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# SINGLE DAD BURNING UP

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### **Single Dad Burning Up**

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“Daddy, I’m going to miss Chester.”

I glance at my daughter, her mess of blonde hair bouncing as she skips down the near empty hallway beside me. Her bright sequined backpack is weighed down with a year’s worth of artwork and the Chester she’s referring to is the class pet, a cute guinea pig with white and butterscotch fur. With summer vacation now upon us—Kaitlyn’s last day of kindergarten behind her—Chester will be going home with the teacher until the school years starts back up in the fall.

“I’m sure he’s going to miss you too,” I say, and ruffle her hair as the last of the kids rush from the school to enjoy their summer vacation. Luckily, I have the next few days off from the fire station and I was able to pick Kaitlyn up myself.

She pouts up at me, and my heart squeezes in my too-tight chest. She’s been without a mother and baby brother for two years now, and every fucking morning, right after I peel my eyes open, I pray to God I can do right by her.

“Can we get a guinea pig?” she asks.

I swallow against the rawness in my tight throat, and grin

at my little girl. I have such a hard time saying no to her, especially when she blinks up at me with those big blue eyes—her late mother's eyes.

"Please, Daddy."

I scrub my face, and remember the goldfish fiasco. Who knew overfeeding a goldfish would create ammonia in the bowl? I'm a firefighter, not a damn fish keeper. But, yeah, I should have Googled it. Kaitlyn shed a lot of tears in the makeshift funeral in our backyard, and I'd hate for her to go through that again. Then again, every child should have a pet, right? A guinea pig would be less work than a dog.

"We'll see, okay?" I say.

"Yay," she squeals and claps her hands. I can't help but smile. At six years old, she's smart enough to know 'we'll see' really means yes. My little girl has me wrapped around her pinky finger. I'm just glad I found the nail polish remover last night, after she painted said finger neon pink. The guys at the station would have gotten a kick out of that. They're all good guys though, even if they love to goad me. There isn't a single colleague that wouldn't jump to lend a helping hand, and she gets lots of motherly attention from her aunt Melissa—my late wife Zoe's younger sister—and both sets of grandparents, who dote on her.

I arch one brow. "You promise you'll take care of him?"

She gives me an enthusiastic nod, and I just shake my head as we round the corner. "I'm going to call him Gilbert."

"Why Gilbert?" I ask.

Her mouth drops open, like I might be dense. She's probably right. Just when I think I'm nailing this single parenting thing, she grows and changes, presenting different challenges and a hundred more Google searches. Can't wait for her teen years—said no dad ever.

"Because it's cute," she says.

I laugh, but it dies an abrupt death when I take the

hallway corner and smack straight into something...or rather someone. A squeal of surprise wraps around me as books and papers and pens scatter to the floor at my feet. I reach out to steady the woman I nearly knocked on her ass.

"Whoa, are you okay?" I ask, instantly realizing I'd plowed right into Gemma Davis, an old friend from high school. She teaches seventh grade, so we rarely cross paths in the school, but I've always liked her. Zoe took Gemma under her wing when Gemma moved here in high school.

"I'm okay," Gemma says and lifts her head. A wide smile splits her lips when she sees it's me. "Callan. Hi. It's so good to see you, or rather, bump into you."

I sink down and begin to gather up her books. "Sorry, I wasn't paying attention."

Her gaze goes from me to my daughter. "How are you, Kaitlyn?" she asks as she crouches with me to clean up the mess.

"I'm getting a guinea pig," Kaitlyn sings out.

I groan, and cut Gemma a glance. "Lucky me, huh?"

Gemma grins at me. "Don't worry. You're not alone. I think every child in Mrs. Anderson's class wants a guinea pig now. Chester *is* awfully cute." She gives a roll of her shoulder. "I guess it could be worse. The class pet could have been a snake."

I eye her. "Don't tell me—"

"Not me," she says with a quick shake of her head that loosens a tendril of honey-blond hair from the small clip straining to hold it all together. "Mr. Baily has one." She holds her hands up palms out. "Just preparing you for first grade."

I exhale, my shoulders slumping. "Maybe I shouldn't have given in so easily to the guinea pig." She chuckles as we finish gathering up her music sheets. "I hope I didn't mess everything up."

“It’s fine,” she says. “I’ve always wanted to hear Beethoven played out of order.”

I cringe. “I’m—”

She puts her hand on my arm. “I’m kidding,” she says, and when she realizes she has her hand on me, she pulls it back and clutches the papers tighter. “It’s not a big deal. I have lots of time to get them in order, before my summer lessons start.”

I swallow and work to ignore the sensations trickling through me. Christ, she barely touched me; it shouldn’t be triggering any kind of reaction, especially around the vicinity of my crotch. Jesus, I haven’t been with a woman since Zoe, and have no desire to be with anyone. I might not have seen Gemma in a while, but we go way back. No way should a simple touch from her spark something deep inside me. Awaken something that has lain dormant for a very long time now.

“Sounds like an exciting weekend,” I tease. But who am I to talk? I can’t remember the last time I’ve been to Burgers and Brews Pub with the guys. Maybe that’s why my traitorous cock jumped to the occasion. The guys at the station are always trying to set me up—especially my best friend Mason and his wife Lisa. When Zoe was alive, we always hung out as couples, and our children played. Maybe I ought to take them up on it. Any girl I hook up with would have to know up front that a quick roll in the hay is all I’m looking for, though. I have no more to give.

“I’d prefer a weekend with my music sheets to your dangerous job any day, Callan,” she says, her eyes wide. “Running into burning buildings.” A quake goes through her. “No thank you.”

“It’s not so bad,” I say and turn to look at Kaitlyn. She’s spinning in circles, her arms wide, as she chants *Gilbert* over and over. For a child who’s been through a lot, she’s always



happy and that brings a smile to my face. I must be doing something right. I turn back to Gemma, find her staring at me. The last time we talked she'd just taken the job at the school and was dating a police officer. I remember him being quite a bit older than her.

"How've you been?" I ask. "Are you still with...Ah..." Shit what was his name?

"Brad. No, we broke up. A few months ago."

She averts her gaze, her lids fluttering rapidly as her body tenses. Okay, I'm not an expert on reading body language or anything, but I've clearly hit a sore spot here. Did the guy break her heart or something?

"Oh, someone new?" I ask.

"Nope. No desire. I've decided single is the way to go." I frown at that—but who am I to talk? She plasters on a big smile and turns back to me. "But I'm great. Two months off school to bask in the summer sun. Though I will be helping out at the Boys and Girls club, and a few nights a week, I'll be giving private piano lessons."

"I want to play piano, Daddy," Kaitlyn says. "Can Miss Davis teach me?"

It's not the first time she's asked. Her mom played and always filled our house with music. "We'll—" I stop myself before spouting out my favorite response and getting Kaitlyn's hopes up. I don't even know if Gemma has room in her schedule. "How about we talk about it later?" I say.

Gemma gives me a wink, like she's fully aware of my dilemma with my daughter, and my inability to say no. "She almost had you there, didn't she?"

I chuckle. "I've got to get better at saying no."

"You're doing a fine job with her." She casts a look Kaitlyn's way, a look of longing in her eyes as a small smile touches her naked lips. For a second I wonder if her break-up with Brad had something to do with wanting kids. Obviously, she

longs to be a mother. “She’s a sweet little girl. Very kind and sincere. Like you.”

“Shh,” I say and glance around. “I’ve got a reputation to protect here.”

Her lips quirk at the corner, then her smile falls. “You good, Callan?” she asks, her voice soft, and I get what she’s asking, what people are still asking two years later.

“I’m good,” I lie. I’m as good as can be expected, I guess. Truthfully is anyone ever ‘good’ again after losing their wife and unborn baby boy? I was once told that when you lose someone you have bad days and days that aren’t as bad. I hate that I fully understand that now.

“Do you keep in contact with any of the old gang? Are you and Mason still friends? Wait, he’s a firefighter too, right?”

“Yup, still best friends,” I say. “Come on, I’ll walk you out.”

“Sure.”

We head toward the doors, and the warm afternoon sun shines down on us, but it does little to loosen the tightness in my lungs. On those bad days, I walk around with an invisible band around my chest, squeezing tight. Who am I kidding? On those days that aren’t as bad, the belt is still there. I’m not sure it will ever slacken, and maybe I don’t want it to. Maybe I deserve the grief.

Gemma leans into me, her warmth and citrusy scent stirring the controlled storm in my body. Her voice is low, for my ears only when she whispers, “If she’s serious about lessons, I do have an opening.”

I nod, and consider it. “She would probably love it. Her mom...” I let my words fall off.

“I know,” Gemma says, and glances at her feet. “We can talk about it more later if you want.”

Her reaction isn’t unusual. Most people avoid the subject

of my wife. They don't know whether it will upset me or not. I'm glad they don't know how to react. It means they've not had loss.

"We can talk about it over ice cream," I say to Gemma.

"Ice cream," Kaitlyn belts out, and we both laugh.

"Nothing gets by her." I shake my head. "Unless you have other plans," I say, hoping she doesn't.

"I do," she says. A ridiculous sense of disappointment sits heavy in my gut and I work to ignore it. "But," she says brightly, holding up an index finger. "Ice cream first." A smile reaches her dark eyes when they meet mine. "It's been too long, Callan," she says in a soft voice. "Let's get caught up."

"I'd love that."

"Yay," Kaitlyn says, her hand sliding into mine. "Swing me, Daddy."

I pick her up under the arms, and give her a swing, and she squeals in delight. I set her down and she grabs my hand and Gemma's. "Now both swing me."

"Kaitlyn—" I begin, wanting to set boundaries when it comes to other people.

"It's okay," Gemma says, and we both take one arm up high, so it doesn't pop from the socket as we swing her.

"That was fun," Kaitlyn says as we reach the car. She hops into the back to buckle herself in, and I glance around to see what Gemma is driving.

"I walk to school," she says. "I bought a townhouse a few blocks away."

"Oh, nice. I didn't realize." I pull her door open for her. "Ride me." What the fuck. I give a quick shake of my head at my blunder. "I mean ride *with* me," I say quickly.

"I know what you meant," she says, mature enough not to needle me as she slides into the car and sets her papers on the back seat beside Kaitlyn. None of the guys at the station would have let that go, and when I say guys, I mean the

female fighters. I love them all dearly, like family, but they love to *ride* my ass—as in harass me relentlessly, all in good fun of course. I get a whiff of her scent as she settles in my passenger seat, and I tug my hair, closing the door behind her.

Ride me?

*Really, Callan?*

Shit, it was a simple slip, but now that I've said it, I kind of can't stop thinking about it. Me in bed, sweet Gemma on top of me. My dick twitches as I circle the car and I clench my teeth and work to purify my thoughts. Yeah, the guys are right. I do need to get laid. I never was the kind of guy to sleep around, but maybe it's time for a one-night stand. Not with Gemma, of course. We're just friends. Yeah, sure she was cute in high school, but four years of college later, combined with a couple years of teaching, well, let's just say she turned into a beautiful woman. I can't understand why she's still single. Maybe her break-up with Brad was recent, and she's not ready to get back into the game. I can understand that.

I back out of my spot and head toward Boston Common. Fifteen minutes later we're walking through the park, eating our dripping ice-cream cones. Joggers run the path around the park, as families picnic, or play with their pets.

"I'm going to teach Gilbert how to fetch," Kaitlyn states unambiguously, and Gemma stifles a chuckle when I glance at her.

"That'll be a neat trick," I say, and zero in on the big stain of ice cream on Gemma's face. "You have a bit..." I reach for her face, and she jerks backward. Whoa. What the hell? "Sorry, you just have some ice cream on your face."

"Right, okay," she says, her eyes big as she swipes her mouth with a napkin.

Fuck, I've been the first on the scene in many situations, including domestic abuse. If I didn't know better... Hell, I

don't know better. A burst of protectiveness goes through me. "Everything okay, Gemma?"

"Yeah, sure," she says, all bright-eyed. "You just startled me." She turns her attention to Kaitlyn. "Will you be at the Boys and Girls club this summer?" she asks, and I don't miss the fast switch in conversations.

"Will I be, Daddy?"

"You bet you will be. But next week you're going to stay with Grammy and Grampy, remember?" I say, my stomach coiled tight. Is someone hurting Gemma? If so, I'd like to meet them, and introduce my fist to their face.

"Grammy has a bird," she says.

"What kind of bird?" Gemma asks.

Kaitlyn holds her hands a couple inches apart. "It's a perky." She rolls her eyes. "I like him but he sings a lot."

"Parakeet," I correct. In the distance I spot fellow firefighter Colin and the guys playing frisbee. I waved as we pass, and inside Gemma's purse her phone starts ringing—a ringtone I don't recognize, which probably means its personalized and she knows who's calling. She tenses and ignores the chime. It keeps on ringing, the caller as tenacious as a six-year-old.

"You going to get that?" I ask.

"No," she says flatly.

I shove my hands into my pockets, and cast her a sidelong glance, aware of the tightness in her shoulders, her rapid intake of breath. "Want me to get it for you?"

"No, it's..." Her head slowly lifts, her eyes filled with something that looks like despair when they latch on mine.

I come to an abrupt halt. "Jesus, Gemma, what is it?"

**D**ammit, dammit, dammit. I never meant to react when Callan reached for my face, or again just now when my phone started ringing. He's a smart guy, one of the smartest I know, and he's a firefighter to boot. Guys like him, first responders, they're used to dealing with those in a crisis. Not that I'm in a crisis. Not anymore, anyway. Or maybe I still am.

All I know is my ex is going to be at the annual family get-together this weekend, and he's the last person on the face of the earth I want to see. I'd tried to break it off with him numerous times over the last couple of years, but he always apologized for his behavior, always insisting he'd change. I'm a cliché, I know. But it doesn't change the fact that I'm still a little afraid of him, and his violent outbursts. He's never laid a hand on me, but his threatening nature, always putting me down, and rough handling me in the bedroom, broke me a little, or a lot. I shake my head and push down the memories.

Honestly, I'd skip the reunion altogether, if it weren't for my parents. Dad's health hasn't been great and I don't see

them enough as it is. They're both looking forward to seeing me and what they'd like most is to see me back with Brad. The man could win an Oscar for his performances when he's not behind closed doors.

"It's my mother," I say, and keep walking.

He continues on with me, slowing his strides to match mine, and I look straight ahead, but that doesn't mean I can't feel his eyes drilling into me. God, I wish I wasn't such an easy read. We might not have seen each other for a while, but Callan was always nice to me, always protective of those in our group.

"You don't like your mother?" he asks.

That pulls a laugh from my throat, and eases some of the tension in my shoulders. "No, of course I do." I take my last bite of ice cream and wipe my mouth. "It's just, ugh, it's the annual Davis weekend."

"You lost me there."

"Once a year, we have a big gathering at my parents place. They moved to the Cape after I graduated high school." We make our way back to his car, and I continue with, "I mean, I'm looking forward to seeing everyone. Mostly."

"Who is it you don't want to see?" he asks, straight up. Leave it to Callan to get to the bottom of matters.

My body bumps his as we walk, and I move back quickly. Men like Callan, big, strong, powerful. Those are the kind of guys I go out of my way to avoid. Callan, however, he's not like my ex. He's always been sweet, and I probably shouldn't be thinking about him naked. Clearly, it's been too long since I've been touched by a nice guy, a guy who would never threaten to hurt me after a bad day at work—or even a good day.

"My ex is going to be there," I say and scrunch up my nose. "Awkward, and all," I add to cover the truth.

“Ah,” he says. “I take it the breakup wasn’t mutual then.”

“I broke it off with him, and no, not mutual.” My heart pounds a little faster. “He’s still messaging me, and he wants to get back together,” I say, wondering why I’m telling him any of this. I don’t talk about my ex, don’t even want to think about him. I guess with the weekend reunion tomorrow, it’s hard not to think about him. Not only am I thinking about him, the jerk is also invading my dreams. Every night for this past week, I’ve been waking up in a cold sweat. His folks are old friends of my parents. They were all so happy when we got together. None of them can understand the breakup, and I’m not about to drag my parents into my problems. I just wanted a clean break and to put it all behind me

“Is he harassing you?” he finally asks, pulling my thoughts back. I swallow as we reach the car and Kaitlyn jumps into the back seat, buckling herself into her booster seat.

“Let’s just say he doesn’t like to take no for an answer.”

His steps slow and the muscles along his jaw clench. “Is he hurting you, Gemma?”

“No, no,” I say quickly. “I just wish he’d get it in his head that we’re not getting back together.”

Callan pauses, his gaze moving over my face. “Ever think of a restraining order?”

A humorless laugh catches in my throat. “He’s a cop, Callan. It complicates things.” I can’t even imagine how much he, or his fellow officers, would harass me if I went to the courts. I’ve been around his buddies enough to know they stick together no matter what. At the end of the day, I’m physically fine, but it’s the mental abuse, his possessiveness that frightens me. Avoiding him has been my best course of action, and that’s worked so far. With the weekend coming, he’s been reaching out to me again. Changing my number and making it private hasn’t stopped him. Which just goes to show me how much power he has.



"It shouldn't complicate things," Callan says softly.

"You're right, it shouldn't." I open my door and slide in. Callan stands there for a moment, his brow furrowed as he scrubs his chin. My insides tighten. I've already said too much, and to Callan at that. He has enough problems of his own. He doesn't need to be taking on mine, or worrying about me. "It's okay, Callan. Everything is okay. I'm sure the weekend will be fine."

He nods, but doesn't look convinced as he circles the car and jumps in. He turns the engine over and backs up.

"Daddy, can we have pizza for dinner?"

He glances at Kaitlyn in the rearview mirror. "Sounds like a good idea," he says, the muscles in his shoulders tight, like he's still trying to work through what I shouldn't have just told him.

"Can Miss Davis have pizza with us?"

"Oh, honey, that's okay—" I begin but Callan cuts me off.

"I do make a mean pizza," Callan says. "Three-time champion at the station." He blows on his knuckles and shines them on his shirt. I grin, happy to see the playful Callan back.

"Wait, you *make* pizza? Like, homemade pizza? Not frozen from a box?"

"I'm pretty good in the kitchen, I'll have you know."

Kaitlyn rubs her belly. "He puts extra cheese on it for me."

Back in high school, Callan was the school's jock. Totally into fitness—he's still physically fit—and while he always ate well, I never saw him as the kind of guy to enjoy cooking.

"When did you get so good in the kitchen?" I ask and instantly regret it. Ugh. Sometimes I need to engage my brain before my mouth. He's been on his own with Kaitlyn for two years. The man learned to cook out of necessity. "I didn't mean. I'm just—"

He laughs to make light of it and I'm grateful. "You're coming for pizza then?" he asks

"How can I say no to extra cheese?" I look straight ahead and reclip my hair. "Is it true, that at the fire station, you guys all cook for one another?"

"Yup, it's true."

"And you have competitions?"

"I wouldn't call it a competition." He lifts his head and his chest puffs up, a playful grin on his face. "Not when the guys don't really stand a chance against me."

I laugh at that, feeling so much lighter. I love how he puts me at ease. "Wow, that's some ego you've got there, my friend."

He grins. "Only because I can back it up."

"I bet you can," I say and before I can help myself my gaze drops to take in the lovely bulge in his crotch. He shifts, and my gaze flies back to his. Oh my God, I was just checking out my friend's crotch, and he caught me doing it.

Instead of calling me on it, and for that I'm grateful, he says, "I can give you a tour of the station if you like."

"Yeah, actually that might be fun. Maybe we can arrange something with the Boys and Girls club in the coming weeks."

"That would be fun, Daddy," Kaitlyn says, but I can only imagine she's been there numerous times.

"I'll look into it. As the top chef, I have a lot of pull."

Chuckling at his sense of humor, I sit back and relax into the seat as he drives us to his house. He coasts into the driveway and as soon as we come to a complete stop, Kaitlyn unbuckles, jumps from the back seat, and runs to the small group of kids skipping in the next driveway.

"She's such a happy little girl," I say to Callan, my heart warming at the image of the kids playing. It reminds me of

my own childhood, and my two older sisters. They too became teachers, following in our mother's footsteps, and they'll be home with their husbands and kids for the gathering.

He smiles, his look distant, like he's remembering happier times, and my stomach clenches. It must be hard to watch his little girl grow up without a mother, to think about a mother missing out on all her child's life. Wanting to lighten things, I reach for my door handle and say, "So what's the secret to this pizza, and please don't tell me it's lard."

He grins. "Come on, I'll teach you."

"Really, you'll share your big secret?"

"I think my secret is safe with you, Gemma."

I lift my chin an inch. "Maybe I'll slip it to one of the guys at the station when we're on tour. Knock your ego down a peg or two."

"Then I'd say you're forgetting something."

I narrow my eyes. What on earth is he talking about. "What am I forgetting?"

He throws his arm around me, and a quiver goes through me. He jerks it back, clearly mistaking my reaction this time and I can't blame him. "Sorry. I didn't mean—"

"It's okay," I say. "You just surprised me earlier, that's all." It's true he did. I know Callan would never hurt me, but he doesn't need to know that Brad would put his fist up to my face in anger, just to see me flinch. I hate how long it took me to end it. I'm ashamed by it, to be honest, though I shouldn't be. For those who don't understand abuse, staying can sometimes be easier. It takes courage to leave. Guys like Brad prey on that fear.

My gaze moves over his handsome face, his gorgeous blue eyes, and I can't help but wonder if my secret is safe with him. Then again, what good would come out of telling him

about my ex's possessive behavior, the violence he could barely keep on simmer? A guy like Callan Ward, well, he'd likely go after him, and that would bring nothing but trouble to his family and loved ones.

"What am I forgetting?" I ask, bringing the conversation back around.

"You helped me pick out Zoe's promise ring. It killed you to keep it a secret from her. But you did."

I smile at that. "I swear I was ready to burst."

"Yeah, you were like a great big hippopotamus holding its breath for weeks."

I put one hand on my hip and glare at him. "Excuse me?"

"It was a compliment," he says with a laugh.

I shake my head. "Yes, how could I mistake being called a hippo as anything other than a compliment."

His head drops, hangs low in shame. "I've clearly been hanging around six-year olds too much."

"You definitely need some adult company, Callan."

"That I do."

I resist the urge to ask what else he might need as he starts up the driveway and my gaze drops to his very fine ass, showcased by low slung jeans. I follow him up the walkway, and he opens the door and gestures for me to enter. My heart jumps into my throat when I step into the entranceway and glance around. The house is warm, comfy, and a bit untidy, but everywhere I look, I see love, and laughter—pictures of family, of a wife that hadn't changed in two years. Because she's gone. The last time I was here was four years ago, when they bought the place and had a housewarming party.

His late wife Zoe still lives on here, and I'm not sure whether that is a good or bad thing. I haven't seen our old group in a long time. Zoe was the glue that kept us together. Has Callan even been with anyone since she's been gone? I'm thinking no. All signs point to it. He did just admit that he

needed adult company. Zoe would have wanted him to move on with his life. Of that I have no doubt.

“Just like I remember it.” My voice is low, barely a whisper, as my heart thumps a little harder against my ribcage.

His throat makes a sound as he swallows. “Don’t mind the mess. I’m not much of a housekeeper.”

“It’s homey,” I say to him and he gives me a grateful smile.

“I hire a nanny for Kaitlyn in the summers. She starts when Kaitlyn gets back from her week at her grandparents. She tidies up while she’s here, but for ten months of the year, it’s a bit of a mess.”

He gives me a smile, but that’s when it occurs to me. He might look put together, but underneath it all, the man is held together by frayed stitches. God, I didn’t even know what kind of shape he’s been in. My heart sits heavy in my chest. What kind of friend have I been, not to know Callan was living in a time capsule, and simply going from day to day?

“Who takes care of Kaitlyn during the school year when you’re on shift?” I follow him to the kitchen and he removes a stack of papers from the chair and gestures for me to sit.

“She does the Boys and Girls club after school, but on the nights I’m working, she usually goes to one of the grandparents’ places.”

“You have a great support system.” There isn’t a lot of stability for Kaitlyn, going from home to home, but I guess they’re doing what they have to do to get by. A measure of guilt gnaws at me. I should have been there for him over the years. Well, I’m here now. Maybe I can help him move on with his future.

“Yeah, I do,” he says but it’s what he’s not saying that tightens my throat. While he has numerous people there for him and Kaitlyn, no one can take the place of his wife, and I have to agree.

“Drink?” he asks as children’s laughter trickles in through the open windows and fills the house. A smile tugs at the corners of my mouth. When Brad and I first got together he was so damn charming and I used to dream about having a family with him. Now that I’m single, recuperating from an abusive relationship, I just want to keep a low profile and try to find myself again. As much as I want kids, I’m not sure I see it happening.

He opens the fridge and leans in. “Wine or beer?” I stand, unable to sit idle while someone serves me and step up behind him to see what he’s offering.

“If we’re having pizza, I think that calls for a beer,” I say.

“I knew there was a reason I always liked you,” he says and turns around, bumping into me again. I stumble backward, but he slides his free hand around my waist. The other is holding two beers. He pulls me to him and I become acutely aware of the strength in his body as it presses against mine. “Sorry, Gemma. I didn’t know you were standing there.”

“We have to stop meeting like this,” I tease, but dammit, my voice holds a hint of arousal that I pray he doesn’t pick up on.

He laughs. “You’re kind of stealthy.”

“It’s always been one of my finer qualities. It’s at the top of my resume, actually. Bachelor of education, pianist, stealthy,” I tease. Why isn’t he letting me go? Better yet, why don’t I want him to? “It’s a skill that helped me get a job teaching English to seventh graders.”

“The school needed a stealthy teacher for that, did they?”

I open my eyes wide in mock surprise. “You clearly have no idea how sneaky teenagers can be with their phones, especially when it comes to cheating.”

He arches a brow, and his clean soapy scent fills my lungs.

“Ah, so you have the ability to sneak up on that and catch them in the act.”

“That’s right.”

“You’ll have to teach me that. Kaitlyn is six going on thirteen.”

I chuckle, but it comes out rough and hoarse. “I’m sorry to say it’s not teachable. You’re either born with it or you’re not. Sadly, I think you lack the skill, Callan. You’re too big to be stealthy.”

“Too big, huh?” He angles his head. “Wait, is that a sideways compliment, like the hippo?”

His heat moves through me, trickles through my blood and settles between my legs. My God, what is going on with me? This is Callan. I can’t go there with him. He’s not over his late wife, and never will be—which is unfortunate because everyone deserves happiness—and the last thing he’s likely looking for is a relationship. A brief affair, however.

Wait, what?

“Not a sideways compliment, Callan. It’s a compliment. I remember every girl wanted to be with you back in high school.”

Myself included.

His hand slides from my back, leaving cold where there was once warmth. Okay, Gemma, that’s your cue to move backward, put a measure of space between our bodies.

Why the hell aren’t I moving back?

Because Callan is sweet, hot and fun, and I haven’t been around a man like that since...Callan. Still, he’s my late friend’s husband—a widower—and I shouldn’t be thinking inappropriate thoughts, like putting my hands on his hard, naked body, touching his flesh and caressing his hard muscles with my fingertips. Or him touching me in return. Since I broke things off with Brad, I’ve not looked at another man, haven’t wanted to. But there’s something so incredibly safe

and warm about Callan. I don't know. Everything about him draws me in. Probably because he's big and strong, and comes with his own gravitational pull.

"That's not true," he says.

I lift my finger and start checking things off. "Captain of the football team, good student, always nice to everyone. Even the new girls in town. But you were with..." Shit. Shit. Shit. What is the matter with me? I shouldn't be bringing up painful memories for him. I back up and fall into my chair.

"I was with Zoe," he says, his body tight.

I shake my head and mentally kick myself. "Yeah, sorry, I didn't mean to bring her up."

He drops down into the chair next to me and pulls it close until our knees are almost touching. "It's okay to talk about her, Gemma. I like that people remember her."

I blink through the water in my eyes. "Really?"

"Yes, really."

"Okay, I just didn't know." Without even realizing it, I lean into him, and put my hand on his face, his late day shadow prickly against my palm. "She was the best, Callan."

His nod is slow, his voice tight when he says, "I know."

The front door flings open and Callan pushes to his feet and turns toward his daughter as she rushes down the hallway. "I need a drink," Kaitlyn says.

"Right," Callan says, and grabs a drink glass from the cupboard. He turns on the tap and runs it until it's cold.

Kaitlyn glances around. "Is the pizza ready?" Callan hands her a tall glass of water and she gulps it. My hand goes to my stomach as I watch her, a sense of longing building inside me.

"Not yet," Callan says.

"Can Liam have pizza with us?" she asks as she hands the drink glass back.

Callan shrugs. "I guess. If it's okay with his mother."

"It's okay with her," Kaitlyn says and swipes the back of



her hand over her mouth, wiping away the traces of ice cream and water on her face.

“How do you know that?” Callan asks.

“We already asked her.”

He arches a brow at me. “You okay with Liam coming over?”

“Of course. I love kids and two is much easier than thirty.”

“I can’t even imagine.” Callan laughs and shakes his head. “Fine, he can come for pizza. I’ll call you both when it’s ready. Remember the rules. Do not go on the road.”

She gives an exasperated sigh. “I’m not a baby.”

“Oh, I know,” Callan says and cracks the beers. The door slams shut as he fills our glasses and hands one to me.

“You do have your hands full.”

“Like I said, six going on thirteen.”

“Good thing she has a big strong daddy to frighten all the boys off.”

“A big strong daddy who owns a gun.”

I laugh at that. “I pity the boys who ask her out when she’s older.”

“You should,” he jokes and opens his pantry. He pulls out flour and sugar and some other things, and I kick my legs out as I watch him. Warmth moves through me, probably from the beer—I am such a light-weight—but the truth is, I haven’t relaxed in a long time. Everything about this place screams love, home and heart. It’s so easy to be here.

With all the ingredients laid out, he plugs his kettle in, picks his beer back up and steps toward me. He holds his glass up in salute.

“What are we celebrating?” I ask.

“How about old friendships,” he says, bending to tap his glass to mine. I try not to notice his closeness or the way it overwhelms me. For a brief second I consider his overprotec-

tive nature. Brad might think twice about harassing me if Callan was by my side. Yeah, Brad would probably tuck tail and run the other way—bully that he is. Not that I'm about to ask Callan to come to the Cape for the weekend, or pretend to be my boyfriend for the duration. That's completely ludicrous, right?

Or is it?