proved ineffective at best and destructive at worst. Vanessa could do no less for Vachel.

She took Vachel home, then turned right back around and stormed the principal's office to un-enroll him.

*I should call Cooper right now and have every one of those children charged with assault and then get Knox down here to sue the district.*

*You know good and well they didn't mean any harm. They like him. They were playing.*

*I've already talked to you about this, Jason. More than a few times. And you know his history, so I can't imagine how you could let this happen.*

*Let me tell you something right now, Vanessa Whittaker. I wasn't there when it happened and I can't be the kid's personal bodyguard. Everybody likes him, God only knows why since he almost never speaks. What am I supposed to do? Order them to ignore him? Do you want me to splash his psych profile all over the school bulletin boards so people will know his issues and be sensitive to them?*

She hadn't had a good answer for that. When she found Vachel packing an ATV with his camping gear and weapons for an angry retreat into the woods, she didn't have the heart to tell him he couldn't.

*All right, then. Take some books with you. Be in the kitchen at six every night for dinner or I'll come looking for you and I guarantee you won't like it when I find you.*

LaVon seized the moment and gone on all the television talk shows, feted and dressed and paid to . . . lie. About everything. She likened Vanessa to Jodie Foster in *Taxi Driver*. (Vanessa had to look that up to understand the reference.) She cast Eric as a

predator of very young girls, Knox's boy toy, setting up a protection racket in Chouteau County, *and* having Simone killed.

LaVon accused Vanessa of kidnapping her "precious grandson, the only memory I have left of Simone," then of brainwashing him to despise the grandmother who'd taken care of him. She accused Eric of facilitating the kidnapping.

Tom Parley's murder once again rose to national attention, but federal prosecutor John Riley had retired and couldn't be contacted. No one else involved in that investigation would speak of it. LaVon took great delight in announcing to the world that not only had Knox murdered Parley, but threatened her with the same.

When confronted, Knox did what he'd always done: ignored it.

To top it all off . . .

*My daughter wouldn't give me a roof if I were homeless, which she told me to my face. I can only thank the good Lord I'm not homeless, since I can't count on the child I birthed and raised and loved—the only child I've got left.*

Whatever else Vanessa could say about her mother's television appearances, some PR person had worked a miracle to shape LaVon's deportment and speech into something devastatingly credible.

LaVon had been waiting for a way to bring Eric down since Simone had gone home crying about the way Eric had treated her all those years ago.

After sixteen years, she'd finally succeeded in hitting him where it counted, and getting back at Knox was a delightfully unintended consequence for her.

Poor Eric— But he'd known. Some of it, anyway. It didn't make Vanessa feel any better that he was prepared for it.

She wasn't.

Nor was anyone else caught in the whirl of the F-5 tornado that was LaVon Whittaker and all the baby tornadoes spinning around her.

Dirk stepped up to the plate to defend all of them—Eric, Knox, Vanessa, Sebastian—going so far as to grandstand on the Chouteau County courthouse steps. Sanguine and proper Bishop Dirk Jelarde had relayed the history in a booming performance worthy of a full-time Southern charismatic hellfire-and-brimstone preacher. Vanessa had never seen that side of him and she knew that he would never do that at church, but his theatrics

seemed so well practiced, it confused her. “It’s his courtroom Hail Mary pass,” Knox had told her wryly. “He uses it when he knows he’s losing, and occasionally it works. He’s beaten me more than once with it.”

Church members rallied around Vanessa in the only way they could, which was to give her bracing hugs whenever they saw her in town. The ladies from the Rocky Ridge Farm gift shop dropped by during the week to give *her* cookies (which Vanessa decided to feature in the gourmet grocery across the highway because they were that good). The officials and citizens of Mansfield and Ava, not to mention the troopers and deputies, shielded Vanessa and Whittaker House as much as they could from strangers who didn’t have the look of inn guests about them.

Vanessa’s PR firm came out swinging, with no compunction about waging war on LaVon and the media that had turned her into the victim *du jour*.

Vanessa’s ad agency had ramped up three full-scale marketing blitzes to counterbalance the war that, at first glance, looked like a heartless and unwarranted attack on an old woman who had been betrayed by one daughter and pined for the grandson from her dead daughter.

It humiliated Vanessa to her core to have such a public catfight with LaVon, but . . .

The reservations for the holiday masquerades had poured in, forcing Vanessa to hire a full-time event planner and an assistant for him. Thus, February was booked solid for the romantic gimmick he’d come up with: *Every day is Valentine’s Day at Whittaker House*. There were five four-day women’s conferences booked between March and July, for which the spa across the street would have to be expanded and more massage therapists hired.

Construction had begun and the golf course was scheduled to open in eighteen months, immediately after which she had four week-long corporate retreats booked back to back. Three pro golf tours had put Whittaker House on their short list for desirable venues for televised tournaments based on the design by Corey Leonard and Eric Cipriani and Whittaker House’s grandeur.

*Vittles*’s ratings had gone through the roof.

The dress Vanessa had worn to the governor’s birthday celebration made a star out of its designer, a local—and very young—seamstress overflowing with talent, who had

big dreams but little money. Over the years, the girl had designed and stitched Vanessa's entire cocktail and formal wardrobe, so she would be presenting the collection in New York as The Vanessa Collection.

The *Maxim* and *Esquire* covers had become collectibles.

So had the photograph Eric and Vanessa posed for in Silver Dollar City, which zoomed into production and circulation immediately.

Unsolicited offers for *Wild, Wild West* were rolling in, the amounts of which had astonished her.

"Oh, Eric," she whispered at her reflection. How naïve he'd been that night, thinking it'd all blow back on him and him alone. No, Eric's enemies couldn't get to him with a full frontal attack, but they could get to him by attacking his loved ones.

No, there was no dirt to be dug, but plenty that could be manufactured.

Glenn had risen to some journalistic prominence after he had posted a series of articles and documents concerning Senator Afton's financial schemes from the late 1980s onward. He still couldn't prove the identity of Afton's mistress, but as he always had, he reported provable facts and let his audience draw its own conclusions. The general consensus amongst the population was, "Eeww," and Vanessa didn't think it would be long before Afton would feel enough heat for him to resign his position. And if not . . . Glenn had muttered the words "grand jury" to her just that morning.

"VANESSA! GET YOUR ASS IN GEAR!"

Vanessa heaved a great sigh and swept down the stairs, out onto her porch to see Knox holding an umbrella for her.

He put his hand on her back to propel her down the driveway and started in. "Shit, Vanessa—"

"Stop nagging at me," she huffed. "Can't you see I'm having a hard time?"

He said nothing for a moment while they hurried toward the mansion, from which they could already hear and feel the hum and thrum of the revelers. "I'm sorry," he muttered. "About everything."

She glanced at him, surprised. "Everything what?"

"Well, Sebastian mostly. I would never have let you near him if I'd known he'd do what he did. I don't . . . see you that way, so it didn't occur to me how he would see you.

I had no idea until I saw the painting and I was pissed, but you were an adult and he wouldn't have cared what I thought. But now the press is on you about it and—I've kept my mouth shut for years, but I couldn't anymore. Don't think I didn't rip him a new one, but you know, it's eight years later and I . . . should've protected you better back then. It's all my fault."

Her eyes widened. "Oh, Knox," she breathed. "Please don't. I— Sebastian was—" She bit her lip, unwilling to talk about *that* with her *dad*. "I will never regret that, no matter what the press says. It was one of the best things that could've ever happened to me, and I don't mean about the painting or getting famous."

Knox glanced at her. "I don't understand."

She took a deep breath. "I think," she said slowly, "that if every girl's first lover was like Sebastian, she would never settle for anything less than the best. Being with him kept me from making all the stupid mistakes that my girlfriends made."

"It wasn't right," he growled. "He's almost twice your age—"

"You have no room to talk, Knox Hilliard," Vanessa flared. "Your wife is younger than I am, and Sebastian didn't blackmail me or threaten me at gunpoint. He *seduced* me. That's more than I can say for how you got two of your women into bed."

Knox snapped his mouth shut and looked away. "Point taken," he muttered. "Sometimes I don't think." No, he didn't, but he'd been at her beck and call every weekend for months, and he was here now. Not only that, but he'd brought his entire squadron of family and friends with him to deal with both the publicity and the extra business that her abrupt upsurge in celebrity had garnered. It didn't matter anymore that Knox had left her to follow his bliss for a year; it only mattered that he was alive and had come through when she needed him as he always had.

She slipped her hand in his.

"You are the best daughter a man could have ever asked for," he said low, his voice heavy with emotion she'd never heard before. "If my biological children turn out as well as you, I'll feel like I did a good job, like I left something good to the world besides death and destruction."

"You've been good to me, Knox. I never wanted to disappoint you."

"Not possible."

They said nothing more until they'd reached the back of the mansion and entered the bustling kitchen.

Justice swept in from the dining room, wearing an iridescent babydoll dress that emphasized her very pregnant belly, and floated when she moved. It displayed an impressive amount of her cleavage and her long bare legs, and it seemed every square inch of her exposed skin—and her hair—sparkled with glitter. She had fairy wings attached to the back of her teensy bodice, and her face had an elaborately decorated mask painted on it. Knox glanced at his wife and scowled. “Did you wear that to piss me off?”

“Of course I did.”

“Mercy?”

“Gave her a snack. Read her a story. Put her to bed. Giselle and Eilis are, at this moment, putting their own spawn to bed. The nice young women Vanessa has recruited to babysit are spread out all over our suite in their jammies and sleeping bags, eating pizza, drinking caffeine-free Coke, and watching movies. You are free to double-check my work if you don't trust me with *your* child. *Doctor* Hilliard. *Sir*. You'll have to take my word for it that I'm gestating properly.”

“Shit, Iustitia, you don't have to be so touchy.”

“You're being an asshole because you don't like the way I'm dressed.”

“Oh, I *love* the way you're dressed. So will a hundred other men.”

“Exactly. Thank you for your insight.”

He curled his lip at her, then looked back at Vanessa. “You gonna be okay?”

She took a deep breath and said, “Yeah. I think so.”

Knox, dressed in a simple dinner-jacket tux like the rest of the staff, brushed by Justice on his way out. He cast her a lust-filled glance that made her preen and snicker wickedly. Vanessa looked away, unwilling to think of Knox *that* way.

“Are you sure about that costume?” Justice asked her. “The tintype's still fresh in everyone's mind.”

Vanessa knew that. She knew what it would cost her to wear it, to flaunt her sexuality, her affairs with Sebastian and Nash and Eric, to invite ridicule now when it seemed the whole world expected her to crawl into a hole and hide.

*I can be a bit of an exhibitionist.*

No, it wasn't the media she'd dressed for tonight, but she'd take whatever it dished out.

"Here," Justice said, reaching up to straighten the feather in Vanessa's hair, but her kindness made tears sting her eyes. "Oh, my friend," Justice whispered. Vanessa held herself together by the barest thread, and only when she called up Chef Granny. "We can find a way."

"There is no way. I'm in too deep. Whittaker House is in too deep."

"Um," Justice said hesitantly, "I have an idea. Kind of. I haven't thought it through all the way yet."

Vanessa looked at her suspiciously.

"We can talk about it later. You better go before Knox comes back in here and drags you out by the hair."

Vanessa walked to the doors between the kitchen and dining room. Took a deep breath and steeled her spine. Plastered a delighted smile on her face.

She didn't flinch when she opened the doors and strutted out, hands on her swinging hips. Cameras flashed. Women gasped. Men whistled.

She stopped for the cameras.

Posed for them.

Smiled at them.

Blew kisses their way.

Once the cameras had had their fill, she continued deeper into the mêlée, peppy, laughing, smiling, gracious. She greeted her masqueraders like the saloon girl that she was. Most of her guests were masked, though she could tell at least half the time who was who. Most of the revelers would pair up tonight—and not with their own significant others. That was the nature of a masquerade, if not its purpose—and she capitalized on it shamelessly.

The dining room and grand parlor were so packed the waiters could barely squeeze through. People had stationed themselves all the way up the staircase, around the second-floor sitting area, and outside on the veranda to chat and dance. Vanessa could expect a visit from Cooper later tonight to request she clear some of these people out, but that was a formality. She wouldn't even try and he wouldn't force the issue.



The front doors were open. The French doors along the wall of the dining room and the front wall of the grand parlor were open. The large Palladian windows on the second floor were open. Cold, rainy late November night or not, it would get very, very hot.

Vanessa roamed and chatted. Laughed and flirted. Signed autographs and granted air kisses.

Sebastian and Eilis stood on the staircase chatting with people Vanessa had cooked for and housed more than a few times: Morgan Ashworth, economist-turned-novelist and one of Knox's many cousins. Jack Blackwood, CEO of Blackwood Securities, one of the few investment bankers on Wall Street to have both survived the tumble and thrived in its aftermath, with his wife, Lydia. Mitch Hollander, CEO of Hollander Steelworks. Another dozen of Knox's friends, aunts, uncles, and cousins, along with their spouses, gathered around, chatting, laughing—all there for her.

Next week, that juggernaut of a family would crank its machinery into overdrive on Eric's behalf.

Sebastian and Eilis made themselves conspicuous just by having shown up in apparent support of Vanessa, but the crowd quieted when Vanessa climbed the stairs to chat with them for a moment.

Ford-slash-King Midas.

With his *wife*

and his former *lover*

*together*, both of whom were dressed identically, albeit Eilis in black, as usual.

"Muse," Vanessa said to Eilis, who smirked.

"Muse," Eilis replied, at which point they both burst out laughing.

Vanessa waved her hand and the dance music suddenly thundered out of the speakers.

"Thank you for coming," Vanessa said to Eilis wryly.

"Oh, I wouldn't have missed this for the world," Eilis murmured over her appletini, a mischievous smile on her face.

"I do *not* like being on display like this," Sebastian grumbled, right before he knocked back a shot of tequila. "Between my wife and my mistress. Shit."

Eilis nudged him with her elbow. "Quit being such a sourpuss."

“Can we go find a quiet corner and do something more pleasant, like have a root canal?”

Vanessa looked between them. “So he never got over being grouchy in public?” she asked Eilis.

“Oh, no,” she replied. “Also, when he can’t get from A to Z in a straight line.”

Sebastian grunted. “I’m a frequent topic of conversation, I take it?”

“You *are* fascinating,” Eilis said.

Sebastian took a deep breath, and Vanessa looked at the man who’d ushered her into womanhood so well. “Vanessa,” he murmured slowly, “I was never going to tell you this, but under the circumstances—” He slid an uncertain glance at Eilis, who inclined her head slightly. He looked back at Vanessa. “You forget yourself when you’re making love. That’s good. And . . . sometimes you forget who you’re making love with. That’s not so good.”

Vanessa blinked.

His mouth twitched. “My name is not Eric.”

She groaned, thoroughly mortified.

“It’s one reason I didn’t ask you to stay with me. Man doesn’t forget it when his lover calls him by another man’s name, no. Didn’t know it was *that* Eric until he took a swing at me, though.”

“Oh, Sebastian, I’m so sorry.”

He snorted. “Eh, don’t be. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve done that to different women and got slapped for it. It was time for a little karmic retribution.”

That made her chuckle a little. “But now all three of you know I’m crazy.”

Sebastian burst out laughing. Wrapped his arm around her. Hugged her close. “Yeah, but we still like you. As for this mess, well, it’s not over yet, so don’t give up hope.”

She had her doubts about that, but she appreciated his attempt to make her feel better. “Thank you, Sebastian. Oh!” Vanessa pulled a key out of the sash around her waist and gave it to him. “My office. Everything’s there. Your boxes came Monday and Mitch’s got here this morning.”

“Working Thanksgiving weekend,” he murmured grimly. “Fun. Hopefully we’ll be

able to get you squared away tonight, and see if we can all get Mitch put back together by Monday or Tuesday. Wednesday at the latest. Maybe.”

“Is it that bad?”

“Let us worry about Mitch,” Eilis murmured. “You’ve got enough on your plate. So . . . back to work, partner.”

“Okay then. I’ll make sure you have everything you need,” Vanessa said, and hugged them both before she left them to their amusements.

The concierge sought her out to attend to a pair of A-list celebrity couples, who demanded she greet them personally. She did this with the same graciousness she did everything, treating them no more or less specially than she treated any other guest.

Random men swept Vanessa into dance after dance. She laughed, had a good time insofar as she could forget about Eric and stop craving his presence at her side. She fetched drink and *hors d’oeuvres* trays herself. She helped a woman in the ladies’ lounge whose costume had ripped. She vaguely noticed people drifting upstairs in pairs or threes, then turned her attention to someone else. She popped her head into the Hilliard suite to see four toddlers and one infant asleep in their respective beds, and three tween girls giggling in the glow from the TV.

She went back downstairs and stopped to chat and dance and laugh at good-natured jokes she didn’t find funny, most of which were directed at her current infamy.

They’d shown up to do that very thing, so she let them and soothed her hurt feelings by totting up the extra revenue in her head.

At midnight, she found herself standing alone in the middle of two hundred people. She looked around for her family-via-Knox and saw Giselle and Bryce dancing with the other hard partiers like they were twenty-year-olds at a rave.

Sebastian and Eilis, Mitch and Morgan, Jack and Lydia had retreated to a quiet corner of the veranda to visit.

Nia, Whittaker House’s architect, and Étienne, its engineer, sat on a couch in a dark corner with their heads together.

Half the rest of Knox’s cousins and their spouses, along with a couple of his aunts and uncles, were scattered about enjoying themselves.

Vachel, who couldn’t stand all the people invading his space during the

masquerades, had left the mansion hours ago and would be laid out on a pallet in front of ol' Curtis's fireplace, reading while Curtis rocked in his chair, plucked his dobro, and talked about Korea in fits and starts.

Knox and Justice played host and hostess as capably as Vanessa.

Only one person was missing: the one who had wanted to see her in a pink saloon girl dress.

If anybody noticed Vanessa leaving the party early to head up the hill to her cottage where Eric wouldn't be, she didn't know about it and didn't care.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **42: DARK AS A STACK OF BLACK CATS**

Vanessa had just finished hanging up her saloon girl dress when her phone rang.

"Where are you?" Justice demanded. Vanessa gulped at the panic in her voice because Justice never panicked.

"Getting ready to go to bed," Vanessa said slowly. "Why? What happened?"

"LaVon's here."

"Shit." But Vanessa wasn't really surprised; the minute LaVon had begun making the talk show rounds, Vanessa had expected her to show up. "Okay, well, Cooper's here somewhere. Probably toasted, though. Give me a minute and I'll call the sheriff."

"You don't understand. She brought the press or the press brought her, I don't know which. She's demanding to see you and all the cameras are rolling."

Vanessa dropped the phone and her stomach churned at having to settle her score with her mother so very publicly. She'd rather not have had to do it at all.

It took her a little while to put herself together in the same dress she'd worn to the governor's birthday party, but if she had to go to war, she'd damn well be outfitted for it. She went back down the drive and clipped up the mansion stairs, went up to her office to

check her makeup, then slipped through one of the secret passageways that would take her to the top of the grand staircase.

Once there, she stood silent, head held high, to survey the scene twenty feet below her.

*Queen Vanessa.*

LaVon's behavior wasn't finishing-school perfect, but she wasn't the Jerry Springer freak show Vanessa knew. She turned and smiled and spoke calmly to her handlers and shook hands with a modicum of grace. Her deportment had to be the thinnest of veneers; she couldn't have internalized that much information in a month or however long she'd been prepped before she appeared on television.

Regardless how weak LaVon's façade was, Vanessa knew she wouldn't be able to play her complex mind games, and it wouldn't take long for her to back Vanessa into a corner.

Telling jerk guests to go to hell in such a way as to make them eager to do so was a long-practiced skill. Tricking a little boy and an old man into taking care of each other had been relatively easy. Finding a way to force Eric to focus on his murder trial had been more difficult. Contrary to what he'd thought, she hadn't been able to come up with anything much less practice it, but her rant had worked in spite of its incoherence. She still hadn't figured out how to construct a Knox-proof trap to make him tell Justice about his diabetes without making Vanessa feel like a traitor.

LaVon was a different game entirely. She could manipulate people on the fly, instantly turn every word to her advantage somehow, and Vanessa had never learned how to do that. Her only hope was to somehow provoke her into revealing her true nature for cameras sympathetic to her and hostile to Vanessa.

Slapping her again was out of the question.

*What would Laura do? Help me, Laura. Please help me.*

After a moment, Vanessa felt her panic begin to recede and peace fill her.

*What's the worst that could happen, Vanessa?*

The worst already had happened, so she had no reason to play LaVon's game, even if she could.

A few members of Knox's family stood around the edges of the massive ground

floor of Whittaker House, watching and waiting. Justice stood off to one side, her fists clenching at her sides while she struggled to keep her fury off her face. Knox was nowhere to be seen and Vanessa had to assume Sebastian and Bryce were keeping him out of sight. Knox hated LaVon enough to kill her; even a tiny flare of his temper would play right into LaVon's hands and he didn't need any more bad publicity.

Giselle stood by the newel post at the base of the staircase watching LaVon with a predatory expression. By contrast, the look she cast up the vast staircase at Vanessa was one of mischievous humor. Vanessa released the last of her tension in a long breath when Giselle winked at her. All Vanessa had to do was keep her cool; Giselle would break out the bitch if it came to that.

Slowly the roar of hundreds of conversations died down as Vanessa stood, waiting for everyone's attention, just as she had at the governor's ball.

LaVon, in the middle of a laugh, noticed the growing stillness and turned to look up at her too. Her eyes narrowed a bit. Her mouth pursed. Vanessa couldn't see all the little cigarette lines around LaVon's lips, which made her wonder if she needed new contacts or if LaVon had had—

*Has to be Botox.*

One step down, then another, her hips swinging, her gait self-assured, her demeanor arrogant. Let LaVon wait.

She saw Glenn on the periphery with the rest of the press, watching as sharply as everyone else, but without the bloodthirsty look of his colleagues. Glenn would report this, she knew, and he wasn't on her side, but he'd be fair and that was all she needed to feel like she had one friend in the press corps.

Masked and costumed guests on either side of the staircase watched her, moved out of her way, parting for her and leaving a clear path to her mother.

Vanessa took the last step, still not knowing what to say.

"Vanessa," LaVon said, "Thank you so much for inviting me tonight."

"I didn't," Vanessa said flatly. "Don't think I'm going to cover your lies." LaVon's mouth tightened infinitesimally. Vanessa took a step away from the press to cull her mother from her handlers. "I guess I don't have to ask why you're here," Vanessa murmured, and took note when LaVon wrapped her hand around the sand dollar pendant

on her necklace.

“A million dollars would make me go away,” LaVon replied, equally low. “I know you could write me a check right now.”

“Mmmm, so you’re easy *and* cheap.”

LaVon’s arm twitched, and the long bony fingers of her unoccupied hand curled into her palm. Oh, how Vanessa wished she’d followed through on that aborted slap. “I don’t see Hilliard here, defendin’ your honor, or Mr. Rapist, either.”

“No, but *I’m* here,” Giselle said low, squeezing herself between Vanessa and LaVon.

LaVon started. “Who the hell’re you?”

“*I* am your worst nightmare,” Giselle murmured cheerfully as she wrapped her small hand around LaVon’s upper arm and clamped down.

“You get your hands off me, ya li’l bitch. You ain’t nobody to me.” LaVon’s diction was slipping, her anger cracking that thin veneer and oozing through, and her grip on the pendant tightened.

“Knox would just shoot you in the head. I’ll tenderize you with my knife until you’re begging for mercy, and then I’ll slit your throat.”

Vanessa thought that might have been a little much, but LaVon stared at Giselle for a long moment before she decided it might not be an idle threat. Giselle nudged LaVon back toward her entourage, chatting amiably at LaVon all the way, then joked with LaVon’s people while surreptitiously keeping LaVon under control.

Vanessa looked up and around at the press. “Congratulations,” she finally said coldly. “You’ve made it for story time. Make yourselves comfortable.”

Tangible shock rippled through the crowd, and they all gathered in a rough semicircle around Vanessa, who turned and climbed about five stairs to begin. She saw all the costumes spread out across the massive rooms, and resentment poured through her. LaVon had spent the last month dragging Vanessa and the people she loved through the mud and then had violated her space and an important Whittaker House event to rub salt in the wound.

“That woman,” Vanessa began, pointing a finger at LaVon where she stood humbly between one of her handlers and a very peppy Giselle, “is a liar and a thief and a party to

child molestation and very possibly an accessory to nineteen counts of murder.”

All the attention whipped to LaVon along with gasps and murmurs. She shrank into herself and would have fled, except for the fact that Giselle had her tethered. The shocked press didn’t know whether to focus their cameras on Vanessa or LaVon.

A shuffle at the front doors attracted her attention and she saw an entire platoon of sheriff’s deputies and state troopers file in quietly, gather in the entryway, and fold their arms across their chests.

Vanessa sighed.

This was the biggest across-the-trailer-park hollering match a woman and her mother had ever had, complete with the cops being called out to break it up.

“So since you all,” she said, regaining everyone’s attention, “have been after me for the last month to speak, I’m going to tell you what kind of woman you’ve been celebrating and what really went down with Eric Cipriani sixteen years ago, when he was arrested and charged with the rape of my sister, Simone.”

\* \* \* \* \*

### **43: WHEN TRUTH WAS PARAMOUNT**

“You are the luckiest son of a bitch who ever lived.”

“Good morning to you, too, Glenn,” Eric muttered absently while he worked. “Did you have a good Thanksgiving with your cat?”

“Have you read this morning’s post?”

“Your blog isn’t my first priority, so no.”

Glenn dropped a copy of the *Chouteau Recorder* on top of the legal pad Eric had been writing on, then dropped his person in the chair on the other side Eric’s desk.

Eric stared at the headline as if he were trying to remember how to read; indeed, it felt that way:



**WHITTAKER RESCUES CIPRIANI.  
AGAIN.**

He picked it up and sat back in his chair to read. “Masquerade . . . ” he mumbled while he read, not wanting to think about the party he’d nearly attended despite how much it would have cost them both. “LaVon crashed the party . . . Bitch.” He looked up at Glenn. “What was Vanessa’s costume?”

Glenn stared at him as if he’d lost his mind. “That’s your most pressing question?”

“Just tell me.”

“Some pink . . . thing. And black. I don’t know, like a saloon girl.”

Eric hurt so badly he could barely stand it, but went back to reading, then he bolted upright. “She *said* that?! What the hell was she thinking? Knox could never prove LaVon helped Parley kill those women or he would’ve. Shit, now LaVon can sue her for defamation.”

“Keep reading,” Glenn commanded. “You will note it is an uncondensed and unedited transcript.”

He did as he was told, and lost himself in Vanessa’s words.

“Was this extemporaneous?” Eric asked after a while, impressed by Vanessa’s clarity of thought.

“It had to have been. LaVon caught her completely off guard.”

It shouldn’t have surprised him. She didn’t use a script when she taped *Vittles*; why would she need one for an impromptu press conference?

Most of Vanessa’s story he knew: How she had decided to go to Knox with Simone’s diary. How many men went to jail because of Simone and why Knox had protected her. What she had to live with at home, her starvation, the abuse that only stopped when Knox had stepped in between her and LaVon.

She spoke of living in a house where a serial killer visited, spending his nights in her mother’s bed. She spoke of Simone’s sexual precocity and how LaVon had not only not protected Simone, but had encouraged her promiscuity. She spoke of Simone coming home the day seventeen-year-old Eric had snubbed her, crying, heartbroken, and LaVon

laying out the plan to take vengeance on him. Most of what she said Eric had deduced, although a detail here or there did give him pause. As far as he knew, she left nothing out.

She talked at great length about Laura, her connection to Laura, what Laura had done for her and that she credited Laura with saving her life. She spoke of how terrified she'd been to go to Knox, but had walked out of the courthouse that day with a father figure and a mentor.

Even on paper, her love for Knox came through.

Then she spoke of Eric.

\*

*But don't think I was solely motivated by honor. I was also motivated because I had, well, the teensiest weensiest tiniest little bitty crush on the big badass of Chouteau High School.*

*I want to clarify right here, right now, that it was a crush from afar. I was twelve, so I think I can be forgiven for being foolish that way. I had never spoken to Eric, nor he me, until a year and a half ago when I went home to Chouteau City for the first time in fourteen years, for my sister's funeral.*

*I found out I had a nephew. I found out he had been named for a man who had done nothing to deserve any of the hell my mother and sister had put him through. I saw that my mother and sister had abused this kid far worse than they had me, but only because I had a fire-breathing dragon shielding me. I saw that my mother and my sister had used my nephew's existence to make Eric Cipriani's life miserable, to poke him and taunt him at every turn, hoping that the next poke or taunt would discredit him, bring him down. Yet Eric did as much for my nephew as he would allow. He never let my mother and sister's evil get in the way of helping my nephew. Eric never broke, never buckled. Never used the law to persecute my mother or get revenge, never so much as raised his voice to her or my sister.*

*So with that all hanging over our heads, the fact that we could even have some semblance of a conversation, much less a love affair, no matter how short-lived, is pretty spectacular. Think about yourself at twelve, the boy or girl you had a crush on. Think*

*about meeting them fourteen years later. Think about having that much shared baggage between you. Would you fall in love? Would you want to?*

*For years, I've been killing myself, trying to get where I wanted to go, to make Whittaker House this, this monument to the woman who saved my life. And then I met that incredible man. And we talked and laughed and made love and fell in love. We wanted to make it work, but too much time has passed. We have our own lives that we built.*

*That man, that incredible man, the one I love. He has convictions and ideals. He wants to make things better for the country. He wants to serve the greater good and he thinks his philosophies are the way to do that. I share most of his philosophies. There are tens of thousands of people out there who believe in him already and he has only begun his climb up the ladder. He has a goal and a plan. He has never not accomplished anything he set out to do and I know he'll get exactly where he wants to go. He has asked me to come with him to help him in that endeavor, but I said no.*

*Too many people here depend on Whittaker House for their livelihoods and I can't take that away from them. I have asked him to stay here with me and run Whittaker House because, you see, he's an extraordinary manager. He makes people's jobs easier. He trusts them to do those jobs and do them well. He believes in people and their potential. My staff loves him. The boy, my nephew, loves him like a father. But Eric said no, because all those thousands of people believe in him and they want to believe in him, and they think millions of others will believe in him, too. He believes in them and they know that.*

*So the next time you watch Vittles or you hear Eric Cipriani asking you to trust him with your vote, you'll know our story. You'll know Eric never touched me when I was a child, never so much as spoke to me. You'll know why Eric is still single, although how long he'll remain so—*

*It takes a long time to—*

*You'll know why he's still single. You'll know the truth of our relationship. I have never met a more honorable man in my life, and letting him go is—*

*Eric Cipriani is the only man I have ever loved.*

\*

The paper fell from Eric's hand, and he wiped his palms down his face.

"Thank you," he whispered.

"You're welcome."

Eric said nothing for a moment when he heard no gloating or arrogance in Glenn's simple return. Then, "Shinkle, I— I owe you an apology."

"Yes, you do," Glenn retorted.

Eric had to chuckle at that, but it didn't last. "I get it now. You might have been a pain in my ass for the last eight years—and you most likely will continue to be—"

"You got that right."

"But I know you would never have done this to us, make up shit. You— The way you report, it— Well, it spoiled me. I didn't really believe anybody would cut my friends and family off at the knees, because I'm used to the way you work."

Glenn nodded. "You made fun of me for not getting Knox's non-scam because, well, yeah, I would've won a Pulitzer if I'd figured out *how to prove* he wasn't on the take at all. Busted that whole thing open about his uncle and OKH Enterprises—proved and printed what half the country already suspected. Yeah, that would've put me on the map."

Eric swallowed.

"But I knew it. In my gut, I mean. I couldn't find anybody who'd paid him off. I must have interviewed every person in Chouteau County. I just . . . couldn't prove a negative." He stopped. Began again. "You know, I'm almost sixty. I've spent my whole life trying to do this right, getting bypassed by reporters who took shots in the dark and became celebrities, but never suffered the consequences when they got it wrong. I've tried to be honorable about it, barely scraping my paper out of the red each month, while amateurs went online and blogged all the way around me without any sense of responsibility."

Eric sighed. "I'm sorry, Glenn."

"It's not just about you, Eric. It's about the whole system. The way technology's changed things. The way society's changed. We're a bunch of bored Romans waiting for

the next gladiator fight at the coliseum.”

It sounded so harsh, but Eric had no retort for it.

“Don’t think I’m going to quit dogging your heels because Knox was wrong to murder Parley and *you* are wrong for covering for him, but . . . ”

“It’s because Vanessa was nice to you,” Eric said low.

“No,” Glenn said. “All I care about is fact. Truth I can verify.”

“And it finally paid off.”

“Yes. Because you trusted me enough to come to me when Afton first approached you. You knew I wouldn’t lie to you about what I knew versus what I’d printed.”

Eric closed his eyes to think about that one act, prompted by the subconscious understanding Glenn wouldn’t be unscrupulous with whatever Eric told him.

“You know I’ve been after Afton for years,” he continued, “and never printed a thing until Knox . . . He isn’t so much a white-collar prosecutor as a forensic accountant.”

“How do you think he pulled off that scam so long?”

“Right. Anyway, I couldn’t have followed Afton’s real estate deals myself or proven it without Knox to show me exactly how it was done.”

“But you’d still bust out Knox if you could.”

“You better believe it. He didn’t come to me out of the kindness of his heart. He did it because he knew I’d print it. It was an equitable trade-off. Afton gets exposed and out of your way. I get my Pulitzer nomination and now my blog’s getting enough traffic to make some money.” Glenn laughed suddenly. “Enlightened self-interest at work.”

Eric smiled wryly and shook his head.

“Look,” Glenn grunted as he hauled his squat frame out of the chair and headed to the door. “I’m the last guy to give advice about— Because, since, as you so astutely pointed out, I spent Thanksgiving with my cat.” Eric found it sad he was so matter-of-fact about it. “But in the big scheme of things, politics aren’t . . . Some things are more important.”

\* \* \* \* \*

## 44: GOD HATES A COWARD

April 2011

Vanessa sat in her office chair and watched out the window as her April-green southwest field got systematically scraped and run over and turned by earth movers that, from this distance, were about the size of cars and all the men with shovels looked about as tall as ants.

This was it, the final brick in her vision of Whittaker House.

"I don't even golf," she muttered, wondering if Eric would like what he'd designed.

She wondered that a lot.

Sunlight glinted in starbursts off the lake when the breeze rippled the surface of the water. The pear trees were in full blossom, all puffy white and without a care in the world. She could hear a tractor's drone; by the end of the day, five acres of lawn would have the precise wide crosshatch pattern of a professional baseball outfield. The faintest echo of gunshots from the northwest field let Vanessa know Vachel and the conservation rangers had finally nailed the damned bear that had spent the last month wreaking havoc all over her property.

For ol' Curtis's sake, her employees', and her guests, she'd asked the Conservation Department to deal with the animal. They'd tagged the bear, relocated him, tracked him back—twice—and had been preparing to capture and relocate him a third time.

When the bear did indeed take out Curtis's front door and nearly killed a couple of teenagers out for a nice afternoon hike, Vanessa had panicked. *No more tracking. No more relocation. You kill that bastard—today—or I'll get every gun in this county out for his hide.* It was a worthless threat, but the rangers were already on it.

She'd never butchered a bear before, but then, the state might not let her keep it, even though it had lived and died on her land.

Well, not all her land.

Yet.

OKH still owned half, but Eilis didn't want it and had encouraged Vanessa to start buying it out.

"For me, it's a hassle," Eilis said. "It's yours. Your dream, your vision. You're in a good place now and you've earned it."

Indeed. Vanessa could afford to start buying out OKH's share now, but every time Knox asked her if she wanted him to make a payment toward that, she said no.

"Why not?" he'd ask, completely puzzled.

She'd shrug and go find something else to do.

Her email pinged.

\*

***Subject: [no subject]***

***Reply-to: nash.piper@yahoo.com***

*trixies got an attitude. i didnt know they got that way til they hit puberty. i must of been really bad in a past life to have to deal with this but her and mel dont get along and she dont like i take mels side. she thought her daddy'd come back one day and save her from big bad mommy-had to get that idea out of her head fast.*

*the blowback from ur little masquerade shit storm last winter ain't stopped here yet.*

*u might of put all those bastards in their place plus that bitch mother of yours, but this goddam blogger and his buddies still wont leave mel alone. im about to fix that fucker and the bastards that want mels land cuz shes got water rights. your old man hilliards coming in mighty handy right about now, all bored and itching for a fight.*

*nil carborundum illegitimi. didnt know i knew latin huh? my daddy used to say that to me. had to look it up to spell it right tho. u do what u need to do about whether u cop to our affair or not, things cant get much worse here if u speak up.*

*i know u didnt ask for my advise but whatever u got left with ur boy, u maybe should think about why ur throwing that away for a building.*

***stand in \*2***

\*

Vanessa read it. Re-read it. She hadn't spoken with Nash since she'd called him and told him not to come back to Mansfield at all, and she didn't know him well enough to be able to read between the lines as to what was happening between him and his ex. At the very least, he was still in Bozeman and had apparently taken a solid place in his daughter's life in the last six months.

Why had he felt a need to stick his nose in her business? Except, well, the press had made Vanessa's business "Doc Mel's" business, who was innocent of the whole thing. Collateral damage. Like Vachel. And Nash's little girl, attitude and all.

The only thing she could be grateful for was that her life was back to Whittaker House normal, the press had backed off and apparently forgotten about her, and LaVon had completely disappeared.

For the time being.

Vanessa sighed and went to beg the rangers to let her keep that bear.

On the way, she stopped in the kitchen to take a good look at it and how well it functioned. Vanessa had known what she wanted in her kitchen and had pushed Nia and Étienne until they caught her vision, to have as much faith in her design as she did. The Whittaker House kitchen was a machine unto itself, now copied in several new restaurants around the world.

Vanessa had built this.

She walked out the back door, across the veranda, down the stairs, and started up the pansy-flanked cobblestone drive toward the garage. A sweet spring breeze ruffled the little wisps of hair around her face and she could smell the cherry blossoms. It had been a day like this when she'd lain in the grass nude while *Maxim* photography assistants sprinkled cherry and pear and lilac blossoms over her body. Seemed so long ago now.



She heard the screeches and squeals of children on the playground: The first Saturday morning of every month, all the children from church arrived at Whittaker House to play for a couple of hours while their mothers sat on the veranda resting, talking, laughing, drinking an innocuous punch, and eating cookies.

Vanessa's steps slowed and she turned to walk backward, to look at Whittaker House in all its solar-powered, energy-efficient, nineteenth-century glory. No matter how long she'd lived here, she'd find herself stricken by its devastating magnificence at odd moments. Most days she didn't dare stand and gawk because the knowledge that *she* had built that—the little girl from Chouteau Acres Mobile Home Park—was almost a crushing weight, as if she couldn't possibly have accomplished that, as if she had perpetrated a great fraud upon the world.

Her pet missionaries drove past her with a wave, a cheery “Bye, Sister Whittaker!” floating back to her. They were funny: nineteen-year-old boys who sacrificed two years of their lives and upwards of five hundred dollars a month to preach their faith because they thought God wanted them to, thus, important.

*I've been thinking about what you said about politicians like you and you're right. You're important. Governor Cipriani. President Cipriani. It's just— Here, it's— This isn't where you need to be. You have so much to give to the world, things it needs. Leadership. Philosophy. Sacrifice. Protection for people like me, while I . . . cook for rich people.*

Vanessa had no need for power and she was comfortable with her meager fame. Politics annoyed her, and whenever she heard the word “fundraising,” she sneered. That money could be spent in so many better ways than getting one man a job.

*It's because of politicians like me that you got your golf course. We work to keep the politicians you don't like out of your way.*

She sighed and went to get her ATV out of the garage. As she hooked a trailer to it, she heard the faint rumble of the bulldozers that were building the golf course politicians like Eric had helped her get, the golf course Eric had helped design.

“Oh, Eric,” Vanessa whispered as she threw her leg over the seat. She sat there for a moment, her nose stinging and her vision blurring, then realized that the idea of butchering a bear held no thrill for her at all.

She got off the bike and headed back to her office to make a phone call.

\*

Eric sat on his couch, his feet up on the coffee table and bracing his laptop, tap- tap- tapping away at his latest article and getting more and more frustrated with it. He yawned and looked at the clock. One-thirty in the morning.

“Shit,” he murmured to no one.

Which was the problem.

Now he understood Knox’s years-long tussle with insomnia that had only gotten worse once he’d met Justice.

He picked up his dog-eared Thanksgiving edition of the *Chouteau Recorder*.

*I have an idea.*

Justice’s voice echoed in his head while he read and re-read Vanessa’s love letter to him.

*About what?*

*Well, you and Vanessa, how you can—*

*Does this involve me giving up my career or her giving up hers?*

*Well, kind of. Maybe. I’m not sure yet.*

*Okay, well, the RNC is scheduled to call me in five minutes to grovel at my feet. Let me know when you have it all worked out.*

Eric started when his apartment door burst open and Annie came struggling in, cursing at her dripping umbrella and rolling suitcase piled with her laptop case.

“I’m back,” she huffed in his general direction while she tugged and tugged to get her suitcase over the threshold.

“I see that,” Eric muttered mostly to himself, as he watched her. “Does your mother know about this?”

“Fuck no,” Annie snapped. “And don’t tell her, either.”

“What happened in Omaha?”

“Just . . . None of your business.”

“A man or a woman?”

“Man!” she spat. “I hate you all.” With one tug, she got the case over the threshold, but she fell on her ass, which made her hit her head against a wall—“*Ow!*”—which knocked her glasses clear across the tile floor of the kitchen. “*Shit!*” She crawled on the floor to find her glasses, patting tiles as she went. He’d forgotten how blind she was. “Go find Judge Wilson,” she said once she’d found them and put them back on her face. “You and I are getting married.”

“Uh . . . why?”

“I’m going to solve your problem and you’re going to solve mine.”

“I know what my problem is. What’s your problem? Or did you already tell me that?”

“My *problem*,” she said as she got to her feet and brushed off the butt of her jeans, “is that you suck. *He* sucks. You *all* suck. And you know what? Women suck, too. People suck. I hate people.”

“You’re in sales. You’re not allowed to hate people.”

“I can hate who I want, fuck you very much.”

“I don’t feel like taking you up on that right now.”

“No, and you won’t. Because you’re in love with someone else and you have no way to be with her without completely screwing you both up.”

“Hmm, beginning to think the same thing about you.”

She dropped onto the couch beside him. “You are good in bed, though.”

“I know.”

“It could work.”

“Think about that for a minute, Annie. You’ve got the same background check problem Vanessa does, with you and your bisexuality.”

“*Bicurious*ality. Totally different. Besides which, I told you I gave that up for real penis.”

“So what is Real Penis’s name?”

“Rafferty,” she mumbled, crossing her arms over her chest and looking away. Eric leaned forward to look at her face because he thought he saw . . .

“Are you *crying*?” he asked, shocked and awed.

“Shut up.”

“So . . .”

“He’s got mommy issues, okay? His mother, my mother. Could be evil twins separated at birth. He knows she’s wrecking his life. Makes him miserable. He won’t dump her. Said he made a deathbed promise to his dad to take care of her. Well, I sure as hell am not getting wrapped up in someone else’s mama drama when I moved away from my own.” She swiped at her cheeks. “I hate honorable men.”

“No, you hate that honor is inconvenient.”

“That too.”

“I don’t want to marry you, Annie.”

“I don’t want to marry you, either, but it’s efficient. *You* aren’t going to brea—”

He waited for her to finish, but she didn’t. “Break your heart. You *can* say it, you know. It doesn’t make you less of a hard-ass.” He paused when she braced for the cheap shots he would normally take. “Is this the guy you brought down here on election night?”

“No. He was an ambulance chaser. Not a very good one, either.”

“Oh, okay. So what does, uh . . . Rafferty . . . practice?”

“Maybe he’s not a lawyer. Ever think of that?”

Eric decided to back off that whole conversation because Annie’s discombobulation unnerved him a little. He’d never seen her like this and whoever Rafferty was, he’d gotten under her skin.

“Well, uh,” he said, clearing his throat, “getting married’s a nice idea in theory, but we can’t live that way. You’ll get horny and go find somebody and then the press would find out. Shit, I just got them off my back—well, Vanessa did that. I don’t need you fucking that up.”

She sat silent for a moment. “I . . .” She swallowed. “Raff— I’ll stock up on batteries and toys. Just . . . roommates. With the same last name, okay? You help me. I help you.”

“This would kill her,” Eric whispered, staring at his laptop and feeling the weight of the world settle over him.

“Well, I’m sorry about that,” she murmured, and Eric knew she was. “I can’t imagine being in her situation and here I am, feeling sorry for myself.”

Eric glanced at her. “You kind of are in her situation, sounds like.”

“Not even close. She built that gorgeous place, but now she’s trapped. She loves it. She loves you. What to do, what to do. No contest. I get it, right? So if you want to keep Vanessa, I’ll cover for you. Really.”

“*Mistress?* Are you fucking kidding me? I wouldn’t insult her with that and she’d hate me just for asking.”

Annie pursed her lips. “Yeah, I guess she would,” she whispered. “I wouldn’t like it, either.”

Eric studied Annie, thinking about how well they worked together. He’d been her first lover, she sixteen and he seventeen, and they’d been lovers on and off ever since. As adults, they had a four-year monogamous engagement behind them. They’d never had a need to look outside their relationship for anything else. Even now, Annie was his ticket. She *got* it, what he was about and why, and she was willing to play the game with him as long as it suited her purpose to do so.

“I’ll call Knox and Sebastian tomorrow,” he finally said. “Bryce. They have the most to lose and they deserve a say in how we go forward.”

She looked at him, her expression somber, then began to nod slowly. “Good idea.”

\* \* \* \* \*

## **45: JUST LEAVE, AND I WILL COME**

Eilis looked at Vanessa soberly across the kitchen table, Vanessa’s staff all bustling in and out, busier than ever. They both nursed cups of sassafras tea.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Eilis murmured over the rim of her dainty cup. Vanessa nodded. “I’m sure.”

“The county’s probably going to sue us.”

“I know. I talked to Cooper and the mayor about it this morning and now they’re pissed. Won’t take long for everybody to come pounding on the back door requesting my

head on a platter.”

“Have you talked to Vachel?”

“Yes. He’s good with it.”

“But—”

Vanessa gestured slightly to interrupt her. “The clientele is shifting. I got the corporate business I wanted by putting in the golf course. They want steak and potatoes, not roadkill and weeds. In another three years, Chef Granny Whittaker will be an artifact.”

“Then wait until that happens.”

“I can’t. I won’t.”

“Are you going to tell him or am I?”

“Don’t say a word. It’ll kill him.”

\*

“So I wanted to let you guys know,” Eric finished heavily. “I’m sorry.”

The four of them, Eric, Knox, Bryce, and Sebastian sat around a collection of tables at Bryant’s Barbeque, along with six children under the age of four because the ladies had taken Annie to the spa for the day. It was pandemonium. Though all three fathers were adept at dealing with their respective offspring, it wasn’t the best of circumstances during which to break the news to these men who’d guided and supported him.

“All that money, all the effort. All the bullshit the press put you—” Eric pointed to Knox. “—and Sebastian through . . .”

“Oh, we don’t care about that,” Knox muttered as he stuffed a bottle in his son’s mouth. “We care that you might regret it.”

Maybe. It was possible that, in a year or two or five or ten, he’d look back on this moment and wonder *what if*.

The road not taken.

He studied them all. Knox and Sebastian were variously feeding their children or cleaning them or trying to keep them in line. Sebastian was so busy with his three he didn’t seem to be engaged in the bigger conversation. Bryce listened calmly while he ate

his brisket, his little boy asleep on his shoulder. He occasionally reached out a hand to gently redirect one of Sebastian's children. Knox smiled at something his daughter said—in sign language—and answered her the same way; whatever he said made her giggle.

Eric found it oddly . . . comforting that they really didn't care what he chose to do because they considered all his options valid.

"So . . . what would you do if you were me?"

"Exactly what you're doing," Sebastian offered over his shoulder while he wiped his squirming three-year-old's face. "When you get to this point in your life, there is no choice."

Knox nodded and took a long pull out of his bottle of diet Mountain Dew. "I hate this shit," he grumbled. "Perfectly good pop ruined by the word 'diet.'"

"Then why are you drinking it?"

"Because," he said snidely, "Vanessa tricked me into telling Justice about my . . . *problem* . . . and I don't feel like getting my ass chewed constantly over my sugar consumption."

"Not used to getting a taste of your own medicine, are you?"

"I don't know when she got that good at it," he grumbled, which made Bryce start laughing.

"If I'd known Justice didn't know," Bryce rumbled, "I'd have told her straight out. She's your wife and you don't tell her?"

"Exactly. Justice is my wife, not my mother. I have a mother. His name is Bryce Kenard."

Eric watched this, the camaraderie of men who had been friends forever, who had wives and children, whose families had merged and become one. They were men who were rich and powerful enough that they could do or have anything they wanted in the world—

—and what they wanted most was what they already had.

It was then Eric knew he would never regret taking this path.

"Hey," Eric said, trying to make himself heard over the children, "I'm gonna head back home and get started." He looked at Knox. "Don't tell Vanessa, okay?"

Knox started. "Mmmm, I wouldn't advise that. She doesn't like surprises."

“It’s going to be a surprise either way. She’ll get over it.”

\* \* \* \* \*

## 46: YOU MAY KISS ME GOODNIGHT

May 2011

*Hi, I’m Shepard Smith and this is the Fox Report Live from Studio B.*

*Something’s rotten in the state of Missouri. The supposedly defunct romance between Missouri prosecutor Eric Cipriani and cover-girl chef Vanessa Whittaker may have taken another bizarre turn today. In separate press conferences held only minutes apart, each announced their intention to abandon their careers, but no mention was made of each other.*

*Vocal Independent-slash-Libertarian Eric Cipriani, who seems to be at war with the very Republican leadership that needs him to reform the party and give it a much-needed facelift, announced his resignation from the Chouteau County, Missouri prosecutor’s office.*

*“While I still have political interests, at this time I don’t feel I can serve the party or my future constituents the way I want to, the way they deserve. My head’s in politics. My heart isn’t. My executive assistant prosecutor, Justice McKinley Hilliard, will be taking over as acting prosecutor until the next election.”*

*A half hour after that, owner and Chief Executive Chef of chichi Ozarks resort Whittaker House, Vanessa Whittaker, held a press conference on the front steps of her inn.*

*“Today marks a turning point for Whittaker House. As you know, OKH Enterprises has been my corporate partner for the last two and a half years. As of today at noon, OKH Enterprises is the sole owner of Whittaker House and will continue its niche cuisine*



*and traditions. The only change anyone will notice is that my nephew and I will not be here.”*

*Cipriani’s blog has exploded with more well wishes than insults. Whittaker’s Thanksgiving confessional has been revived all over the media, and talk radio is practically swooning over the romance of it all. Wow. Even though Ms. Whittaker said nothing about where she and her nephew are going, and Mr. Cipriani made no mention of his intentions for the future, it’s easy to draw a few conclusions. You kind of have to root for a couple like that. Too bad they didn’t coordinate their efforts. Might have helped to talk to each other, you two. It’s called communication.*

\*

Vanessa stared at the TV in horror, as did every single person in her kitchen. “Oh, my God,” she whispered, a trembling hand to her mouth.

“WOOT!” Vachel shouted and dashed out the back door, shouting all the way to ol’ Curtis’s cabin.

\*

Eric stared at the news clip in horror after Annie had called him, panicked. “Oh, my God,” he whispered.

“Pretty neat trick, huh?” Knox said smugly from the doorway of Eric’s office. He looked up, feeling anger wash over him.

“You knew,” he growled.

“Of course I did. I’m the CFO.”

“And you let her do that.”

“Same way we let you do it, yes. Now you both have options, but whatever you choose to do, you can do it together.”

“Was this your idea?”

Knox pursed his lips. “While I’d really like to take credit for it, no. It wasn’t my idea. The mastermind of that little operation will be taking over your job as soon as you

feel like getting your ass out of here. I like to think she learned it from me.”

“You motherfucker.”

“And might I remind you that she attempted to talk to you about this, but neither of you gave her the right time of day. Then you turned around and handed her the opportunity on a silver platter. All she had to do was arrange the press conference dates and times.”

Eric glared at him.

“Your self-imposed martyrdom was getting tedious.”

“Okay, so I’ve sold my share of the dojo to Dirk and Giselle, and I’m officially out of a job in two weeks. Vanessa doesn’t have a business to run or a home. What are we supposed to do?”

“Shit, Eric, do I have to take you by the hand and walk you through it? Call Vanessa. Go to Mansfield. Something. Just quit being so fucking stupid.”

\* \* \* \* \*

## **THESE HAPPY GOLDEN YEARS**

He found her in her grove behind Laura’s house the same way he had found her before, on her knees, her hands fisted against them, her head bowed, her shoulders shaking.

The sun set in the west, giving her an otherworldly green and gold glow filtered by the leaves on the trees.

She started when he plopped himself down beside her.

“They tricked us,” he said wryly.

Vanessa sniffled. “I know.” She paused. “Are we really that stupid?”

“Apparently. So I guess the first order of business is a wedding.”

“Whose wedding?”

“Ours. Yours and mine.”

“Oh, don’t look at me like that. You hadn’t asked, so I was confused.”

“Smart ass,” Eric grumbled when he saw the corners of her eyes crinkle. He felt vindicated when he opened a little hot pink velvet box and she gasped.

“*Eric*,” she breathed.

Platinum, with a large pink diamond solitaire flanked by white seed pearls.

“I did good?”

She nodded, too choked up to speak when he put it on her finger.

“The second order of business,” he said after a while, a while that they spent kissing for the first time in months. “Kids?”

“I threw my pills out when I decided to leave Whittaker House, so whatever happens happens, I guess.”

His mouth twitched. “We need to get on that then.”

“Mmmm, but we need to get through our agenda for this meeting first.”

“Ah, yes. What to do with the rest of our lives now that we’ve been cut loose from everything.”

“Eilis,” Vanessa murmured, “is going to keep me on as Chief Executive Chef and as part of that, I’ll phase out roadkill and weeds to steak’n’potatoes and golf. I’ll keep doing *Vittles* and finish the cookbook I started last fall. I can create new recipes if I want to, but the focus will change.

“She’s going to offer you the temporary position of COO. If you want. In the meantime, we’ll be launching your official campaign. That way, we’ll be free to campaign for the next eighteen months and then go to Jeff City after you’re elected attorney general. That’ll give us time to find a general manager. If you lose the election—which I doubt now since we have become the love story of the decade—we can continue running Whittaker House until the next cycle or we can settle down and buy it back. If you decide you really don’t want to go past attorney general, we can buy it back after your term ends. But no matter what, we’ll always be able to call Whittaker House home. We can come back for good when you’re finished being the leader of the free world.”

That made him smile. “We’ll need to find a campaign manager, then, to do this right. I told the Republicans to go fuck themselves and third-party candidates aren’t

popular.”

Vanessa pursed her lips. “I talked to Annie.”

Eric started. “Uh . . .”

“She quit her job when she left Omaha so she’s not tied up at the moment— So, well . . .”

“You want *Annie* to be my campaign manager?”

Vanessa shrugged. “Sure, why not? She’s savvy like that. Shares our politics. Attractive. Wants to take her career in a different direction. Still wants to get away from her mother. Solves our problem. Solves her problem.” She paused. “If you say okay, she’ll move to Jeff City and start there, since we’ll be in Missouri for at least the next ten years or so.”

“I don’t know if I can trust her around you.”

“I like, ah, real penis. Particularly yours.”

Eric burst out laughing and shook his head. “So whose idea was that?”

“Justice’s. She got tired of Annie moping around about, uh . . .”

“Rafferty.”

“That’s it. And . . . I empathize completely. Been there, done that. Running a campaign should be a good distraction and who knows? Maybe she’ll meet somebody else.”

“Well, what the hell. And Vachel?”

“Funny thing. Vachel and Eilis have somehow become best friends forever and he’s decided he wants to learn how to run a company. So . . . we’ll start with Whittaker House, then see where that ends up. Whether we stay here or move to Jeff City next fall, he decided he didn’t want to leave Whittaker House until he goes to college, which . . . I think is wise, all things considered.”

Eric shook his head, completely exasperated. “They had this all figured out, didn’t they?”

“They think they’re very clever.”

Vanessa stared at him for quite a while, studying him. She reached out, laid her palm gently on his face, caressed his cheek with her thumb.

“What?”

She flashed him a smile of unabashed joy, her turquoise eyes shimmering with unshed tears. “You’re going to come home with me tonight and you aren’t going to leave me.”

He watched her and remembered far back in the past when a little girl had looked at him with hope and pleading. Then, she had wanted a kiss on the cheek, maybe on the lips. Now, tonight, she wanted—

“I’ll never walk away from you again, Vanessa,” he whispered, vowed, there in the middle of their church. “I’m here.” He pressed a soft kiss of promise against her lips. “To stay.”

\* \* \* \* \*

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**MAY 2007**

I didn't go into prostitution because I was desperate; I did it because I was bored: Bored of my hausfrau existence, bored of my husband both in bed and out, bored of my ingrate daughters who don't (yet) understand what it means to be the sacrificial lamb in the nuclear family setup and that being a wife and mother can be its own category of prostitution. They will. And I'll laugh.

I was never the stereotypical whore with a heart of gold, which seems to be used as point and counterpoint: If you're pure in heart, being a whore is tolerable, forgivable even; if you're just a mercenary bitch who likes sex and, moreover, getting paid for it, it's the unforgivable sin. Ultimately, however, I had to choose my clients on their ability to pay my exorbitant prices and leave the good sex to my carefully selected lovers.

I didn't quit prostitution for some sort of wish fulfillment of born-again virginity; I quit because I was bored. Fucking for money involves a certain amount of acting ability and while I'm a very good actress (thus, a very good whore), it takes some amount of concentration that is not usually conducive to having a real orgasm.

With a healthy bank account, one ex-husband whose current partner sports genitalia similar to his, four grown daughters, and my forty-third birthday on the horizon with professional ennui setting in, I had to find something else to do . . .

\* \* \* \* \*

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Since before Moriah can remember, she wrote stories in her head to put herself to

sleep at night. Unfortunately, they grew like kudzu and took over her neural path-ways until, around age fourteen, she had to start putting them on paper before they choked out everything else. She's been writing ever since, with the exception of a five-year sagging middle—er, uh, hiatus—during which a lot of stuff happened. The trouble started when she woke up one morning in 2007 with the solution to a plot problem that had plagued her since 1995 . . .

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