



Chapter Fourteen: **The Other Side of Fort Worth**

Sam and his wife Emily lived on the other side of Fort Worth, so it was a bit of a drive, especially with the traffic. Everyone was heading home since the holiday season was finally over. It was a new week and a new year, so it was time to get on with real life. I would miss the lights. I was going to keep the ones that Jasper hung up for our anniversary in the sunroom. They just made me happy. They were a pleasant reminder of that night.

I spent the morning preparing some foods I knew our friend liked when I cooked for him in Albany. Potato salad, macaroni and cheese, and brownies. He said we didn't need to bring anything, but we wouldn't come empty-handed. They were all excellent things to have at a barbecue, anyway. Jasper also bought a case of beer. Sam would never argue with that.

They had a cute little house in the suburbs, wedged closely in a middle-class neighborhood. It was brick with yellow-painted shutters, and it looked like it was from the seventies. His car and truck were parked out front as well as a couple of dirt bikes underneath the carport. Some parts were laid out on a towel around them. Neither of them was in running order.

Sam opened the door with an enormous smile. "WELCOME!" He said too loudly, holding his hands up. "Come in." He beamed when he saw what I had in my hands. "You brought me food, too! God, I missed your cooking," he mumbled as he drew me into a hug. "You smell like chocolate," he added into my hair. Blushing, I giggled.

We followed him through the living room to the kitchen. It was a mismatched collection of Native American art and western designs. Everything was just so. His wife must have been good at keeping him in check because I knew he could make a mess.

There was a tiny woman with long straight black hair down to her waist standing at a stove. It was stunning, a solid sheet of shining ebony. She had olive skin, like Sam. They were almost the same shade. "Hey, baby! Where do you want me to put this stuff they brought?" He asked as he came into the room.

When she turned around, I realized that almost half of her face was horribly scarred and disfigured. It looked like it had been slashed by something sharp and large, drawing across her forehead, over one eye, and touching the corner of her lips. Automatically, I drew in a breath as my eyes got wide. It was a little too loud.

She took the plastic containers from him. "Hi!" She said pleasantly, then pointed at her face. "He didn't warn you, did he?" I shook my head slowly. She rolled her eyes and clicked her tongue. Emily was smirking. "Uh, what an asshole. He knows better. I was mauled by a bear when I was on a camping trip when I was a teenager," she stated calmly. My cheeks heated in embarrassment. I would have never asked, and I felt ashamed for acting as I did. It was just a split moment where I couldn't control it. "It's okay, everyone is surprised the first time they see if they haven't been warned." She purposefully glared at her husband.

Swallowing, he bowed his head as he looked at his feet. "I didn't even think about it, and Bella is the last person to care."

"Yes, but it's still shocking!" She scolded, then turned to look at my man. "Jasper, you should have."

He put his hands up in defense right away. "I've had things on my mind. And I'm not one to say anything about scars. Just most of mine aren't on my face." He pulled his collar away from the one on his throat by his ear.

"I'm sorry." I shook my head. I didn't mean to start anything. It made me feel guilty.

"No." She walked to me and offered me her hand. When I took it, she put her other on top of mine. "I am so excited to meet you finally. He bragged about your food so much," she giggled softly. It was a delicate, sweet sound. "Thank you for making sure he ate at least somewhat healthy."

“It was my pleasure. Thank you for inviting us into your home.”

Smiling, she peeked over my head at the man right behind me. “The good doctor should know he’s always welcome here, and so is his wife,” she promised before looking at her husband. “Go start the charcoal before you have another beer, please. I don’t want you to set yourself on fire. Again.”

Instantly, he was offended. Sam pouted. “I did it once, and that was fifteen years ago.” He held up his finger. “One time.”

“You only have to do it once.” She wiggled her fingertip at him before booping his nose.

We followed him outside onto his deck. He had a massive grill and a big picnic table with a rainbow-colored umbrella. The patio was covered in small potted plants that seemed to be mostly herbs, and the entire backyard was a garden. Even with it being the middle of winter, there was still an abundance of things growing in it and producing. It was obvious it was something that Emily spent a lot of time working on. She must have had some time to spare since he was always traveling.

“Sorry about that,” Sam said to me after he shut the door in a low voice. “She’s obviously not shy about it, and I just don’t think about it. I don’t see scars when I see her face.” He shook his head. “I see my beautiful wife.”

I brought my thumbnail to my mouth to chew anxiously, but I caught myself before I could. “I’m sorry that I just automatically reacted. It was rude, and I feel like I should properly apologize.”

Sam snorted. “Trust me, you can’t not react. It’s a human thing. Don’t worry, it doesn’t upset her. It’s how you act after you get over the shock that matters. And people have done and said far worse.”

“People are jerks,” I complained as I sat down at the cast iron table. The metal chair scraped against the wooden deck.

“Yup, that’s why we have jobs.” He waggled his finger between him and Jasper.

“Why you have a job. I’m going to use up a little more of my paid time off, and then I’m done. I can’t do it anymore. If I had any doubts about it before, yesterday cleared it up for me.”

He paused to look at him, a container of lighter fluid in his hands. “Really?”

“My publishers are going to pay him to be my bodyguard,” I explained. “So, you still have one because people are the worst. It’s just that you’ve jumped specialties. You’re narrowing your focus.”

Snorting, he glanced at me. “I guess that’s true, but I don’t consider it a career.”

“Huh,” our friend said to himself, squirting the coals down liberally. He was shaking his head a little to himself, his eyes unseeing as he soaked them.

“What?” My husband questioned.

He peeked over his shoulder at us. “Uh, um... Well, they offered me that new gig you were supposed to start back to once the trial was over earlier this week. I haven’t responded yet since I’m on vacation right now.” He swallowed and looked back at the grill. “Honestly, I didn’t know what to say. I’m flattered, but I didn’t want you to lose your position. Though I can understand why they’re looking for someone to fill it. They’re drowning. I realize I’m not a doctor like you, but I am qualified for it.”

“Oh!” Jasper beamed, his smile surprisingly bright. “That’s fantastic! You should take it! I know you’ve been ready to find a more steady path for a while now. And that has got to be a good pay bump.”

“It is. I haven’t told Emily,” he whispered, then cleared his throat. “I didn’t want to kick you out of a job, but if you don’t want it... I’m a loyal colleague first and greedy bastard second.”

Jasper laughed. “I don’t. Not at all. That would be great. It means we’ll be able to hang out occasionally,” he encouraged. “You should take it.”

Licking his lips, he considered his words. His dark eyes peered over at his friend. “Are you sure?”

“Nothing would make me happier,” he stated as he put his hand on his heart. “You are an amazing agent. One of the best I’ve met. Texas would be safer for it.”

Sam smiled. “I’ll write them an email later, letting them know that I’ll accept it.”

Emily came out with a pitcher of tea, placing it in the center of the table. “How’s it going?”

“Still working on it,” her husband swore as he hurriedly tried to get his lighter going. When it finally caught, a small ball of flames almost licked his arm. It was like a mushroom cloud. He drew it away quickly, his eyes wide in surprise. “I’m fine,” he promised automatically. “It didn’t get me.”

Shaking my head, I looked over at his partner. I think the men needed to talk a little more on their own. "Do you need some help in the kitchen?"

"That would be fantastic, thanks!" I stood up to follow her. Grinning, she turned to look at me as she opened the backdoor. "By the way, I've already eaten a bowl of that mac and cheese you brought. It's incredible. Can I have the recipe?"

"Oh! Sure! I'll write it down for you. It's really easy, and you can actually mix it up a lot to change the flavor," I began, and once we started, we were off. She was friendly, pleasant, bold, and funny. She loved to eat as much as her husband did. And she teased him mercilessly. They were perfectly matched.

We stayed late into the evening, playing games and talking. Jasper needed it. Being around his family helped, but no one understood his trauma like his former partner. They went through it together, like soldiers in war. By the end, we promised to do it again soon. We would do it at our place once the landscaping was fixed. I couldn't wait to entertain our friends at our home.

The garage door had already been cleaned, and the following day people would come by to look at the yard to start that process. It was tedious, but it gave me a chance to add more flowers and shrubs to our garden. Fruit trees in the back and maybe gardenia bushes in the front. I would make the best of an unpleasant situation because I wasn't going to let them take away from my happiness.

The mail came through a slot beside the solid door and landed on the small table with a decorative metal pail on it to catch them. When I put my purse away, I went to check it. Peeking over, I hung it on my hook. There were some coupons and a couple of sales papers. Picking through it, I wasn't impressed. They would go into the recycling. A thin plain envelope was at the bottom of the pile.

I opened it with my key, ripping up the simple white paper. There was a check from my car insurance company. There was no note or any more information. It was for three-quarters of a million dollars.

"Oh, my god!" I gasped, dropping it onto the floor as if it burned me. Both of my hands flew to my mouth.

Jasper was hanging up his coat beside me. "What?" He said hastily, picking it up. His eyes scanned the page. When he got to the number, he laughed. "Holy shit! This is for your car?"

"I guess so. They mailed that?!" I questioned in shock. "That's so much money! Are you fucking serious?"

"I guess when you go car shopping, you can get whatever you want," he continued to chuckle at my reaction. "Wow! That's more than what I was expecting. I wonder what Dad did to that thing. He must have given you a real family discount."

"What am I going to do?"

He snorted. "Buy a new ride," he said sarcastically, then shrugged. "What else is there to do?"

"I'm not dropping this much on a vehicle. That would be insane. No one needs a car like that. I can't even imagine spending one hundred thousand."

"That's easier to do than you think."

"I can't wrap my head around it." I took it from his grip so I could look at it again. My eyes kept tracing the numbers. All the zeroes made me dizzy. "What should I buy?" I had been too busy to research what I wanted to get.

"Darlin, you are asking the wrong Hale or McCarty for that."

"Ohhh..." I drew out. "You're right. I should talk to Emmett or Rose."

He pointed at the paper. "We could go to the main lot tomorrow. I'm sure they're all working. They'd all be pleased as punch to help you, and you know they'll be honest with you since they're family."

It was funny that even he thought car salespeople and mechanics were shady. His dad was far from it, which is part of the reason he did so well. "Rosalie is one of the most trustworthy people I know."

"I was talking about Emmett. He is a good salesman for a reason," he sardonically declared.

I giggled in response, folding the check and putting it in my purse. We would have to go to the bank the following day, anyway. I couldn't keep it in the house. "Yeah, make sure we won't be bothering them, but I think that's a splendid idea. I've never picked out my own vehicle before, so this should be interesting. I'll need some help."

"Really?" He asked in surprise. I nodded, then shrugged. He saw my nearly seventy-year-old truck. And I certainly wouldn't have chosen a million-dollar car for myself. "Well, hopefully, we'll be able to find you exactly what you want."

