

I don't think it's possible to hate someone you love...

I should.

I should tell...

I should scream!

But I can't.

I love him.

~Delilah~

CHAPTER ONE

~Maverick~

Anyone who has been awakened at three in the morning by a knock at the door knows how god-awful it can be. Unless a well-mannered burglar is trying to get your attention, there are only a handful of reasons why someone would interrupt your sleep. Maybe a friend needs a ride, or someone has given birth. But sometimes, it's the worst reason possible.

My dad was out of town for work when the knock came, during my junior year of high school. Only my little sister's nightlight lit the hallway between my room and my parents'. Mom's silhouette was motionless. Not till I found the switch did I see her agonized expression. She must have had an inkling of what was to come.

I didn't. "What's wrong?" I was sixteen and immortal. At least, that was how I felt. What sports-playing, fist-pumping teenage male doesn't feel that way? I already had a college scholarship lined up and a hot girlfriend.

What else was there to life?

I'll tell you. *Life*. And life has wicked ways of reminding you who's in control.

My mom's legs began to move though the rest of her body was rigid. I followed her down the stairs, catching my first shot of adrenaline. When she stopped moving on the steps, I had my second shot. Over her head, I saw through our front door's window. The glass was blurry for

privacy, but there was no mistaking the outlines of two officers waiting on the porch, shifting their weight as if not comfortable being there.

Her knees gave out. “Mom?” I caught her under the arms and set her on a step.

“I...” She tried to talk. I stepped around Mom as her hand covered her mouth, her terrified eyes glued to the door.

“Mom, do you want me to answer that?”

Her face was pale as she numbly pointed.

I headed to the door. My chest was pounding, but I was still clueless at how my life was about to shake like an earthquake, nine points on the Richter scale.

I don’t quite remember opening the door. I only remember Mom’s screams waking me from the shock that took hold of me. The screams were what jolted me from where I stood staring at the officers as if they had not just said my father had been killed.

“Did you hear me, son?”

I remember thinking how inappropriate it was that the officer just called me *son* when my father no longer existed.

My mom *did* eventually stop screaming that night, but she, too, was never the same. The love for the man—my father—was too much to bear when he no longer existed. At least, they said he no longer existed, but no matter which way I turned, he was still present. Especially when I looked at Bailey.

Two months had passed when one morning my little sister’s nose scrunched. “Mavowick, my milk tastes *funny*.”

In our kitchen, I took a bite of my little sister’s cereal then immediately spat it into the

trash. “Mom, the milk is rotten.”

Mom’s body might have been sitting in the chair next to Bailey’s, but my *mom* wasn’t there. Her vacant eyes stared out the kitchen window, unresponsive to any word I said. I followed her empty gaze out the window, wondering what she was seeing—wondering if I, too, could fade away into a distant place and avoid the crushing sensation in my chest. But out of the corner of my eye, I saw Bailey reaching for her spoon. I grabbed my sister’s bowl. “Peanut, don’t eat that. Want some toast?”

Her voice was timid as she looked at the zombie form sitting next to her. “Mommy? Do we have any bwead?”

Bailey had always said my name and certain big words with some struggle, as if the syllables were too big for her mouth. But her pronunciation of R, L, and Th became a new speech impediment after my father’s death. I knew I should repeat the word *bread* correctly, as per her psychotherapist’s instructions, to encourage Bailey to try again, but my throat tightened, preventing me. I sensed my sister’s insecurities about my mom’s mental state.

Bailey was only five but was smart and aware. She was lacking the care a little girl needed. That was the moment I took over. I almost felt my dad’s hand resting on my shoulder, begging me to do right by his family. It was time to become the man he’d always said I would be, to let go of what had no value and hold tight to what mattered most.

“Bailey.” I held open my arms. She stood on her chair, mimicking me—forced smile and all—trying to love the game we always played, but I could see doubt in her eyes. I wrapped her in my arms, smothering her against my chest and continuing our game as if our world wasn’t crumbling around us. “Who loves you?”

“My big brwoder, Mavowick.”

I squeezed. Her blond curls smelled like bubble bath. “That’s right, Peanut. Want a PB&J sandwich?” Her little head bobbed as she clung to my neck. Before making her sandwich, we stood there and watched my mother fall farther away from us. Bailey’s arms tightened around my neck. I asked my mom, “Do you want me to drop her off today?”

No reaction. Mom’s eyes never drifted from the dark place in her heart.

“Mom!”

She inhaled sharply, startled, as she looked around and noticed she was in the kitchen. When she peered up at Bailey and me, the kitchen’s lighting showed how sunken her cheeks had become. “Yes, baby?”

My sympathy for my mom skyrocketed, and I realized she wouldn’t know the milk had gone bad because she hadn’t had a glass since Dad died. I told her with infinite kindness, “Uh, I was thinking I could drop Bailey off at preschool today... for you.”

She tried to smile, but it never reached her haunted eyes. “That would help. Thank you, Maverick.”

I knew she wanted to crawl back in bed—hide away from the world and go back to sleep. Sleeping was how she avoided the pain.

Still holding Bailey, I went to my mom. “Bailey, give kisses.” Little lips puckered up, offering unconditional love. When Bailey wrapped her arms around my neck again, Mom had tears in her eyes. I cupped her cheek. “We’ll get through this, Mom.”

She nodded, but I didn’t think she believed me. I didn’t believe myself either.

No one at the preschool was shocked to see that I was the one dropping off Bailey. My mom had been one day away from a breakdown for some time. The teachers watched me with pity in their eyes, yet kept their distance as if my sadness was somehow contagious. Many of my

classmates treated me differently, but when they started pulling away, I thought that was—well, it was shitty. *Friends to the end* was not the case. I think I became too sorrowful for them. I was no longer the happy-go-lucky jock everyone wanted to hang out with after I turned in my boxing gloves.

Walking into school had become a drag. Those hallways had once been my palace—where my throne had resided. I rocked that place when I believed my status to be important. The only relief walking the corridors brought me after my father's death was knowing any second Tara would be in my sight. That changed the day shortly after the funeral when I turned a corner and saw Smith whispering in her ear.

Tara had been different in the beginning. At the funeral, she'd stood by my side and cried to my friends. At the time, I'd been surprised to see how my father's death was affecting her so deeply; she had only met him twice.

Smith, a football player who I had gone a couple rounds with in the past, was *not* a friend of mine. That morning at school, he smirked at me, ran his hand over Tara's ass, and kissed her cheek—a kiss that she eagerly leaned in to receive. Then he said, "Hey there, Maverick," over Tara's shoulder. The announcement of my arrival had tension sneaking across Tara's back.

The old me would have jacked him up and fought for what I thought was mine. The new me now knew nothing was forever and to let go when it was time. I lifted my chin. "Smith."

He proudly walked away. He had won this round; we both knew it. Slowly, Tara turned to me, searching to see how much I had witnessed. Then she took on an elaborately casual expression. "Hey, baby."

I inhaled deeply, trying to prepare for another blow to my gut. I'd taken this girl's virginity—or so she had said—and believed we had been tight for six months. With my new

perspective on life, I put my hand up to stop Tara from getting closer.

“What? Maverick, what’s wrong?”

I realized she was a complete stranger to me. “I was running to you, Tara. Now I don’t even know who Tara is. You may be young, and you clearly want to be free, but *damn*, girl, couldn’t you have let me go before you moved on? Why drag me through more fucking dirt? Don’t you think I’ve been through enough?”

Sitting in class, I felt like an alien. Students were filing in, jabbering about subjects that now felt juvenile. I had no place in this high school world anymore. Kevin—a buddy—walked to the desk that was next to mine and slid into the seat like the gangster he so desperately wanted to be.

“Yo.”

I only nodded, too tired to give a verbal response. He didn’t notice and looked at his vibrating cell phone. “You and Tara broke up?”

Damn, that was quick.

That pretty much summed up the rest of my junior year. A new routine had taken the place of the old: Bailey.

I’d never respected a parent’s responsibilities until I started acting like a parent myself, raising my little sister. As my mom sank lower, I rose higher and became what Peanut depended on most. Being into sports, I had some education about which foods built muscles, so with a little more research, I learned how Bailey should eat to stay healthy.

Friends—let me rephrase: *acquaintances*—and teammates were not patient or understanding of my new parental role. Every time I was asked to go to a party, my reply was the same. “Got Bailey tonight.”

“Damn, man! When did you become her dad?” Kevin would say. Then he would look guilty and apologize. “Maybe next time?” Eventually, even *next time* was no longer offered. I felt left out, but what was I to do? Turning my back on my mom or Bailey was not an option. Ever.

My old coach, the only one I felt I *could* turn to, was worried for my family’s future. The driver who’d killed my dad had been drinking, and the company that owned the truck he was driving had lawyers who seemed petrified of the multimillion-dollar lawsuit my family was entitled to. Mom, being in a world of heartbreak, was in no shape to take on the corporate lawyers.

“Coach, how’d you end up marrying a hot, smart lawyer?” I asked with a smirk.

A grin that only a male could give crossed his face. “Not giving up my secrets, kid.”

I thought about his wife’s advice and took a deep breath. “You think this is the right thing to do?”

“Just talk with her. Think you can get your mom to her office?”

I did. My mom was extremely distant, but with my persuasion, she signed papers, and we had representation. Coach’s wife was good to us. She gave us options, and we were able to settle out of court. She warned that the amount was way less than we deserved, but to fight for more could take years and money I didn’t have.

Our lawyer took a small percentage, but it still left us with a healthy sum. Along with the proceeds from my father’s life-insurance policy, we had enough money to invest and keep food on the table. I didn’t have to hold a job on top of everything else my senior year, and I even secretly hoped I’d find a way to still attend college.

My heart told me that mom would find her way back to us someday, but when my cell

phone went off one day during fifth period, I couldn't help but panic. Mom never called during school hours—she was always sleeping then.

From the back of the classroom, holding up my cell, I looked to my teacher, hoping she could see my torture and allow me to break school rules. Understanding crossed her face immediately. Mrs. D nodded and pointed toward the door.

Heading out of the classroom, I answered. “Mom? What’s wrong?”

She sounded hysterical. “Bailey’s school just called saying she’s crying and needs to come home! Mav! I can’t drive like this!”

“Mom, I need you to hang up and breathe. I’m calling Bailey’s school right now.”

My voice echoed in the empty hallway as I spoke with her school. “Hi, this is Maverick, Bailey’s brother…” The principal walked by, looking at me. I was so tired of seeing pity in the eyes of adults.

By the time I got to Bailey, teachers were gathered around her. Her little chest was heaving as though she’d been hyperventilating, and there were telltale dried lines, showing how tears had been streaming down her heartbroken face. “Peanut,” I called out in her school’s hallway.

Bailey came running to me, starting to cry all over again. Seeing her alarmed face, my Peanut so scared, had me struggling to breathe. The need to take away her fear made me realize my sacrifices were worth it, and I would continue to put the one running toward me above all else. I scooped her up and wasn’t sure I would ever let her go. “What’s wrong, baby?”

Bailey was gasping, her distress amping up her impediment. “I—I had a nightmawre at napttime.”

“About what, Peanut?”

“You—you died, Mavowick. I… I wost you.” Bailey’s voice trembled with a fright I didn’t

even know she was capable of.

“Look at me.”

Watery red little eyes looked into mine as I brushed her leaking nose with a finger that dwarfed her. I wiped her snot on my jeans as a distraction. I could barely talk because I was choking on emotions. “You won’t lose me. I’m here for you, and that *won’t* change.”

A tiny hand lay on my cheek. “But I wost Daddy.”

I swallowed the lump that had lodged in my windpipe. “Nothing will take me from you, Peanut. I swear it.” And I carried my sister out the door, her head resting on my shoulder.

Getting Bailey calmed, bathed, and to bed was only the beginning of my night. Walking down the stairs, I saw my mom sitting on the couch, melting into an old photo album. Taking a deep breath, I asked myself, *What would Dad do?* My answer came when I opened the fridge. Instead of grabbing dinner, I grabbed two beers and headed to the living room.

After turning on a lamp, I handed her a beer. “It’s Friday. Can your son share a beverage with you?”

A shaky hand reached for the cold bottle. “That would be great, if you don’t mind.”

“Mind? Mom, teenage boys are physically unable to not enjoy beer.”

Sitting next to her, I watched my mom turn pages, her fingers sliding over the clear film covering the photos as if trying to touch him. “I’m tired of hurting... but I can’t stop... I miss your father, Maverick.”

My chest tightened for the umpteenth time that day. Her emotions were raw, and mine mirrored them. I pointed to a picture. “I remember that one.”

She nodded. “The park down the street... see, Mav? It’s like everywhere I look, I see him. I can’t find one spot in my life where... he wasn’t a part of me. My best friend is gone.”

My heart finally sank. It simply plummeted for the woman sitting beside me. I'd thought of parents as a joined force, allies in making childhood and teenage life about *No* and *Don't touch that* or *What did you just say to me?* But I never thought of them as *friends*.

My friends at school had bailed on me. My father had promised his soul to my mom and then had bailed on us. Someday, I would make that same promise, and I hoped like hell I'd never have to break it.

"Mom, what can I do? What can *we* do so you can breathe again?"

Tears rolled down her face in waves, and her bottom lip trembled. "Move."

My mind fought to catch up to her word. "To where?"

She shook her head in building frustration. "I don't know, and *I don't care*, but I *have* to get out of here! I think it's my only chance!" She began to unravel. "I-I am fighting to live—"

Desperate not to let even another piece of her sanity slip away, I grabbed her, trying to hold her together. "It's okay, Mom. We'll go. I'll find somewhere, and we'll go."

I held her tightly, but my mom still fell to pieces in my arms that night.

CHAPTER TWO

Summer came, the school year ended, our house sold, and that meant it was moving time. We moved from Atlanta to a small town south of there. Atlanta lacked the accents and manners usually associated with good old Southern folks, and I believed a little country town where nobody knew us was just what we needed. Apparently, my mom agreed because she packed up boxes and hired movers.

Good-byes were incredibly easy with no family or friends to speak of besides Coach. Tara tried to bring on the waterworks and the dramatics with my departure, but I refused to be fooled twice by alligator tears. I did, however, accept the good-bye fuck she offered. Even though the sex lacked the excitement and thrill it used to have, it was *all* worth it when I stepped out of the school broom closet, buttoning my pants, with Tara following, adjusting her shirt.

Smith, her current *sucker*, was standing by her locker, his jaw dropping, when we walked out. In a sweet-revenge kind of way, I returned the smirk he'd given me earlier that year. "Hey, Smith!" I sang out.

Tara froze. "Busted!" I whispered in her ear—loud enough so he could hear, of course, "Thanks for the good time, babe." Then I looked at him and said, "Take care, Smith," as I departed with a happy strut.

Final round? Won by Maverick. *Score!*

Mom and I, with Bailey in tow, ran as fast as we could from our devastating past, but some things you just couldn't escape. Grieving was one of them. No distant was great enough for my mom to forget my dad and all he'd been to her.

We painted walls and organized furniture, but with every box we unpacked, memories pelted us. Even though we hadn't left a forwarding address, slowly but surely, misery appeared on our doorstep, and my mom sank even deeper into grief. Nothing had changed. She was still alone.

The only difference was now Bailey and I were as alone as Mom was. We had no friends and nothing familiar, just a depressing home environment. New walls could not shield us from our terrible loss.

With the inside of our new home all set, it was time to tackle disaster number two: the outside. I was so thankful for being outside in the sun while taking care of the yard. For mowing the lawn, I took off my shirt to soak in warming rays and shook off the fog that lingered around Mom. Our new home, which sat on two acres, was a rundown two-story wooden house with light-blue paint chipping away.

Coach's wife had told us what to look for: a low-priced house with cosmetic issues only. The realtor had said, "It's a fixer-upper but will give you a good return with some TLC, when you decide to sell it. You good with a hammer?"

I had nodded and instantly tried to shut down my thoughts of how Dad had taught me to do my own repairs. As soon as he entered my mind, I felt a pain I wasn't ready to deal with. There was already too much on my plate, and I was just trying to survive.

After an inspection declared the house had solid walls, no termites, no problems with plumbing or electrical, and only cosmetic issues, my lawyer approved it, and I bought our new house. With the money from the sale of our much nicer home, I paid in cash and put the rest toward the investments my lawyer had made with the settlement money. She'd told me my dad had a substantial nest egg, and if we budgeted properly, we could live off that for quite some

time.

Our few neighbors lived in old homes similar to ours, but those had been properly kept over the years. I became entranced by the inviting dirt road and wondered what our new town had to offer.

Little Peanut, running across the yard, pulled me back to reality. She had a glass in her hand that spilled liquid with her every step. “I made you sweet tea!” As she leapt into my arms, the remaining fluid dripped down my arm.

“You did?”

She nodded while handing me a mostly empty glass with a concerning amount of sugar clumped at the bottom. Not daring to deny her hard work, I tilted the glass and accepted my sugar rush with a wink and a smile.

“You’re *sweaty*.” Bailey winced, looking at her wet hands.

Still trying to swallow sugar goo, I agreed. “Yes, I think I need a shower when I’m done.”

Little fingers nervously tangled in the hair coming down the back of my neck. “Arwe you almost done?”

I knew why she asked, so I nodded. “You okay?”

A guilty whisper came to my ear. “Mommy is sad again.”

Just like me, Bailey didn’t want to feel the darkness consuming my mom’s afternoon. The sweet kid needed a distraction. “Wanna help me?” She excitedly nodded, so I teased, “I don’t know if you can handle it—”

Before I could finish, she yelled, “I can! I can!”

Bailey was adorable as she ran around the dilapidated front yard, picking up sticks so our push mower wouldn’t get jammed up. She proudly showed me her overflowing arms. “Look how

strong I am, Mavowick! I'm just like you."

After my shower, I cooked chicken and steamed broccoli. Bailey sat in her booster seat, attached to a dining-room chair, and chomped away. Mom nibbled, forcing herself to eat so I wouldn't worry. She had dropped at least ten pounds with her lack of appetite. Seeing how she was only a buck fifteen to start with, that was a lot of weight to lose. Bailey stopped chewing the food in her mouth when our mom said, "I think I'm going to get some rest."

It was only seven o' clock. My stomach clenched. "I'll take care of your plate."

Bailey went a little pale as she watched Mom walk up the stairs.

"Peeeanut," I sang out to her from my squeaking dining-room chair.

Worried little hazel eyes looked at me. I wondered if that was how my eyes looked.

"I feel like licorice." I grinned because I was pulling out the big guns.

Worry left the little eyes, which were quickly lighting up. "But I'm in my pajamas."

"Oh well. If you're not wearing slippers, we can't go to the mini-mart."

She jumped off the booster chair and ran on petite legs to the front door and back to me in a flash. Bailey stood with a smile and Scooby Doo slippers in her hands.

I buckled a happy girl with funny-looking slippers into her car seat. I could have bought a new truck with the settlement, but this one was my dad's truck. If the old green Ford was good enough for him, it was more than good enough for me. I used to envy friends with new cars. My father had told me I would appreciate the nickels in my pocket. He was right; I did.

The local mini-mart, Gas & Chic, was a lifeline after the grocery store shut down for the night. A local guy at the hardware store had told me that Gas & Chic had the best fried chicken around. He also said he'd never admit that to his mama because she would hit him upside his

head with her “chicken frying” pan. Yeah, that character had me laughing out loud.

Looking out my dad’s windshield, I exhaled heavily when I saw a couple guys my own age. Being the new kid in town for my senior year wasn’t going to be easy. I opened my door, hoping the local boys wouldn’t choose to give me a hard time with my Peanut present; I didn’t want her to witness me killing some punk for upsetting her.

A shorter, stocky kid with a cowboy hat went into the store while I walked around the front of the truck to get Bailey. The other dude, a lanky character, was yelling into his cell phone and pacing by an old Chevy truck. “Yes, I hear ya, girl! The whole world can hear ya carrying on!” They both appeared to be my age.

School having not started yet gave me the solitude I desired. If my so-called friends in Atlanta couldn’t understand my situation with Bailey, no teenage strangers would. A plan to keep my distance was in place. I preferred not to experience any more rejection or ridicule.

Inside the store, Bailey’s fingers snatched up a small package of red licorice, but her eyes kept glancing at the larger package. I chuckled and pointed. “You want that one?” Her pixie face peered up at me, and she hesitantly nodded with shameful eyes. What child at such a young age could already have the heart to try to save money for her family? My little sister. I was so fucking proud of that little girl.

I knelt down. “You have been such a good girl helping me with yard work today that I think you deserve the big one.”

She gasped as if I had just offered her the world. *I would if I could.*

“*But* you have to share,” I warned. She was more than willing, of course.

With one of her hands in my palm and the other holding a half-chewed piece of licorice, we stood in line to pay. Bailey looked all around, inspecting her surroundings as she waited

patiently for me to finish purchasing her treat. “Do you like licorwice?” Bailey asked someone behind me. I looked over my shoulder to see the young guy in the cowboy hat.

After preparing for him to be a jerk about it and ignore Bailey, I mentally sighed with relief when he smiled at her. “It’s one of the best candies in the world.” His country accent was thick as could be.

Bailey started nervously gathering her nightgown in her hand, practically exposing her Dora panties as she bashfully twisted her body and PJs from left to right. “Mavowick says I should sharwe. I would like to sharwe with you.”

Apparently, I wasn’t the only one Bailey could win over. Cowboy Hat balanced his items for purchase in one arm and squatted to her level. “You have made my night, Scooby Doo. Who’s Mav-o-wick?”

Bailey let go of her PJs and hugged my leg. With her cheek on my thigh, she peered up to me. “My big brwotho.”

My hand with her licorice package rested on her back as the other reached around to shake his, introducing myself. “Maverick Hutton. How’s it going?”

Cowboy Hat stood and shook my offered hand. “Cole Coleman. Hey, you the ones who just moved in on Beacon Street?”

Here we go.

I nodded. “A couple months ago.”

“How ya liken it here so far?”

Handing over cash to the man at the register, I answered, “Still settling in. Haven’t had a chance to see much.”

Cole Coleman laughed as he approached the counter. “Not much to see, my friend.” Paying

for his drink, he said, “But we find ways to stay entertained.” The cashier huffed and rolled his eyes, and Cole laughed at him. “Bill, at least I stopped stealing beer!”

Bill shook his head. “*Only* after your mama threatened to burn down my damn store.”

I lifted an eyebrow as Cole received his change. He grinned, proving his guilt. “My mama is on my ass like no other.”

An unexpected pang of jealousy stung my chest when I thought how my mom couldn’t care less. As we moved out of the way for the next customer, Bailey reached her arms up. She wanted to be a part of the conversation and was not succeeding from the ground level. I picked her up, propping her on the lower part of my arm like my dad used to do. He’d once told me, “This way, her little dress doesn’t ride up. Every time your mama sticks Peanut on her hip, her little butt is exposed for pervs to see.”

Bailey pulled out another piece of licorice and handed Cole what she had promised. He accepted it. “Thank you, ma’am.” Taking a bite, he asked me, “You still in school?”

“Yeah. A senior.”

“Hey, me too. Waited all my life for this year.”

Me too. Too bad it’s gonna suck!

Heading back outside, the lanky guy met up with us. He had on beat-up cowboy boots that were so big they looked like skis. I was six foot one, but this skinny guy had me beat by another two inches. It made him and stocky-cowboy Cole look like a comical pair.

Lanky’s darker hair was tussled, and his fingers kept nervously running through it while he yelled into his cell. “Damn, female! I’m coming!” He ended the call, telling Cole, “My ball and chain is *all* over my shit. We gotta go.”

Cole ignored Lanky, as if that kind of bitching was nothing new, and introduced us. “This

is Maverick.” Then he winked at Bailey. “And this little one here, who is *more* than willing to share her candy, is...” He smiled at Peanut, waiting for her to tell him her name.

She shyly leaned her head into my shoulder and spoke around the licorice in her mouth. “Bailwey. I’m Bailwey.” She laid her palm on my cheek. “This is my big brwother, Mavowick.”

“Hi, Bailey,” Lanky said, not judging her impediment. Then he put out his hand for me to shake. “Big-brother Maverick, nice to meet you. I’m Houston. My mom dreams of the big cities, but I like small towns, so call me Hu.”

I busted out laughing. “What an introduction.”

Cole rolled his eyes. “Hu don’t get out much.”

“I’m never getting out again if my ass don’t show up at Bryce’s in five minutes.”

Cole pulled his keys from his pocket. “All right. All right. We’re out.”

Stepping backward toward my truck, I said, “Nice to meet you both. Take care.” There was an ache of envy for the night they were getting to have, but the angel in my arms was enough to snuff it out.

About to put Bailey in her car seat, I heard from behind me, “Maverick, why don’t you come and meet some local folk, hang out for a bit?”

I turned with regret, because after meeting these clowns, that would have rocked. I pointed to Bailey in my arms. “Got the little sister tonight.” Expecting that to be the end of the conversation, I turned back to my truck to load up Bailey.

“So? Bring her,” Cole rebutted. “Jazebelle has her sibling. We’re laying low tonight.”

I didn’t know how much I wanted a new group of friends till I heard the offer. As I was eying the soda bottles in Cole’s bag, thinking it didn’t look to be a heavy-drinking event, Bailey asked me, “What’s a sibling, Mavowick?”

I kissed her little cheek. “A brother or sister. You’re my sibling, like I am yours.”

She looked to Cole. “A wittle sibling?”

“Little. Use your L, Peanut,” I whispered, hoping these guys would continue their patience with her because Ls just needed a friendly reminder for Bailey to try harder.

The guys waited as Bailey shaped her lips and communicated with her tongue. “A l-little sibling?”

Acting completely unaware of what he just witnessed, Cole said, “Yep, a little girl to play with.”

Gasp!

I laughed. “Does that mean you want to go?”

Anxiously nodding, Bailey leapt from my arms and into her car seat. I tried catching her as I said to Cole, “I think that’s a yes. I’ll follow you.” As I buckled Bailey in, she smiled and chomped away on her treat. Some kids her age would have been in booster seats, but Peanut was just too little. My dad had said, “Until she’s bigger, we must always buckle her and check that she’s in tight. You never know what asshole might crash into you.”

I thought about the asshole that took his life. *Drinking and driving fucking sucks.*

I followed Cole’s muddy white Chevy crew-cab dually to a house down a dirt road. Everyone seemed to live on a dirt road, including me. Grabbing Peanut from my truck, I heard, “*Bailey*, don’t forget your licorice!”

She excitedly crawled into my arms, waving her candy. “I didn’t, Cole!”

As he opened the door to the modest one-story country home, I noticed no one was in the front living room. I heard music playing, but it wasn’t too loud. The only loud thing came from a heavysset brunette, yelling to Hu from a couch. “My God! It’s about time!”

Oh, that must be the ball 'n chain.

Hu left us to hand her a Coke and a candy bar. “I said I was coming! Damn.”

Cole rolled his eyes. “It’s never ending.” Then he took off his cowboy hat and set it on an old entertainment center before leading us into the kitchen.

Two guys and three girls were sitting around a table next to the kitchen, playing a card game. Two guys who looked identical stood behind one of the girls, who had short black hair. She was saying something to a guy in a baseball cap sitting to her right. The twins behind her were laughing at her comments and drinking beer.

“Shut UP! I have three bucks in this game,” the guy wearing the baseball hat jokingly yelled to her in the ongoing conversation. I couldn’t help but chuckle as everyone booted him.

“We’re big spenders,” Cole explained to me then said to everyone else, “Hey, gamblers and sinners, this is Maverick and Bailey.”

The girl with short black hair shrieked. I almost jumped at her reaction, but what she had to say set me at ease. “A playmate! Hailey! Come meet Bailey.” Then she looked back at me and Bailey. “Hi, I’m Jazebelle.” Jazebelle looked as though she was *always* willing to have fun. Her smile lit up the room. She was cute, a little too small—all the way around for my taste, but definitely cute. I wouldn’t have gone there anyways because the two behind her seemed to be competing for the vicinity around her.

“Maverick. Nice to meet you.” I asked Bailey, “Can you say hi?”

She shook her head but gave a little wave. Jazebelle kept smiling and waved back. “You are too cute, Bailey. Who’s holding you?”

Bailey’s little palm lay on my cheek, rubbing the hair on my face, as she whispered, “My big brwotho.”

An attractive dark-blond girl to the left of Jazabelle looked up and over her cards. “Bailey and Hailey? *God*, that sounds adorable.” She was more my style. Sorry, but that was the truth. I hadn’t been laid in a couple of months; therefore, every female within a twenty-mile radius had become a possible prospect and got inspected as such. The blonde had a subdued yet sharp-minded feel about her. “Mavy, you the new guy on Beacon Street?”

I smirked with a touch of flirt. “I already have a nickname?”

She grinned at my sarcasm, conveying an unspoken respect.

Yep, my kind of girl.

Then she coyly replied, “It’s either Mav, or Goat ’cause of your goatee.”

I couldn’t help but notice that the impressively bigger guy sitting to her left quickly smirked. *Ah, he likes her attitude also.* His acknowledgment of Blondie’s sass carried so much admiration that I was shocked the girl sitting on his lap wasn’t jealous.

I graciously chose a name. “Mav it is.”

“Mav, want a beer?” the guy with the ball cap asked me. “I’m Bryce, by the way.” He was a little goofier looking, wearing glasses but also a Falcons hat, so I knew he was solid.

“Nice to meet you, Bryce.” I waved off the offer. “No, I’m good.”

“He’s driving Bailey, you idiot,” the sassy blonde snipped at him while further inspecting her cards.

Bryce winced at me. “Oh, damn. Sorry, forgot about the little one.” He waved. “Hi, Bailey.” Looking at the cards in his hands again, he said to the blonde, “Viola, I’m not an idiot. Now, focus on your hand before you lose my money.”

So, Sassy is Viola. V for Vixen. I like.

Viola winked a seductive blue eye at Bryce, and it was not friendly—it was sexy as shit!

The idiot, as she called him, was clearly her man.

Lucky, goofy, vixen-lovin' bastard.

“Hi, I’m Hailey,” a tiny voice said from somewhere below. Bailey and I looked down at a little black-haired girl who looked to be the same age as Bailey, with huge blue eyes to match Jazabelle’s. Bailey shyly waved at her from my arms. Hailey asked, “Wanna watch TV with me? I have toys.”

Bailey looked to me for an answer. “Up to you, Peanut.”

She nodded, so I put her on her feet. As her slippers shuffled away, I heard Bailey ask, “Do you want some l-licowice?”

Proud of Bailey for trying harder on her Ls, I grinned and mouthed, “Good girl,” watching the two little girls go into a bigger den attached to the kitchenette room where I wouldn’t lose sight of them. I realized Viola was staring at me. She glanced at Bailey and then gave me a nod. More respect. *Damn, this girl is hot.*

Cole watched Bailey and Hailey too. “See? I’m so smart!”

Every card player and bystander grumbled, apparently not agreeing.

He laughed. “Haters. A bunch of *jealous-ass* haters.”

“Damn jealous haters,” Hu echoed from the couch in the big room Bailey was in.

Cole pointed to the bigger guy with the girl in his lap. “Maverick, meet Tucker.”

Tucker was not as laid-back as the others seemed to be. He looked a little older and wiser with an easily agitated, rougher edge. He glanced over his cards and saluted me then pointed to the tiny chick on his knee. “This is my girlfriend, June.”

June had auburn hair and *happily* waved from where she was *happily* perched. “Hi!”

Cole moved us along, pointing to the bystanders. “These are the twins, Nelson and Nash.”

Nelson and Nash were of average height and had dark hair. I knew it would take me some time to get used to being watched by identical green eyes. “How’s it going?” I asked, giving a chin lift because Nelson placed his hand on Jazebelle’s shoulder. I remembered which one he was because he had a scar above his left eye.

I hear you; she’s taken. But you may want to explain that to your bro, who’s mean muggin’ you. Nash was staring at his brother’s hand on Jazebelle’s shoulder.

Cole then pointed to Ball ’n Chain on the couch and groaned. “And that’s Adele.”

It was clear Adele wasn’t a fan of Cole either when she flipped him off. Then she fake smiled to me as if I had already managed to be added to her shit list. I did an internal shudder and instantly understood Cole’s gripe about the horrid girl.

Cole gestured to another young woman—one I’d somehow missed but never would again. “And over there is Delilah.”

Sweet lord!

All right, this is going to sound cheesy as hell, but you know those movies when the guy meets the girl, and she is mysteriously surrounded by rays of perfect lighting and all that unrealistic nonsense that makes your eyes involuntarily roll? Well, yeah, apparently that’s no special lighting; it’s you losing your shit! Oxygen going in all the wrong directions in your body, making you see mysterious fucking lighting. I shit you not. It’s the damn truth.

Delilah was sitting in a big easy chair with her long legs lounged over one of its pillowed arms, in a corner across the den. She was reading a book and ignoring the loud voices as if she had mastered blocking out the world. She didn’t even acknowledge my presence. My mind and body were in complete overload, and my existence wasn’t even on her radar. Brown-golden hair hung over the other arm of the chair, and her profile was enough to make me forgive her for not

knowing I had just fallen in love with her.

“Delilah, this is Maverick,” Cole announced.

When there was still no reply, Vixen sang out, “Earth to Pretty D.”

Delilah glanced up, looked me up and down, and went right back to reading her book.

So, the feeling’s mutual? If I hadn’t been so dumbstruck, I probably would have looked around, wondering where *my* special lighting was. No one seemed shocked in the slightest at her reaction, and they all went about their business.

Cole pulled up two stools, and as I sat, Hu walked up. “Where’d ya come from, Mav?”

“Outside Atlanta,” I answered, trying to ignore the female I felt I should be bowing down to, willing to be her servant forevermore.

Tucker did *not* sound like a fan of the capital of our home state. “How *close* to Atlanta?”

I jokingly backpedaled. “Not close enough to be considered a city boy?”

That didn’t win me any smiles, but Tucker nodded. His stern look softened when he politely spoke to June. “Mind getting me a beer, sweet girl?” June had too much pep in her step for my liking. She practically bounced out of his lap and to the fridge to retrieve Tucker’s beverage of choice. By the time she got back, I was relieved the beer didn’t explode in Tucker’s face. When Tucker saw her, he softened again and leaned in for a kiss. “Thank you, baby.” Her lips puckered quickly, seeming anxious for anything he had to offer.

Bryce, immersed in his card game, tried the same strategy with Viola. “Babe, will you get me a beer?”

“Piss off.”

“Guess not.” Bryce laid down a card and sulked. “You’re a lucky man, Tucker.”

Tucker squeezed the girl in in his lap as though he considered her a jewel. “I am, but let’s

not pretend that Viola's bite don't rev your engines." The way Tucker spoke was as if Viola was capable of revving more than one engine in the room. Possibly his. Viola looked up at Tucker, and something I couldn't quite put my finger on crossed her face, but there was obvious admiration.

Definitely a story there!

Oblivious, Bryce said to his girl, "Your turn, babe."

Viola looked at her cards... then slammed them down, yelling, "Pay me!"

I'd never heard of the game before, though I thought it was finished by the way all the other players growled and complained as they handed Viola two quarters. But then cards were reshuffled, and the game continued.

Bailey happily ran up to me, stuck her licorice in my hand, then took off to play some more. Jazabelle was delighted. "This rocks! Do you have Bailey a lot?"

The table got quiet. It was time to hear the new guy's story. "Uh, yeah... she... well, my dad passed away—" Delilah's head jerked up. It caught my attention, but I continued to answer Jazabelle. "And my mom's not taking it so well."

I waited for the pitying look, but it never came. Instead, I witnessed understanding. Heads nodded in silence. It was the first time since my dad had passed that I didn't feel alone.

"Sorry for your loss, man." Tucker spoke in a tone that told me he was no stranger to the pain in my soul.

"When?"

Delilah. The question could seem trivial to others, but from someone who had experienced such a loss, it really meant, *When was your world shattered?*

I met her eyes, letting her know I understood that she had once been torn apart. My voice

came out deeper than I meant. “Last year.”

She went into thought—into memories, it seemed. Then Delilah solemnly nodded and went back to reading.

I needed to get out of the heavy thoughts that were daring to sink me. “So, Cole *Coleman*?”

Cole smirked and hesitantly answered, “Yes, Cole Coleman Genner.”

Jazabelle giggled. “Yes, Cole, but what Maverick here wants to know is *why*?”

Viola egged him on. “Come on, *grill boy*. Do explain.”

Cole mumbled, “My mom got knocked up with me while camping, so she named me after camping gear.” The kitchenette’s walls shook with roaring laughter. Apparently, this joke didn’t get old. “Mom said it was the most romantic and special time of her life and that she didn’t want to forget it.” Cole Coleman shrugged and threw a hand in the air. “Moonshine and tents. What can I tell ya?”

June said quietly, “I think it’s cute.”

Tucker kissed her cheek. “You are correct.”

What gives? Tucker had an angered look to him until he was talking with June or Viola, and the way June lit up with each compliment from him had me reevaluate my first assumptions. I’d thought Tucker saw June as a trophy because she was hot, but then I noticed the way she sat on his lap, almost as if she felt safe there. Her aims to please were not needy or ditsy but *courteous*.

A couple of hours went by with laughing and a lot of storytelling. Bailey came to me, rubbing her eyes. I stood from my stool and picked her up. “You want to go home?” She shook her head but laid that tired-looking face on my shoulder. Bailey was light as a feather; I could’ve held her all night. While rocking her, I kept talking with the others, and I didn’t realize anyone

had come up behind me until I felt Bailey's arms reach out.

Looking over my shoulder, I saw Delilah smiling at Bailey while taking her from me. My jaw dropped. Delilah snuggled with Bailey, asking me, "What?"

I shook my head. "Nothing, it's just... Bailey doesn't go to anyone till she *knows* them."

Delilah had round light-golden-brown eyes that reminded me of honey, and I couldn't help but stare into them. Up closer, Delilah was even more breathtaking than I had originally thought. I told her, "Peanut must like you," and gave her my dimpled smile, which *usually* worked like a charm.

Delilah stared at me while rubbing Bailey's head, which rested on her chest. "Peanut... that is so appropriate for her." A very gentle smile began to cross Delilah's full lips, and just when I thought I had started winning her attention, she shook her head. "I can't do this." She handed Bailey back to me before walking away.

After she grabbed her keys and headed out the front door, I looked at Cole. "Did I say something wrong?" Cole shook his head but didn't offer an explanation for what had just transpired. Everyone else stared at Tucker, who kept staring at his cards. I wondered if Delilah was his ex.

Jazebelle kindly said, "Maverick, you didn't do anything wrong. It's just—"

"Delilah's business," Tucker interrupted. "And she will speak of her business with whomever she sees fit." Tucker wasn't rude, just firm.

Jazebelle told him, "You're right. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. You're fine, Jaz. We just have to respect her privacy."

"Do you want me to try and talk to her?" June asked.

Tucker looked at June with adoration. "You are so sweet, but no, I'll handle it." With that,

he removed her from his lap, sat her in his chair, and went out the front door.

I was concerned when I saw Viola get up quickly and head toward June. Maybe she was planning to smack her for sitting on the knee of a guy she seemed to have feelings for.

Cole clamped his hand on my shoulder. “Every small town has got a story, right?”

Neither Tucker nor Delilah came back in. Feeling a tad bit awkward, I decided it was time for us to leave. “It’s been great meeting everyone, but this one needs to hit the sack.” I rubbed Bailey’s back.

Houston said, “We’re going to the lake tomorrow. You in?”

“Is this a Hailey, Bailey thing?”

Viola mumbled, in appreciation, “*Hailey Bailey.*”

“Yeah,” Jazebelle answered. “I’m bringing her. Bring Bailey.”

Cole pulled out his cell. “Why don’t you give me your number?”

I raised a brow. “It doesn’t mean we have to go camping and fall in love, does it?”

“No,” he said, laughing along with everyone else. Then he shrugged. “But a dinner would be *nice.*”

After giving Cole my digits, I carried a sleeping Bailey to my truck. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw movement at the edge of Bryce’s front yard. Tucker was watching me, and he had Delilah in his arms.

Yep! That’d be a big old ex-boyfriend right there. Damn, does Tucker have something going on with every girl in this fucking town?

