

CHAPTER ONE



IT WAS GOING to be a breathtaking fall sunset in Red Rock Canyon. The birds still sang in a cloudless sky. Awakened by recent rains, the wind was still redolent with desert lilies, poppies, agave, and cholla blossoms. The air was cool but not cold. On a ranch in the valley below, a band played *Can't Help Falling In Love With You* for the crowd at a wedding reception in full swing. Appropriate, given that the lights of the Las Vegas strip had just started to glitter in the distance.

“Good night to be alive. But an even better one to be dead, I reckon.”

Daniel Colton glanced toward the source of the comment. His buddy, Special Ops Master Sergeant Tait Bommer, added a cheerful whistle to it while sharpening a wicked battle knife. The last rays of the day's sun glinted off the steel as Bommer checked the blade, flashing the dying rays of the sun into the eyes of the man who was bound and gagged in the dirt at their feet.

Dan grunted. “Wouldn't know the difference.”

Tait nodded. Though he added a quick frown, he kept the expression to himself. Dan didn't need the guy's goddamn empathy, pity, attempt at understanding, or whatever the fuck they wanted to call it. His face was a freak show, end of discussion. He refused to “process” anything further than that. Didn't want to re-hash the mission in which he'd “selflessly saved a woman's life” in a fire that should've killed her *and* him. Didn't want to talk about the months of burn therapy that made him wish he really *had* died—or the face that caused most people to think he was already half a corpse.

Best to just keep putting one foot in front of the other.

And looking forward to moments like this.

The sole advantage to being half Freddy Krueger was that a guy could go anywhere he wanted and do even more. Eyeballs on the guest roster at a Mexican Rivera resort known for its high security? No problem. The Ken doll side of his face, flashed at the right angle, charmed the front desk agent enough to turn it over. Getting past the guards at Cameron Stock's suite? *Presto magico*. Out came the burned monster, long enough to remind the assholes what they'd look like as worm food, allowing him to slip in with two hired goons and make off with Stock before anyone noticed.

By the time Stock's henchmen realized their boss was gone, Dan had the ass-wad drugged, tied, and loaded onto a private transport helo, charted for a direct flight here. The timing was advantageous. Tait was already out in the canyon, playing best man at his brother Shay's wedding at Spring Mountain Ranch. Dan threw a stare over at the lights of the celebration, where the Elvis tune was followed by the *Cha Cha Slide*. He imagined the faces of so many friends in that glow, happy and smiling—and very relieved they didn't have to look at him, the burned husk serving as a reminder of the off-books operation that had nearly killed them all.

Due in part to the man now whimpering at Tait's feet.

"You ready to do this, spook man?"

Dan bristled. The nickname irked. He hadn't been a real spook for a while. Though he was still on the CIA's payroll, his indefinite medical leave wouldn't be lifted until he received clearance from one of their "approved" head shrinks—and he'd be damned if anyone was going to crack open his psyche for a guided tour anytime soon. Nevertheless, he let the label slide. There was more important work to focus on.

"You know it," he uttered back.

"Music to my ears." Tait chuckled while watching Stock's eyes widen, before the man trickled a scream past the edges of a dirty cloth gag. "But that doesn't suck either, Stock. You sing all you want, because I've been waiting a long damn time for this—namely, from the moment I had to bury the woman I loved thanks to your terrorism." He ran the knife over the sharpening stone again. "Learning that you extorted my mom for years, keeping her from my brother and me, really wasn't a helpful to your case

either, man. And oh yeah...the bit about my sweet little old lady neighbor secretly being your minion, assigned to kill Shay and me if mom ever tried to contact us? So a big winner in the karma department.” He grunted. “Guess it’s a good thing you got some points back when Shay and I found Mom last year.”

Dan pivoted. Planted a boot on Stock’s chest, his face directly in Stock’s line of vision. “Let’s not forget his unique monster-making talent, either. Maybe I’ll just stand here and remind you, asshole.”

“Fan-fucking-tastic idea,” Tait growled. “Nice little preview of hell.”

“Bingo.”

“You’re so damn sweet, Colton.”

“Right? That’s me. Mr. Giver.”

“That frees me up to be Mr. Karma.” The tension rolled thicker off Tait, pretty much as Dan expected—but he still slid a questioning stare at his friend. Something was suddenly off about the guy. Tait had anticipated this day for a long damn time, twice as long as Dan. So why was there a palpable conflict in the man?

“Well?” Dan demanded. “You ready?”

Tait rolled his shoulders then nodded. “Yeah. Okay.” But after he took two steps over, he paused—then returned Dan’s stare with just as much determination. “No, Dan.” He shook his head. “Not okay. Dammit, I’m sorry, but...”

Dan glared. Let his jaw plummet. “You’re—*what?*”

A corner of his mouth jerked up. “Dude, sometimes...you just have to let love win.”

“You have to do *what?*”

“I know, I know. Sounds like a sappy song, right?”

“No, goddammit. Sounds like pussy-whipped walking.”

“Maybe.” Tait tossed the knife to the ground then rolled his shoulders again. “Okay, probably.”

Dan glared at the weapon. Again at his friend. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“I’m sorry. I’m not. This time, love’s the winner for me, man. The lightning bolt that just keeps hitting. I watched my brother declare the same

truth for his life today. My mom was on one side of me, Lani on the other...lightning bolts number two and three, the loves I never thought life would give me, let alone in such abundance. And I've got a feeling that Lani, Kell, and I will be working on number four in a while, too. Life is good and I'm not going to blow it this time."

Rage pounded Dan's chest. Every mottled inch of skin on the right side of his face burned with it, too. Logically, he knew the pain was only memory. Didn't matter when memories were as true as reality. And sure as *hell* didn't matter when the fury seeped so deep, he longed to strangle Tait before driving the knife into Stock.

Life is good?

Love's the winner?

What. The. Fuck?

"Well, isn't that the most precious thing?" He couldn't spit it viciously enough. "So glad to know things worked out for you, dude. That traveling all the way to Mexico, finding this ass-nozzle, flying him out and bringing him right to your feet was so worth my fucking time!"

Tait's face—still so surfer-god attractive, he'd left at least a dozen women panting in his wake during Shay's bachelor party at Gilley's the other night—tautened. "Calm the hell down. Nobody asked you to play Dog the Bounty Hunter and traipse down to Mexico on a vendetta."

"Shut up," Dan snarled. He grabbed the knife and stomped over, thrusting the handle back out at the guy. "Shut the *fuck* up, Tait, and send this bastard to hell now—or I will!"



"WE'RE REALLY GOING to hell for this." Tait's hands were matching loops of white around the steering wheel of his rented Escalade, even in the fading twilight. "You know that, right?"

A groan came from the back seat, laced with rickety agony—sounding a lot like a bastard with a knife in his scrotum. Dan glanced over his shoulder at Stock's prone form in the back seat. Well, imagine that. The guy *did* have a Bowie hilt hard-on. The sack they'd tossed over Stock's head in Mexico now made for an improvised dressing around the wound, and a heap of hotel

towels—God knew why Tait had the things in the car—were swaddled around the bastard, warding off a little of the encroaching shock. Even so, Stock’s continued consciousness was surprising. He was either one of the most tenacious scumbags Dan had ever encountered or he’d really made a deal with the devil—a pact Dan would already be delivering on right now, if Bommer the magical Hallmark card hadn’t stopped him.

Dammit.

At least he’d gotten in the satisfaction of going Benihana on the dickwad’s scrotum. And yeah, he hated admitting it, but watching Stock in agony was maybe a bit more fun than gazing at his corpse. Now, he was determined to enjoy every moment of the show.

“Awww, Cameron,” he drawled. “Is that a knife in your balls or are you just happy to see me?”

“Fuh you!”

He snorted Tait’s way. “Funny how that one always translates.”

Tait added his glower to the mix. “You heard what *I* said, right? We’re dragging that asshole, bleeding crotch and all, back to my little brother’s *wedding reception*.”

“And that’s my fault...why?”

Tait huffed. “Did you stop to think about the *date* of your little toodle-oo South of the Border, billionaire boy? You RSVP’ed to the wedding, too.”

“No. Brynn RSVP’ed for both of us.”

“Because the woman’s good that way. Really good. You know she’s probably the best thing that ever happened to you, including your pre-asshole days, right?”

“You mean pre-Quasimodo days?”

“I mean pre-*asshole*.”

“Sheez. I sent Zo and Shay a present.”

“You sent them a whole game room.”

“They didn’t like it?”

The guy stabbed a hand through hair that resembled a tsunami, due to all the product coating the strands. “For a second, just one, try to wrap your mind around how stressed we all were today. About *you*. When you didn’t show up at the church, we all thought—” He stopped, clearly editing

himself, though the damage was already done. Dan knew damn well what they'd all thought. "Well, we were worried. So when you texted in the middle of dinner with that 'urgent, you gotta come now' shit—"

"Sorry to have disappointed," Dan drawled. "I know hand-delivering Stock wasn't as exciting as talking me down off the top of the Cosmopolitan. Shit, we could've topped off the night with foo-foo drinks in the Chandelier Bar, too. What *was* I thinking?"

Bommer shook his head. "You know, asshole, I'm five seconds away from taking out your teeth with my fist. You want to devalue *your* life like that, I'm past fighting the issue. But stop dragging the rest of us into your goddamn hole."

Silence was the best response to that one. Even rounding the corner on his twenty-sixth sleepless hour, jacked on fury and adrenalin, the wisdom prevailed. Wouldn't do him any good to point out the "hole" wasn't his to begin with, dug deeper by the *two* off-books ops that the band of merry men known to the outside world as Operational Detachment Alpha, First Special Forces Group, had gotten themselves into. Wouldn't be a valid point, anyway. He'd been a willing accomplice to both the wild boys on both rides, including his decision to dive into that burning building in the North Nevada wilderness.

In the doing, he'd saved a nurse's life and lived through the ordeal himself, a miracle that should've brought more comfort than it did. But that was the things about monkeys on a guy's back, especially the species known as bitterness—*especially* if it lived in the eyes of the mangled man in the mirror.

These days, it was simply easier to match the inside to the outside.

"Fuck," Tait grouched. "I've been gone an hour and a half."

"Boo hoo," Dan volleyed. "I'm sure Lani and Kell kept your seat warm." In more interesting ways than he wanted to imagine.

"You remember I'm the best man at this thing, right? The first toast guy? The keep-everything-moving guy?"

"And you would've been back to your duties much sooner than this, if—"

"Yeah, yeah. I know. If I'd let you go hari-kari on fuckhead?"

“Technically, hari-kari is an act of suicide, but I’ll let it slide. You’ve been under some stress.”

Tait snorted. “Well, shit. You *are* Mr. Giver.”

“Not too late for me to take your place as Mr. Karma.” He glanced again at Stock, whose eyes widened in understanding of the intent. “Knife’s still in the perfect position, man. More or less.”

“No.”

“Well, you’re no fucking fun.”

“And *you’re* no fucking—” Tait gripped the wheel harder. “I really don’t know how to finish that.” The air in the car filled with the smoky edge of twilight before he murmured, “What the hell happened to you, Colton?”

Best to let that one descend into a long silence. Maybe another. “That was rhetorical, right?”

Another question that provided its own answer. As if Bommer were serious about a single damn word. As if Dan didn’t have the right rearview mirror to remind him of it. One glance that way, into the slab of mottled flesh from his temple to chin and cheekbone to ear, was proof enough of exactly what had “happened” to him.

“What’s rhetoric got to do with this?” Tait snapped. “And stop answering me by moping at yourself in the mirror. You think anyone notices that shit but you?”

“Says one of the guys who used to call me ‘CIA Ken’ because of ‘this shit’?”

“Yeah. So? We also called you Woofie the magical G-dog.”

“The fuck?”

“Own it, man. If Uncle Sam threw a Frisbee, you’d kill yourself to catch it.” A knowing smirk twisted Tait’s lips. “Now you just have the badge of honor to prove it. On the books or off, you were always the get-it-right guy.”

Dan’s fingers dug into the dust coating the vehicle’s roof. Beat the hell out of pulling his hand back inside, where it would’ve driven into the bastard’s face. *Badge of honor?* Was he kidding? “Not amusing, Bommer. Not in anyone’s fucking universe. *That,*”—he jabbed his chin at the burn scar on the inside of Tait’s right arm—“isn’t your permission slip to spout about *this.*” Flicking a finger at his face took care of that obviousness.

“Right. Because *you* don’t let it define every damn move you make, right?”

“Fuck off.”

Who the hell did Bommer think he was? Tait’s burn could be easily hidden by a long-sleeved shirt, but even without the cover, somebody would have to be looking to see his “badge.” Big fucking difference between that and walking around like something out of a circus side show. Bommer had no damn idea what this was like. None of them did.

“Fine,” Tait finally muttered. “I’ll give you the point. But do you really think any of us defined your work—which was damn good shit, by the way—based on your looking like a plastic doll minus the good parts?”

“Were you paying that much attention to my ‘good parts?’”

“Says the guy who just got his rocks off by digging a blade into Stock’s scrotum?”

“Says the guy who now shares a bed with his sniper partner?”

“*And* the hottest *wahine* in all the Hawaiian islands?”

Dammit. Fucker had a non-arguable point. Tait and Kellan’s unique relationship with their woman—yes, *their* woman, as in sharing the wealth in all ways imaginable—wasn’t one Dan easily understood, though it was far from his place to point judgmental fingers. The three of them were obviously past the point of happy about the arrangement—and for fuck’s sake, Tait deserved the joy after everything Stock and his partner, Ephraim Lor, took from the man.

And didn’t that bring everything full circle once again?

Tait Bommer, the one guy on the planet who’d been craving Stock’s head on a platter more than Dan, was now the guy who’d turned peace, love, and Ed Sheeran on him to all the sickest degrees—an anomaly so insane, it was strictly a see-it-to-believe-it thing. Okay, so it had been over a year since Luna died because of Stock and Lor’s terrorist plot. And, by all accounts, Lani Kail was even better for Tait than Luna was, a truth even Luna herself “agreed” with, Bommer had revealed with a cryptic smile.

Fuck.

He was actually using words like “cryptic” in the same sentence as Tait Bommer.

And maybe the earth was flat now, too. And aliens were lurking in the stratosphere, ready to probe everyone like extraterrestrial kinksters.

But the cosmic issues had to go on hold for now. *Shit storm ahead. Brace for impact.*

The second Tait hooked the car off Highway 159 and onto the access road to the ranch, the glow from hundreds of white party lights nearly made it possible for Tait to cut the car's headlights. The bulbs hung were suspended across one of the ranch's rustic picnic groves, with smaller lights wound around the supporting tree trunks. Old-fashioned oil lanterns rested on the banquet tables, which surrounded a wooden dance floor accented by big barrels brimming with sunflowers and wedding-type foof. It was a Wild West-themed wedding with all the gussy extras, and even from here, laughter filtered out from it on the wind.

There was a day, not too long ago, when Dan would've found such a sight enchanting. Hell, he'd probably have even conjured wistful thoughts of what his own wedding reception would be like. Now, the extra light was just an aid for illuminating his phone screen.

"I've got cell reception again," he told Tait. "But I really want to lie to you about that."

Tait cocked a brow. "You only gotta dial three little numbers, dude. Nine, one, and one."

"Fuck."

"That's not one of the numbers." His jaw clenched as Dan snorted. "Okay, do you really want to go there, man? To know his blood is on your hands—for the rest of your life? Before you give me the 'amen, brother' on that, listen to the guy who lines up sniper shots for a living." He exhaled through his nose and shook his head. "That crap sticks to your soul, Colton. It follows you—and not in the good ways."

Dan gripped the roof harder before retorting, "Right. Because I wouldn't know anything about 'crap' that follows a guy around." *Like half a face full of burn scars.*

"Just make the call, dickhead," Bommer growled.

As he guided the Escalade toward a spot at the back of the parking lot, a voice crackled through in Dan's ear.

“Nine-one-one. What is your emergency?”

He peeked once more at Stock. The guy’s drooped in his pasty, sweaty face. *Now you know what it’s like to wish you were already in hell, motherfucker.*

“Hello? Hello? Do you have an emergency?”

“How about a sack of shit who won’t die?”

Tait swore under his breath before demanding, “Give me that, goddammit.”

As he yanked the phone away to give the operator *real* instructions, a commotion erupted at the other end of the parking lot. Okay, maybe not a ‘commotion’—but enough of a stir to lift even Stock’s head for a second. That was the kind of effect Shay Bommer had on the air, anywhere he went. To be fair, he couldn’t help it. Shay was an actual force of nature, genetically altered as a child by one of Stock’s many “business partners” so his “animal side” *was* his animal side. As the guy stalked across the pavement, his massive body strained at the confines of his white shirt, ivory tuxedo vest, and tailored dress denims. His new bride was just a few steps behind, cobalt boots kicking from beneath her lacy wedding gown.

Dan exited the car then leaned against the hood. Might as well act relaxed, even if his bloodstream wasn’t in sync. “Congratulations, you two. Sorry I had to borrow your best man for a while—but I’ve returned him with a gift.”

Tait jerked up his head, shooting over a fresh glower. “*E kala mai ia u,*” he muttered into the phone. “Just one moment, my friend.” He looked fast to Shay. “It’s *not* a gift, brother. Stay back and for fuck sake, keep Zoe away. She’s in no condition to see this.”

Dan tossed his head back, barking a laugh. “Really, man? You don’t know your own sister-in-law better?”

“Keep me away from what?” Sure enough, Zoe Chestain-Bommer bolted forward like Tait had lassoed her. “And what do you mean, ‘no condition’? I’m pregnant, not schizo.”

“Don’t go near that one,” Dan warned Tait. “Not with a hundred-foot pole.”

Fortunately, it took three of Zoe's steps to match one of Shay's. "No way, dancer." He caught her by the elbow in time, tucking her behind him. "Not until I've played the full shell game on this first."

"*Que?*" The little Latina's eyebrows arched. Technically, the word was a question. Not-so-technically, she'd told her new husband *oh no, you didn't*.

Shay received backup in the form of his groomsmen, consisting of Rhett Lange and Rebel Stafford, both still serving with the First SFG and instrumental in saving Shay's ass on that last off-books mission. They were joined by Ghid Preston, the walking rhino of a man who was passionately devoted to Shay and Tait's mother, Melody Bommer. It actually surprised Dan that Melody wasn't right behind—

Ding, ding, ding. Two seconds later, Melody Bommer appeared, as elegant as Ghid was rough in a figure-flattering dress that matched Zoe's blue boots. Behind her was Zoe's sister, Ava, who'd gotten hitched last New Year's to one of the finest SFG operators Dan knew, Ethan Archer. Too bad Archer wasn't hanging with her now. Though the man's temper took longer to flare than most of the guys Shay hung with, he'd also be the kind not to fling fault for running a basic off-the-books revenge fantasy, given the means and the money for it. Dan needed such an advocate about now.

Instead, Ava's companion was one of Zoe's best friends, El Browning, who'd switched out her long red hair for a blonde, wedding-appropriate updo. The look was really good for her, but that didn't stop Dan's gut from twisting at her arrival.

Where El went, Brynn usually followed.

Brynn. Who'd been there through so much of the last eleven months. Who'd tolerated his bitterness and anger and impatience. Who'd snuck him fast food in the hospital, sat with him through countless old war movies, and even taken him on his first trip in public after the scars had healed—as much as they would. And yes, she'd even been there when he needed to relieve his tension...in other ways.

Who deserved so much more than he'd given her in return—but had staunchly refused to acknowledge that fact.

Until now.

As the woman walked up behind her two friends, looking gorgeous as a princess in the cobalt satin fitted perfectly to her lithe figure, one distinct message was written across her face.

She'd finally seen the light.

Had realized just how fucked up he really was.

Ohhh, yeah. Her glare told him everything. Disbelief, disappointment, and hurt raced across her lips and tightened the corners of her eyes. Tension clamped her bare shoulders and made its way down to both clenched fists.

"Hey there, gorgeous." It was his regular greeting. When he coupled it with what he could muster of a smile, the woman usually dissolved like butter in a sauce pan.

Not tonight.

"You're here."

Her tone conveyed what the words didn't. *You're here—but were supposed to be four hours ago. You're here—dressed in field mission gear that's splattered with blood instead of the tuxedo I bought for you on my dancer's salary. You're here—after letting all my calls and texts go unanswered for two days.*

"I am." *Lame. Ass.* But what the hell else made sense?

"Why?" Once more, tone that implied meaning. *Why did you even bother?*

"My question exactly." As Zoe stomped her foot, all the asymmetrical angles of her foofy skirts swayed, hiding the slight baby bump beneath. "Dan the Man claims there's a present involved but Tait the wuss says I'm too delicate to see it."

Tait jutt'd his chin away from the phone. "The wuss who's now your brother-in-law—which means you're as delicate as I say, dammit."

"Is that so?" Her dark blue nails stood out against the cream lace as she cocked both hands to hips. "News flash, *cabrón*. You're not in the islands anymore. And *I'm* not—"

"Zoe," Shay warned.

"Don't you 'Zoe' me. We stood in front of that minister and agreed we wouldn't hold any secrets from each other. That we would share everything. You need a refresher course on the definition of sharing now, Mr. Bommer? Because it sure as hell does *not* incl—"

“Holy fuck.” Shay’s utterance sliced her short. He peered again inside the Escalade then lurched back, a guy who’d just seen a ghost. And a zombie, too. “What the hell? *How* the hell?” He hammered a frown at Tait then Dan. “This had to be off-books. And *not* cheap.”

Everyone’s gaze reflected the same curiosity—except for Tait’s. He scowled, seeming to anticipate what Dan was about to say.

“Colton Steel’s been doing well this year.” Dan smirked and crossed his ankles. “And let’s just say this was a hell of a lot more fun than buying another Lambo.”

Shay shook his head. “I don’t know whether to shoot you or kiss you, spook man.”

Tait grimaced. “There’s a visual I never needed.”

“*You* never needed?” Dan rejoined.

The guy-bonding respite was enjoyed for two more seconds. His gut was shoved back into the meat grinder as Brynn stepped around, approaching him with tight lips and folded arms. Her raspy whisper was just as much a spleen-twister. “Where have you been, Dan?”

He met her gaze directly. It wasn’t easy, knowing exactly what she was forced to take in as he did—but at this point, he at least owed her his honesty. “In a lot of places I couldn’t answer the phone. A lot of places you probably shouldn’t know about, sweetheart.”

Her forehead furrowed. Her eyes went dark. “You don’t say.”

The gut grinder cranked higher. Who knew it had a *mince* setting?

Dammit.

It had never been his intention to hurt her like this—especially not to drag her this far into his darkness. When they’d first met all those months ago in Zoe’s living room, the attraction had been sizzling and instant—but they’d also been living in a bubble. They’d thought they could go after the bad guys and emerge unscathed. They’d thought they were super heroes in plain clothes, invincible and unstoppable, Superman and Wonder Woman. And after the fire, Brynn had just kept thinking the same thing. She agreed to ignore his monster face...if he ignored the dark preferences of his sexuality.

Like the messed-up shit he was, he’d agreed. Had even accepted the distortion of his face as karmic payback for the dark desires of his mind and

body, indulged over the years in select BDSM dungeons, and now maybe the universe was realigned in that regard, too. Maybe now he wouldn't crave the high of taking a woman to the edge of her limits, physically and psychologically. Maybe now he'd look like a monster but have the sexual needs of a normal man. And maybe, one day far away, he'd be able to settle down with a normal woman, just like Brynn. Maybe *she'd* be that woman.

But that had been an illusion, too. His sorry dick still wanted what it did, and Brynn had made it clear she wasn't wired that way.

So maybe he was just a depraved fuck who deserved what fate had dished out.

Yeah, even the woman who edged away from him, shaking her head slowly, gorgeous features twisting harder. "You don't say," Brynn repeated, as if hoping to gain strength from it. That in itself was wrong. So wrong. *He* should be her strength. That so wasn't happening, either. And likely never would.

He was still a messed-up shit. Only now, without any bubble.

Shay, still gaping in shock, was distracted long enough for Zoe to race forward. Tait's protesting bellow, as well as her husband's attempt to hold her back, were too late. The little brunette jerked open the Escalade's door.

"*Caramba!*" she shrieked.

"Holy crap!" El seconded.

Brynn joined her friends but didn't say a word. She stared, still tucked in against herself, as Stock let out a loud grunt. From his position at the front of the car, Dan couldn't tell if the guy was terrified, pissed, or both. Not that it mattered. Not that the shreds of his gut would magically heal, even if he strutted back there and really finished flaying the asshole—a craving he fought harder with every passing minute.

A reward for the self-control came in one of the oddest forms he could imagine.

Again before anyone could hold her back, Zoe stomped forward. Grabbed the frame of the car door opening in order to balance herself—as she rammed the heel of one cobalt cowboy boot into the bridge of Stock's nose.

“Woooo!” El pumped a fist into the air. “Oh my God, Zo. Awesome! I heard his bones crunch and everything!”

“Shit,” Tait muttered.

“Fuck.” Shay pinched his nose.

“Damn.” Dan snickered. Not even a censuring glare from Brynn quelled him. Why fight for a sinking ship? Tait was right; the woman was one of the best things that had come along in his life—but maybe he simply wasn’t meant to have nice things. It was a damn idiot’s game to continue thinking otherwise.

“Oops.” Zoe swung a wide, innocent gaze at her husband. “Look, *papi*. The *desgraciado* fell down, right on his face. What a shame.”

Melody actually high-fived her for that—on *her* way to the opening. “I’m next.”

“No, you’re not.” Ghid roped a burly arm around her waist and dragged her at least six feet backward.

“Goddammit!” She beat at his meaty chest. “Don’t you dare deprive me of this, Ghid. That monster has to pay for the evil he dragged into my life. Into *yours*.” She drove a glare at Shay and Tait. “And *yours*!”

“And we’ve all overcome it.” Ghid braced her shoulders, making the order beneath his words clear. “Become better for it, even with all our battle wounds.” Logical progression after that was a traded stare with Shay. Nobody in the small throng needed interpretation. They all knew about the heinous “experiments” Ghid and Shay had endured at the hands of Stock’s business partner, Homer Adler—and the incision scars that riddled both their bodies because of them. “Today isn’t a day for killing—”

“Killing?” Zoe’s head jerked up. She whipped her gaze, now sapphire bright, back to her husband. “Could we get away with that? Seriously? If we were quick about it—”

“No!” Shay shouted it along with Tait, Ghid, Rhett, and Rebel. Dan was the only abstention.

“Are you crazy?” The concurring growl came from Brynn, who whirled from Dan to advance on her friend. “Zo, would you listen to yourself?”

“She’s sorta right, honey,” El said. “It *is* your wedding day.”

“And you have a fucking condition.” Tait stabbed a finger in the direction of Zoe’s belly.

“*Ay*. All right, all right!” As Zoe barked it, sirens wailed across the valley. Red and white lights careened off of a pair of emergency vehicles, closing in on the ranch at a NASCAR pace.

“Thank fuck for small miracles.” Rebel muttered it while hiking up his shirtsleeves, exposing his exotically tattooed forearms. He stepped over, roping Shay under one arm and Zoe under the other. “All right, you two, a few hundred people are over there because of you. Go forth and be charming. Rhett and I have this covered.” He nodded toward Tait. “That goes for you too, T-Bomb. Stop moping. That’s Colton’s job now.”

Tait clawed a hand through his hair. “I need a fucking beer. And a dance with my woman.”

“Just a dance?” Shay wagged his brows at his brother but reached for Zoe.

“Easy, *papi*.” Zoe giggled, though the sound was still strained. “It’s not time for the honeymoon yet.”

“It is when you get all feisty and want to kill people.”

His stab at make-love-not-war was lost on his bride, who gazed longingly at the car once more. “It’s a hell of a lot more than ‘want’.”

“Zoe.” He coupled the warning with a jerk at the small of her back. “Let it go, tiny dancer. Please.”

“Because *you* have?”

He huffed. “Do we have to do this right—”

“Because you don’t still wake up in sweats from the nightmares of what that *higueputa* did to you? Because *I’ll* never forget walking into that room in Adler’s lab and seeing him standing next to the bed they’d strapped you to, locking you down like the breeding stud they’d reduced you to? Because it tore my soul apart to see you drugged, cut up, and—”

Shay cupped her face in both hands. “It’s behind us now, baby girl. Don’t sacrifice our joy on the altar of hating him.”

“Great minds.” Tait jerked a thumb toward Dan. “Same logic I tried on the spook earlier.”

Shay snorted. “I see how well that went.”

“Stock’s intestines aren’t decorating the back seat, are they?”

Shay’s brows jumped. “Point taken.”

Dan’s gaze was snagged by the approving slant of Zoe’s lips. “You simply pulled the wrong member of the wedding party away, Colton. I would’ve gladly helped you turn that *cabrón*’s guts into vulture food.”

“*Enough.*”

Shay snarled it before smacking Zoe’s backside with so much force, there was no doubt about his intent. *Obi-Wan; the Dom is strong in this one.* Dan had known that much about Shay for a while, though it was clear Tait hadn’t. The guy gawked at his brother with new awareness. Shay flared a glare in return before pivoting back to his bride, who’d turned the texture of putty. They all watched as Zoe stood on tiptoe to whisper something in Shay’s ear. He nodded and murmured, “Of course you may. But make it fast.”

Dan leaned against the car again, grinning. Whatever Shay had just given Zoe permission for, it ought to be a good show. He hoped it involved something like freeing more little swimmers from Stock’s balls, or finishing the nose job she’d started.

But the little dancer didn’t go near the car. She skipped over to *him*. Before he could recover from the switch-up, Zoe threw her arms around his neck—and landed a solid kiss on his cheek.

He froze.

Rhett and Rebel whooped. El joined them. Everyone else clapped. Even Brynn, who still looked like his *cojones* on a platter would suit her just fine.

“You were right, spook man,” Zoe drawled. “*That* was a kick-ass wedding gift.” She kissed his other cheek, using it as an excuse to murmur into his ear, “But next time, we’ll just kill the *chindago*, okay?”