

COMING HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS

(An LA Lovers Holiday Story)

THE PREPARATION

“Honey, I’m home!” Hunter snickered at herself as she lugged in her haul.

“Honey, I’m in the kitchen!” Ellie called back.

Hunter smiled. Her wife’s voice was filled with joy. The holidays were Ellie’s favorite time of year. Hell, it was Hunter’s favorite time of the year. The lights, the cheerfulness, the smell of gingerbread cookies wafting in the air. She carefully laid down her bags of stuff and took off towards the kitchen, towards her wife.

“Smells incredible.” Hunter wrapped her arms around Ellie and took a long, sniff of her neck. “The cookies smell great, too.”

Ellie leaned her head back and gave Hunter a sweet kiss. “You were gone for a long time.”

“It’s that time of the year,” Hunter grinned. “Gotta find the perfect gifts.”

“*You* are my perfect gift. And Jessie being home is the perfect gift. I don’t need anything more.”

Hunter turned Ellie in her arms. “How did I get so damned lucky to have you love me?”

Ellie smiled up at her wife. “It was written in the stars for both of us, honey.”

They shared a kiss that was filled with the passion, love, and devotion of a married couple who adored each other with all their hearts. The special moment was interrupted by Ellie pulling away abruptly.

“Hey!”

“Sorry, honey. The cookies are ready.”

Hunter frowned. “But the timer . . .” The timer went off. “How do you do that?”

“Years of practice,” Ellie winked.

“Hmm. Hey! Guess what I got!” Hunter said, suddenly remembering her bags by the front door.

“Beer?”

“No. I mean, well, yeah. But that’s a given.”

Ellie put the hot sheet of cookies on top of the stove and put in another batch. “This would probably go a lot faster if you just told me.”

“But not funner,” Hunter pouted.

“Funner? Is that a word?” Hunter shrugged, and Ellie chuckled. “Ok, *Harvard doctor*. Did you get wine?”

Hunter rolled her eyes. “Yes. I got everything we need to induce alcohol comas.” She watched Ellie knead some kind of dough. She loved watching Ellie’s hands work. Especially when they were working on Hunter. She cleared her throat. *No time for that. Right?* “Which, um, brings me to what I got that is *really* important! Sleeping bags!”

Ellie’s hands stopped. “Sleeping bags?”

“Yep! I probably should’ve gotten them during Black Friday, but oh well. Now all our guests will be comfy when they’re full of food and alcohol and can’t move. Also,” Hunter clapped her hands excitedly. “I got a bunch of arts and craft stuff.”

“Arts and craft stuff,” Ellie repeated.

Hunter looked around animatedly. “Did you hear that? We have an echo in the house.” She laughed and ducked just in time to dodge the piece of dough Ellie threw at her.

“How about you tell me why you’re getting arts and craft stuff before I ask you to clean toilets before our guests get here.”

Hunter shivered. “They were already cleaned! Okay, okay,” she said, hands held up in surrender when Ellie raised a spoon full of whatever the goop was that she was working with. “I just thought it would be fun to make ornaments.”

Ellie tilted her head. She was about to repeat the word “ornaments” when she caught herself. “I’m intrigued. More info, please.” Hunter gave Ellie that goofy grin she loved so much.

“Okay, so, here’s what I’m thinking. We put names in a hat or a bowl or whatever. Just half of the names, though. Then we’ll draw and whomever we choose, we have to sit with that person and get to know them a little better. And make an ornament for each other based on what we learned. The only rule is, we can’t be paired with our significant other.”

Ellie smiled brightly. “Honey, that’s a wonderful idea!”

Hunter lifted a shoulder. “I just wanted to think of something we could do that, you know, would be my little contribution to the party. Well, besides drink.”

Ellie laughed. “You’re just trying to get out of having another facial.”

“Nah! I still want to do that,” Hunter smiled. “It’s fun, and my face is smooth for days.”

“Don’t look now, but you’re beginning to like pampering.”

Hunter grabbed Ellie by the waist. “Only if you’re the one pampering me. Do we have time to, um, you know?”

Ellie snickered. “I wish. You’re being sweet, you’re having good ideas, and your hands are doing things to my ass that I should be doing to that dough. But Jessie is due to be here in about,” she checked her watch. “Ten minutes.”

“Ten minutes is plenty of time,” Hunter whined.

“Since when,” Ellie laughed. “Every time I’ve offered up a quickie, it turns into me being late to wherever I needed to be. We *cannot* be doing that when our daughter comes home from college for the first time.”

“Ugh. Our daughter is in college. When did we get so old?”

“Speak for yourself! I’m still young and spry,” Ellie teased. Her smile faded slightly. “I’ve missed her.”

“I know, baby.” Hunter hugged Ellie close. “Me, too. But we’re lucky that we have a kid who likes to call her parents.”

“True. Though sometimes I think she’s just calling so you can help her with her homework.”

Hunter laughed. “I’m happy to help her. Besides, I’m trying to stay on her good side so she’ll come work at the clinic.”

“Aww, a family business.” Ellie squealed when Hunter tickled her. “No tickling the cook!”

“I don’t recall that being a rule.”

“I just made it one! Now, scoot! I have to get this done. Is the grill ready?”

“Gonna start it up now, Mrs. Vale. I also have to make sure the pool is nice and warm, the wood for the fire pit is stacked and ready, the chairs are sturdy, and the sand and grass are ready for action.”

Ellie snorted. “You are goofy.”

“Hey, last year I found sand and grass all over the house. I’m trying to remedy that for this year. Get this; I put turf down. It’s temporary and ugly as hell, but it’ll keep the grass and sand out.”

“And give our friends rug burn in return,” Ellie pointed out.

“That’s what they get!” Hunter’s face lit up. “Oh! I forgot to tell you! I made an addendum on the invitations.”

Ellie stared at her wife. “So I don’t run the risk of echoing you again, would you like to explain?”

“Yep! Pajamas!”

Ellie waited for Hunter to keep going, but she didn’t. “More, honey.”

“Right,” Hunter grinned. “Well, I asked everyone to show up in their pajamas. I thought it’d be fun and comfortable. You know? The rule there is, the jammies have to be fun and festive onesies. Plus, I figured Dani and Claire would feel a little more relaxed if everyone was dressed about the same.”

“You are really on fire today,” Ellie smiled, then she began to laugh when she thought of someone like Eve Sumptor in a onesie. “The only problem is, I do not have a onesie.”

“Au contraire, my love. I took the liberty of buying the three of us matching jammies!”

“I love you. You know that, right?”

“I do. But if you wanted to, you know, show me, I wouldn’t object.” Hunter wiggled her eyebrows suggestively.

THE HOMECOMING

“Moms, I’m home!” Jessie flung her backpack off her shoulder and practically ran towards the kitchen where all the amazing aromas were coming from. She missed her mom — both of them — so much that she was seriously considering transferring to Berkeley. The fact that she was homesick may have played a part. But then, so did the fact that choosing to be pre-med her freshman year at Harvard may have been a colossal mistake. Everything was much harder than she imagined it would be. Of course, she didn’t believe it would be easy, but going to bed with a headache ninety-four percent of the time, wasn’t easy either.

“Really? Do you guys ever stop?” Jessie asked as she rounded the corner to catch her moms in an enthusiastic kiss.

This time when Ellie pulled away, it was to run towards her daughter. “You’re here!” She wrapped Jessie in a tight embrace. “My little doctor is finally home!”

“Mom, I’m barely pre-med. And I’ve only been gone for like six months.” Jessie said the words, but she melted in her mother’s arms. Six months felt like forever. “Hey, Doc.”

“Hey, Little Doc,” Hunter smiled. She would wait patiently for her turn to hug Jessie. There was no way she was going to interrupt Ellie’s moment. Finally, Ellie relinquished Jessie, and Hunter moved in. “How was the trip?”

“Uh, Eve’s jet is *sick*! I may never fly commercial again. Remind me to thank her profusely for hooking me up.”

“Don’t worry. I’m sure your mom will remind you,” Hunter teased.

“Yes, I will,” Ellie reassured them both. “Now, tell us about school.”

“When does everyone get here? I miss them,” Jessie evaded.

Ellie glanced at Hunter, then back at Jessie. “Why are you avoiding my question, kiddo?”

Jessie sighed. What made her think she could get away with that with her mom? “It’s just hard.” She looked up at Hunter. “Was pre-med this hard back when you went to Harvard?”

Hunter gave Ellie a look. “I think our daughter just called me old.” She hunched a bit and began talking with an old, raspy voice. “Back in my day . . .”

Jessie laughed. “I didn’t mean it like that, goofball.”

Hunter straightened up. “Mmhmm. Yeah, it was pretty brutal. Even now, having to study to keep up with all the advances that have been made can be tough. I should have advised you to stay away from some classes in your first year. And maybe to wait until your second year to dive into pre-med.”

Jessie shook her head. “No, you warned me, and I still made the decisions I made. I was too stubborn and ambitious to listen.”

“Whoa.” Ellie leaned dramatically against the counter. “My daughter just took responsibility. College really does work.”

“Ha, ha. If you’ve taught me anything, it’s to own up to my mistakes, mom.”

“Are you saying med school is a mistake?” Ellie asked carefully.

“No. I mean, I don’t think so. I think that maybe I’m just homesick and overwhelmed. No one said freshman year was going to be all parties, sex, and drinking. It’s much more than that. Like finding my place, getting into my groove.”

Ellie raised a brow. “How much partying, sex, and drinking are we talking about?”

Jessie chuckled. “Just like a mom to focus on that part.” She winked at Hunter. “Honestly, mom, I don’t have time for that stuff. That’s what I come home for.” Jessie just realized what she implied. “Wait. I’m just talking about the parties.”

Hunter narrowed her eyes. “I may or may not have spies at Harvard that can keep an eye on you if necessary.” She had never felt as motherly as she did right now. It wasn’t that she didn’t trust Jessie. With Ellie as a mother, Hunter believed that Jessie had the common sense and knowledge to stay out of trouble. But Jessie was also a teenager. And teenagers made mistakes.

“No need, Doc. I promise.”

“Sweetie, are you happy?” Ellie asked, suddenly. “Because if you want to change your mind about medical school, I support you 100%. We both do. Right, honey?”

Hunter’s eyes widened. “Yeah, yeah. Of course!” Sure, she would love to have another doctor in the family. But not at the expense of Jessie’s mental or physical health.

“You want me to quit?”

“No, I want you to understand that *if* that were your choice, we would support you. I just don’t want you to burn yourself out because you think we expect things from you.”

Jessie gave her mom a sweet smile. “I’ve never once felt pressure from you, mom. You’ve always encouraged me to do what’s best for me. I couldn’t ask for a better mom.” Again, she looked up at Hunter. “Two moms. I don’t want to give up so soon. It’s nice to know that I have your support no matter what, though.”

Both Ellie and Hunter sniffled and grabbed Jessie up in a group hug.

“Okay! The, um, guests are going to be here in a couple of hours,” Ellie wiped tears from her eyes. “I need to finish cooking, and Hunter has already been showering me with sweetness. I’m on overload! You,” she pointed at Hunter. “Go get your stuff done. You,” Ellie pointed at Jessie. “Take your things to your room and freshen up.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Jessie and Hunter answered together. They both saluted and ran off in separate directions.

“Oh, have Hunter give you the pajamas she bought you to wear tonight.”

“Kay.” Jessie stopped. “Wait. What?”

“C’mon, Little Doc, I got ya,” Hunter laughed and wrapped her arm around Jessie’s shoulders. Jessie merely shrugged and went with it.

“Wow. They’re so much alike.” Ellie shook her head and went back to doing what she did best. Cooking.

THE ARRIVALS

(PATTY & MO)

“It straight up smells like Christmas up in here!” Mo inhaled deeply.

“Hello, Mo.” Ellie gave Mo a quick kiss on the cheek and then hugged Patty. “I’m so glad you could make it. You both look amazing!”

“Child, we wouldn’t miss this for the world. Last year’s party was epic.” Patty looked down at her silly pajamas. “This was unexpected, but Mo was overjoyed when Hunter sent the request. As you can tell, she had fun with it.”

Mo modeled her pajamas by turning one way, then the other. She then did a little catwalk sashay. Ellie nearly snorted when she read the back of the pajamas. **I’m here for the food** with photos of pies, burgers, beer. Patty’s was a little more traditional with reindeer and Christmas trees. But when she turned, Ellie noticed the rear flap.

“Oh my!” Ellie laughed. “I’m so glad Hunter came up with this idea! She is definitely more prepared this year. Even bought some sleeping bags.”

“Yes!” Mo pumped her fists. “Where is she?”

“She’s out by the pool, getting ready to grill some burgers.”

“Sweet!” Mo took off towards the food and where she was sure the beers were.

“I swear that woman is going to be the death of me,” Patty chuckled. “She has been talking non-stop about this party. Will there be facials? Should we bring more beer? I swear she asked the beer question twenty times just on the way here.”

“That’s our Mo,” Ellie said with affection.

“Certainly is. Now, let me see your pajamas. Do a little twirl for me.”

Ellie scoffed with mirth. “This was Hunter’s idea. The three of us have matching PJs.” She did a little turn showing off the black onesie covered in little pumpkin pies. The phrase “You wanna piece of me” repeated under each pie.

“That is perfect!” Patty exclaimed with joy. “Tell me, just between us, who are you most looking forward to seeing in pajamas?”

Ellie thought about it for a split second. Then both said, “Eve!” at the same time.

“What’s up, Doc?” Mo snickered at her tired joke. “Aw, man! I was so busy showing off my PJs that I didn’t even see what Ellie was wearing!”

Hunter waited patiently for Mo to do her bit of sulking and mumbling. “Hello to you, too. And Ellie is wearing the same onesie as I am,” Hunter said proudly.

Mo looked her best friend up and down and guffawed. “How many times have you said yes to Ellie and tried to get a piece?”

Hunter grinned. “A couple. But Jessie is wearing the same one as well. So, I had to quit that when she put hers on. It was a little too creepy.”

“Bleh! Yeah, you didn’t think that one through, did ya?”

Hunter muttered a moody “no,” then got over it. They were a family. They were together. And that’s all that mattered during the holidays. “The beers are chillin’ in the cooler. Better get a head start before Cass gets here.”

“Ooo, yeah.” Mo grabbed a beer. She popped the top and stood close to the grill. She loved the smell of meat cooking to perfection. Ellie was a freakin’ awesome chef, but Mo had to admit, Hunter was a master griller. Of course, Mo would keep that little tidbit to herself, especially when Cass was around. She didn’t need the two tall weirdos having some sort of cook-off. *Wait. Why don’t I want that?*

“Hey, what’s up with your tree, Hunt?”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s naked!”

“It is not,” Hunter laughed. “It has lights and garland.”

“Yeah, but where are all the ornaments?”

“They’re coming, don’t worry.”

“Okay,” Mo shrugged. “Well, the rest of the house is great! And, dude, it totally smells like Christmas in there. I don’t know how you stay thin with Ellie cooking all the time.”

Hunter grinned smugly. “I have my ways.”

“Niiice.”

“Just don’t tell Ellie I said that in that way.”

Mo made the sound of a whiplash. “Whipped.”

“Nothing wrong with that. I’m sure Cass would tell you the same thing.”

“Ha! Not Cass. She wears the pants in that relationship. Like me.”

Hunter doubled over with laughter. Mo was *way* off on Cass. And herself! “Let me go ask Patty if that’s true.”

“No need! C’mon, it’s Christmas, Hunt! Let me have this tiny little moment where I’m king of my domain. When I go back in there, Patty will resume the title, I swear!”

Hunter gave her best friend of many years a little shove. “Mo, it’s not a competition. It’s a partnership. You wanna be king; Patty will be queen. It’s equal when you’re in love. Fifty-fifty.”

“If that’s true, why are you so afraid of Ellie knowing what you said before?”

“That’s called respect, Mo. I realized after I said it that it was probably something Ellie wouldn’t want to be public knowledge.”

“Cass and Rebecca say things like that all the time,” Mo pointed out.

“Yeah, but they’re different. Ellie is a bit more subdued. It’s all about knowing your partner, Mo, and being mindful of how far to take things.”

Mo looked back in the house where she could see Patty, Ellie, and Jessie laughing together. “I’ve been married longer than you. How did you get better at this?”

Hunter clapped Mo’s shoulder. “Maybe that’s the thing. You were married pretty early. Your marriage brain wasn’t fully developed yet.”

Mo flipped Hunter off. “I love her, Hunt. Sometimes I worry that I’ll lose her because I can be a bit childish.”

“A bit?”

“C’mon! I’m trying to be serious here!”

“Sorry,” Hunter chuckled. “Please continue and then remind me to mark the date.”

“Never mind.”

“No, no! I’m sorry, okay?”

Mo sighed moodily. “I’m trying to do better. But I’ve never been one to censor my thoughts.”

No kidding, Hunter thought silently.

“Patty, though,” Mo continued. “She’s worth trying to think before I speak. I don’t know what I would do without her.”

“Hey.” Hunter put her arm around Mo’s shoulders. “Patty loves you, Mo. Otherwise, she would have left your ass years ago. I’m sure she’ll appreciate your willingness to try and change, but don’t change too much. *You* are the one she fell in love with. Just the way you are.”

“But she slaps me upside the head all the time!”

“A love tap.” To prove her point, Hunter smacked Mo upside the head.

“Hey!”

“Merry Christmas, Mo. Love ya.”

(BLAISE & PIPER)

“Piper!” Jessie ran towards her bestie and slid across the floor on with her footie pajamas. “I missed you!”

Piper readily accepted Jessie’s hug, squeezing her tight. “I missed you, too! You have to tell me *everything!*”

They both walked off, leaving their mothers alone.

“You’d think they haven’t spoken every single hour of every single day since Jessie left,” Blaise said, shaking her head.

“We do the same thing,” Ellie winked. She watched Jessie and Piper giggle with their heads together. “She looks cute.”

“Yeah, unicorns are “so in” right now, apparently.” Blaise rolled her eyes dramatically.

Ellie smiled. “Your jammies are. . .interesting.”

Blaise looked down at her pink onesie that sported in bold writing; **Token Straight Friend.**

“Now that Eve and Lainey are together, I’m the odd man out.”

Blaise smiled, but Ellie knew her best friend well enough to know there was something wrong. “Blaise?”

“I’m ready for some wine!” Blaise exclaimed and headed for the kitchen. “I would have brought some, but I think I remember two bottles we didn’t get to last Girls’ Night. Do you still have them?”

“Yes, of course.” Ellie caught Blaise’s arm. “Talk to me.”

“Nothing to say, sweets.” Blaise hugged her best friend. “All is good. I didn’t mean to make you think differently by wearing this. Is it offensive?”

“No, but.” Ellie sighed. She didn’t think Blaise was completely honest with her, but she would just have to wait until Blaise was ready to talk. “I need you to know something, okay? You are *never* the odd man out. You are odd, sometimes, but not the odd man out.”

“Har, har.” Blaise made a face at Ellie. “Don’t mind me. Ezra was giving me a hard time before I left. He saw us wearing PJs and wanted to go wherever we were going. He didn’t understand why he couldn’t put on his dinosaur jammies and come with us.”

“Oh, honey, you could have brought him!”

“With all the drinking we do? I didn’t feel like I’d be a very responsible parent.”

“How about this? We all know that Greyson comes by here once the drinking is in full swing. Why doesn’t he come by a little earlier and bring Ezra with him? We’re going to be doing some fun arts and crafts. He can help. Then, when his bedtime gets near, Greyson can take him home.”

“Are you sure? You realize that means Greyson will be here the entire time.”

“Well, we just won’t tell any secrets of womanhood while he’s here,” Ellie said dryly.

Blaise chuckled. “Thank you. I’ll text Greyson and tell him to find Ezra’s finest jammies.” She took out her phone and sent the quick text. “Now. What the what?”

“What?” Ellie repeated.

“You said arts and crafts. The only arts and crafts I’ve ever known you to do involved edible stuff. What is this all about?”

Ellie laughed. “We were going to tell everyone when they got here, but since you’re my bestie, I’ll tell you. Just keep it quiet, okay?” Blaise nodded. “We’re going to make ornaments. There are rules that I’ll explain later, but it should be interesting.”

“Huh. Is that why your Christmas tree is a bit. . .lacking?”

“Rude!” Ellie feigned indignation, quickly getting over it. Their tree was bare by design, but it was driving Ellie crazy. “That’s one reason. I thought it might be nice to have everyone help this year. You ladies tonight. Then next weekend, when *everyone* comes back — boys included — to finish it on Christmas Eve.”

“That’s sweet,” Blaise smiled. “Will PJs be a requirement then, too? Because I have another pair. They’re entirely rainbow with “ALLY” across the chest.”

Ellie tried so hard not to laugh, but Blaise's serious face, coupled with her crossed eyes, made that entirely impossible. "You are an odd duck, and I love you dearly."

"Back at ya, babe. Now, get me a glass, woman. I'm thirsty."

Ellie tossed Blaise a bottle of water. "Drink some water, woman. Your son will be here in a bit."

"Fiiine. But you're making up for this later. We're talking about the hard stuff. I want a tequila fountain. Ooo, that's what you can get me for Christmas!"

"You have a problem, babe," Ellie teased.

"It's only a problem on every other Sunday and special occasions," Blaise winked.

(EVE & LAINEY)

"Stop looking at me like that," Eve muttered playfully as she walked with her wife to Ellie and Hunter's front door.

"I can't help it, honey, you're cute."

"I am not *cute*."

"I beg to differ, my love. *You* are *very* cute in that onesie."

Eve rolled her eyes and knocked on the door. "I can't believe I let you talk me into this. Stop grinning at me, Lainey. You'd think you've never seen me in pajamas before."

"I haven't. You sleep naked."

It was her luck that the door was opened at that precise moment. By Hunter. If only Ellie had been the one to open the door, Lainey could have played it off. But now, she was blushing as much as Hunter was, and Eve was smirking.

"Uh, hey. C-come in." Hunter stepped back and bowed as she gestured them inside. *Don't bow, you idiot!* "Great, um, jammies." *Jammies? Couldn't you have called them pajamas? Or even PJs? You had to say jammies to Eve and Lainey Sumptor.*

“Thank you,” Lainey smiled, then nudged Eve.

“Yes, thank you.” Eve lifted her hood for the full effect. “I’m a beaver.”

Hunter blushed an even deeper shade of red, and Lainey howled with laughter.

“What is all the. . . Oh My God!” Ellie nearly fell to the floor in a fit of the giggles. “You did *not* wear a beaver onesie.”

“Oh, I assure you,” Eve began dryly. “I did. So did my wife.”

Lainey lifted her hoodie as well. Then she turned to show her tail. “I saw them and couldn’t resist.”

“You should have resisted,” Eve said with a smile.

“No, she shouldn’t have,” Ellie said as she gasped to catch her breath. “They’re perfect!” She grabbed both Eve and Lainey’s hands and practically dragged them into the living room.

“Ladies, the Beavers are here!”

Jessie, Blaise, Piper, Patty, and Mo all looked up at the announcement. If a pin had dropped right then, it would have been the loudest sound in the room until the dam of whoops burst.

“Man! I thought Blaise’s was the best until now!” Mo managed to get out. “I mean, I still think Blaise’s is the freakin’ bomb, but beavers? Holy shit!”

“No, no. I relinquish the title willingly!” Blaise curtsied with a wink.

“If I see this on anyone’s social media,” Eve looked directly at Piper and Jessie. “I will release my goons on them.”

Lainey rolled her eyes. “You’re never going to let me live that down, are you?”

“That you thought I was a mobster? Absolutely not,” Eve winked.

“Whoa! You’re a mobster? Like, mafia mobster?” Mo nearly tripped over the coffee table, trying to get a “closer look” at who would be the perfect mob boss.

“Mo,” Patty groaned. “She’s not the mafia.”

“Maybe that’s just what she wants us to think.” Mo tapped her temple knowingly. “Plus, with all these phones and Alexa, you never know who’s listening. So, SHE’S NOT A MOBSTER!” Mo yelled. “*That should convince them,*” she whispered.

Eve laughed heartily. “Mo, there is never a dull moment with you. Thank you for keeping my identity a secret,” she said quietly, chuckling when Mo saluted.

“Just remember who had your back.”

Eve shook her head as Mo took off for another beer. “She must keep you busy, Patty.”

“Child, you don’t even know. I love that weirdo with all my heart. But I swear, sometimes I want to slap her more than I want to kiss her.”

“I’m sure we’ve all felt that way about our significant others at one point,” Ellie offered in solidarity.

“Hey!” Hunter put her hands on her hips in indignation. The effect wasn’t as intimidating as she hoped it would be. Not while she was wearing footie pajamas. She shrugged in defeat when Ellie simply blew her a kiss.

(REBECCA, CASS, & AUNT WILLS)

“God, how I *wish* the pajamas idea were mine.” Ellie was busy walking around Rebecca, Cass, and Aunt Wills taking in their onesies. Rebecca sported a red onesie covered in little Santas that read, “WHERE MY HOs AT?” Aunt Wills wore green footie pajamas with Christmas lights that actually lit up. And, Cass. Oh, Cass. The mistletoe on her PJs was *very* strategically placed for a lesbian.

“So, I don’t have you to thank for this?” Aunt Wills quipped.

“Nope. That would be my wife. Wait until you see Eve and Lainey.”

Willamena’s eyes lit up. “Oh! This I *have* to see!”

“Wait, I wanna see, too!” Cass said as she followed Aunt Wills.

Rebecca shook her head with laughter. “I was surprised when we got this request.”

“I was surprised when she told me today what she’d done,” Ellie smiled. “But I love her for this. I think it goes a long way to getting rid of everyone’s “shield” so to speak. You kind of have to be yourself and let loose when you have silly pajamas on. Besides, she wanted Dani and Claire to be more comfortable. No one is in designer clothes.”

“Aww, that’s sweet. I noticed Dani looked a bit out of her depth last year. Hopefully, this will make her feel right at home.” Rebecca bumped Ellie’s hip with hers. “You got yourself a good one there.”

“No arguments there,” Ellie readily agreed. “You didn’t do so shabby yourself.”

Both women watched the scene before them. Cass modeled her PJs much the same way Mo did when she first walked in. Then she urged everyone else to do the same while photos were being taken by anyone who wasn’t striking a pose.

“Oh dear. Is she going to make Kiara do that when she gets here?”

Rebecca let out a bark of laughter. “Most likely.” She tilted her head. “Blaise’s is interesting.”

“Yeah. She asked if it was offensive.” Ellie watched her best friend as Blaise laughed and played along with the vogueing.

“I don’t think it’s offensive. But does she really feel that way?”

Ellie shrugged. “I hope not. She was acting a little strange when she got here, but she blamed that on Ezra being upset that he couldn’t go to the pajama party with his mommy. Not to mention, she wasn’t here before everyone else like she usually is. I’ll have to corner her some time to get the scoop.”

“Wait until her fourth or fifth shot of that god-awful stuff she drinks. That should be good for opening the flood gates or word vomit.”

“As long as it’s not real vomit, I’m good with that.”

Both Rebecca and Ellie shivered and made a face. Neither wanted to think about the little incident last year involving Mo and a potted plant. What happens at Girls’ Night Holiday Party stays at Girls’ Night Holiday party.

“Babe! Come show everyone your jams! I found all your Hos!”

“It seems we’re being summoned,” Rebecca chuckled.

“Just you. Everyone has seen mine by looking at Hunter and Jessie. Ho, ho, ho.” Ellie pushed Rebecca towards the crowd.

(CLAIRE & DANI)

“Hey, Claire!” Hunter hugged the young woman, then turned to Dani. “You both look incredible!” She gave Dani a quick hug as well.

“Whose idea was this?” Dani muttered.

“Mine!” Hunter’s chest puffed out proudly. “You don’t like footie pajamas?”

Hunter’s mouth snapped shut, and Dani just stared at her. Just as Hunter opened her mouth to beg for forgiveness, Dani burst out laughing.

“I’d probably like them much more if I actually had *footies*. And I’m not entirely convinced that Claire didn’t make me wear this elf get-up as punishment.”

“I’m wearing it, too, Dani,” Claire laughed. “How is it punishment for you?”

“Well, you’re short!”

“Baby, you weren’t much taller than I am before the accident. Don’t pretend that this vertically challenged thing is new for you.” Claire reached up and quickly kissed Dani on the lips.

“That was mean. Do you see how she treats me?”

Hunter smirked. “Yep. She fits right in. C’mon. You have to see what everyone else is wearing.”

Dani grabbed Hunter’s arm before they could go further. She eyed Claire, who nodded and continued on without them.

“Can I ask you something?”

Hunter glanced down at Dani. She was grateful for the positive change in her and Dani's relationship. Of course, Hunter owed everything to Ellie on that front. If it hadn't been for her wife, Dani would probably still hate Hunter. And she had no idea what would have come of Dani if Ellie hadn't been there. Or Blaise and Eve for that matter.

"What's up?"

"Did you do this for Claire and me?"

Hunter frowned. "The Christmas party?"

"No, doc. The pajama thing."

"Honestly?" Dani nodded. "You and Claire were part of the reason, but not the only one. I know these women can be intimidating."

"That includes you, ya know," Dani interjected.

"Nah." Hunter wrapped her arm around Dani's shoulder. "I'm the least intimidating of them all," she joked. "Here's the deal. I want us all to get to know each other better. It's easier to do that when we're on more common ground."

"But you know them all. So, Claire and I are the only ones intimidated by everyone else."

Hunter shook her head. "Not true. Eve scares the shit out of me, pardon my language. And Kiara Adler? See? I still have trouble just calling her by her first name. By asking these women to show up here in pajamas, it's like removing a layer from their impenetrable armor." She pulled Dani to a bench that was near the front door and sat down. "Ellie is great at this. Have you ever noticed she's not intimidated by anyone? It's because she can see through any façade you put in front of her. She sees the *real* person beneath."

"Yeah, I've noticed that about mom. I don't know how the hell she does it, though."

Hunter shrugged. Since she didn't want to embarrass Dani, Hunter kept her composure when Dani called Ellie mom. Of course, she'd be telling Ellie as soon as she had a chance, though. It wasn't the first time it had happened. But each time Dani let the endearment slip, it made Ellie feel as though she had done something right in the world. "It could be the years of working in the

service industry. Or it could just be as simple as that's who she is. But I wanted everyone to see each other the way Ellie does. And I'm hoping that wearing silly pajamas helps that."

"We're so different, though."

"I'm willing to bet we have more in common than we believe," Hunter countered. "Now, let's get in there. I think you'll feel much better when you see everyone's PJs."

Dani laughed. "Yeah, okay. Hey." She waited until Hunter was looking at her. "Thank you."

Hunter smiled and gave Dani a wink.

(KIARA & LAUREN)

"Merry Catsmas!" Kiara exclaimed when Ellie opened the door. She held her arms wide to show off her onesie filled with cats in Santa hats. "I'm here with my reindeer friend, and we are ready to party!" She handed Ellie a bottle that looked incredibly expensive.

"You didn't need to bring anything except yourselves!" Ellie reached up and kissed Kiara on the cheek. She then did the same for Lauren. "You both look adorable. Please tell me you come with antlers."

Lauren chuckled. "I come with antlers *and* a red nose." She put the red nose on to show she wasn't kidding.

"Perfect!" Ellie ushered them both in. "You two are the last ones."

"Sorry we're late," Lauren rolled her eyes. "You know supermodels. Always have to make an entrance."

"Ahem," Kiara interrupted. "*Former* supermodel. Which means I should be even later for more of an impact."

"Alright, ladies," Ellie laughed. "I only brought it up because we had been waiting for Blaise's son and husband. Ezra had been upset when Blaise didn't bring him since he had his own PJs to model."

"Aww!"

“Unfortunately,” Ellie continued, hating to disappoint Lauren, who seemed to love kids. “Greyson said Ezra was interested in other things now having completely forgotten about his mom leaving with her jammies on. So, it’s just us tonight. Sunday afternoon we’ll have kids around if you two want to come back for more Christmas fun.”

“Oh, we wouldn’t want to intrude on family time,” Lauren said sincerely.

Ellie stopped and turned to face Lauren and Kiara. “You two *are* part of the family.” She looked at Kiara’s PJs again. “Do you have a cat?”

Kiara smiled wide. “I do! His name is Figaro. The love of my life.”

Ellie smiled and shook her head. “How did I not know that?”

Kiara lifted an elegant — even in footie pajamas — shoulder. “I’m sure there are a lot of things we could still learn about each other.”

“We may get that chance,” Ellie said quietly as she guided the ladies to the heart of the party.

THE MATCHUP

“Ladies?” Ellie waited until everyone’s attention was on her. “Now that we all have full bellies and haven’t hit the booze too hard, yet, we have an activity.”

“Strip poker?” Mo called out with a snicker, earning herself a smack on the back of the head.

Ellie gave Mo a sweet smile. “Not quite. Hunter?”

“Huh?” Hunter had been quite content with letting her wife take the lead. But apparently, Ellie had other plans. Like putting Hunter on the spot. “Oh. Right. Um, well, first of all, I want to say how grateful I am to all of you for indulging my request and showing up in pajamas. And not expensive silk ones, but silly onesies that make my heart laugh. Now, uh, this next thing I have planned, please hear me out before you moan and groan, yeah?”

All the women agreed readily. If they could wear jammies, they could do whatever else Hunter had planned for them.

“So, this idea was inspired by my wife.” Hunter gave Ellie a quick wink. “Ellie has this innate ability to see people beyond the exterior. It doesn’t matter if you wear designer clothes, have a ton of money, have an ivy league education, or have been hit hard by life. Ellie always sees the person beneath. Now, we’re all here because we’re friends. Some of us know each other more than others. I want to change that tonight.”

Hunter grabbed a tote bag and placed it on the coffee table in front of her. She reached in and took a plain white ornament and a clear ornament out. She tossed one to Cass. The other went to Blaise.

“I’m hoping you’ll indulge me once more when I suggest we make ornaments. *But,*” Hunter continued when the ladies were ready to agree. “I want us to make ornaments for each other. We have sixteen women here — thanks, Aunt Wills, for showing up this year,” she winked. “I think we should put half of our names in a hat. The other half will draw a name. You’ll sit together, get to know each other, and make an ornament based on what you’ve learned. The only rule is, you can’t be paired with your significant other. *Or* your best friend.”

The ladies were murmuring, but Hunter couldn't get a read on their reaction. She glanced at Ellie, who gave her an encouraging nod.

"Hunt?" Cass finally piped up. "I think that's an awesome idea!"

The others concurred, giving Hunter props for thinking of it.

"I hope we can make this a new tradition. Along with the pajamas," Rebecca added. "I have never been so comfortable. Now all we have to do later when Cassidy is too drunk to drive me home is bring out the sleeping bags, and we're all set."

"Says the woman who can drink me under the table," Cass laughed. "But seriously, Hunt, I agree with Rebecca. We should make this a tradition."

"I don't know how much my vote counts," Aunt Wills began. "But I third that motion."

"I'd say Aunt Wills's vote counts for, like, a ton." Mo raised her beer bottle in salute to Willamena. "I mean, she's a shrink, so she should know if this is a good idea or not."

Jessie laughed. "Well, I think it's unanimous. Ornaments are a hit. So, let's get to it! Who has a hat?"

"And paper and a pencil," Piper put in. "How do we decide whose name gets put in the hat and who draws?"

"Uh." Hunter looked at Ellie. She just came up with the ideas. No one told her she had to have every detail worked out.

Ellie stepped up. "Okay, Jessie, Rebecca, Eve, Kiara, Lainey, Aunt Wills, and Patty, please step to the right. I'll be with you. Blaise, Piper, Cass, Dani, Mo, Claire, and Lauren, please step to the left. Hunter will be with you."

Everyone did as they were instructed, eyeing each other as though they were trying to predict who they would be paired with.

"This is why she's the boss," Hunter announced proudly. She handed out little pieces of paper and pencils to those on the right. "Ellie has allowed me to use one of her bowls for this. Please do not drop it, break it, chip it, or do anything that may land me in the doghouse."

“Feels like a swing party,” Mo muttered.

Patty looked up at her wife, then looked at Cass. Abruptly, Cass slapped Mo upside the head.

“What was that for!”

“Patty wants to know how you know what a swing party feels like,” Cass answered.

“I — uh.” Once again, Mo spoke before her brain could warn her not to. That respect thing Hunter was talking about went through Mo’s mind. Making the others believe that she — or worse, she and Patty — knew about swing parties was overstepping and embarrassing. “Sorry, babe!” Mo called over to her wife. She received a beautiful smile in return. Yeah, trying to be better was going to definitely be worth it if Mo was rewarded with that smile.

“Okay!” Hunter cleared her throat and got everyone’s attention. “I think we have all the names. Now, who wants to choose first?”

Again, they all looked at each other, waiting for someone to make the first move. It was the most unbelievable sight for Dani. All these confident women were standing there as though they were afraid to take that first step.

“I guess I will,” Dani said finally. *Don’t get Eve. Don’t get Eve. Don’t get Eve.* She was reasonably certain she could handle sitting in front of anyone in this room and hold her own. Except for Eve. As Hunter had confessed, the woman scared the shit out of Dani, too. She stuck her hand in the bowl and swirled around the pieces of paper. She was still chanting her mantra in her head when she plucked one name out.

“Do I look at it now?”

“We can wait until everyone has picked,” Hunter answered. She went down the line until there was one strip of paper left. “Guess this is mine.” She took the piece of paper, then set the bowl down. She was nervous. It was ridiculous. This had been Hunter’s idea. Why would she be nervous? From her peripheral vision, she saw Eve and Kiara. *That’s why*, she thought with a tad of self-disgust. She was a grown-ass woman. A freakin’ trauma surgeon — former, but whatever — at that. Dr. Hunter Vale could handle sitting down with any one of these women. She hoped.

“Hunter, honey?”

Hunter snapped out of her little trance. “Right! Okay. Dani, since you were brave enough to go first, here’s another choice for you. Would you like to open them all together or one of us go at a time?”

“Um, I think maybe one at a time. That way, it won’t get so chaotic, ya know?”

“Agreed. So? Open yours up!”

Dani could feel her palms beginning to sweat. *Don’t get Eve. Don’t get Eve.* She slowly opened the piece of paper. *Eve Sumptor. No, freakin’ way!!*

“Who did you get, babe?” Claire asked with interest. She had picked after Dani. There wasn’t a preference when it came to who she would get. Claire was just excited to get to know these women better.

“Uh. I — I, um, I . . .”

Cass craned her neck to see who was written on Dani’s piece of paper, though she had a pretty good idea who it was. There was only one person in this room that instilled that much nervousness into a person. *Yep. Thought so.*

“She got Eve,” Cass announced, trying to help a sista out.

Eve’s eyebrow rose. “Regretting going first, Dani?”

Holy crap! She said my name. Say something, you idiot! And not just to yourself! “N-no. All good. Claire? Who’d you get?”

Claire was actually a little jealous of her girlfriend. *Oh well. Many more interesting women to get to know better.* She opened her paper and smiled timidly. This person scared her the most. Possibly because Claire didn’t think she could hide anything from her. “I got Aunt Wills!”

“Fabulous!” Wills exclaimed. She had hoped for the chance to have Dani and Claire as patients. There had to be a need for Dr. Woodrow’s services after what they’ve been through. But Willamena was not one to “chase ambulances.” However, if this were the beginning of something, she would consider it a win.

Hunter clapped and rubbed her hands together. This was turning out better than she expected. And they’ve only learned of two pairings so far. “All right! We have two down. Who’s next?”

Cass raised her hand. "I'll go." She unfolded her little paper. "Jessie!" Why in the hell did that fill her with panic? Jessie was just a kid. *Ellie's kid. Who's just like her mom! And her mom makes you nervous!*

"Oh good! I expect an awesome ornament, Mrs. *Arteest*," Jessie joked. *This should be interesting!*

Hunter chuckled at her daughter's cheekiness. "Okay, next?"

"Yeah, that's me," Mo said. *At least Eve and the head shrink were off the list.* She gingerly opened her piece of paper as though that would help her get someone she already knew pretty well. Like, maybe Ellie. *No, that would be weird.* Man! Why couldn't she sit with Patty? Then she read the name and nearly high-tailed it out the door. "Kiara Adler," she muttered.

Kiara smiled at Mo. "Just Kiara. I look forward to getting to know you better, Mo." Funnily enough, Kiara meant that. Mo was sort of an enigma in Kiara's mind. For the life of her, she couldn't figure out how Mo and Hunter became best friends. They were completely different. *Guess I'll find out.*

"I guess I'm next," Lauren said softly. Hell, *anyone* she got would be intimidating. She barely knew these women. Kiara was her way in. And Lauren had such a fantastic time at the last holiday party that she practically begged Kiara to bring her again. Kiara said Lauren had already been invited, and that was true, but still. Coming as a "couple" or a "plus one" was easier for Lauren. That little tidbit would drive her mother crazy, Lauren thought as she read her piece of paper. "Ellie!"

Ellie grinned. "That's perfect. You're the one I know the least about, and I'm excited to change that."

Piper stepped up. "My turn." She unfolded her paper and smiled widely. "Patty!"

"Child! Finally, I'll get to hear you say more than one word!" Patty said excitedly.

"Two words, really," Blaise corrected. "And they're usually "I'm hungry."

"Says the woman who can eat an entire red velvet cake," Piper countered.

“She’s got you there, child,” Patty laughed. “C’mere, sweet girl.” Patty enveloped Piper in a fierce hug.

“Blaise?” Hunter prompted.

Blaise assessed who was left. Lainey and Rebecca. Lainey was a safer option for Blaise. She would like to get to know her better. Then there was Rebecca. Ellie knew Rebecca better than Blaise did. Blaise liked Rebecca well enough. Okay, she thought the woman was incredibly interesting. They just never really seemed to click during their girls’ nights. The conversation between them stayed light and easy. It’d be nice to figure out why that was.

“Looks like I’ll get my chance,” she murmured as she looked at the name she drew.

“Rebecca.”

Ooo, Rebecca thought silently. Best friend vs. best friend. Could be intriguing. Maybe I’ll finally learn more about the kiwi. “Excellent,” she said aloud with a genuine smile.

“Okay! That means I’m with Lainey,” Hunter announced. She knew that with Lainey and Rebecca left, she couldn’t keep Rebecca if that’s who she chose. Hunter’s rules. No significant other and no best friends. That’s why her stomach did little somersaults when the list began dwindling down to the last two. Hunter adored Lainey. But sitting alone with her and talking? Ellie did most of the talking when they were with Eve and Lainey. Now Hunter didn’t have that crutch. *It’s fine. We’re all fine. This is a great outcome!*

“Are we ready for this?” Ellie asked everyone. “Do we need liquid courage?”

“Yes!” Dani shouted.

Ellie laughed. “Sorry, kiddo. You’re still not old enough.”

“Oh, come on! One drink. . .or five won’t hurt anything. Besides, I have to be old enough in homeless years.”

“Nice try.” Hunter mussed Dani’s hair. “No alcohol. But you can stuff your face with dessert.”

Dani pursed her lips. “Interesting alternative. Do you have ice cream?”

“Pssh! Do we have ice cream? I’m offended you would even ask. Do we have ice cream,” Hunter scoffed. “Uh, babe? Do we have ice cream?”

“Yes, honey. About five different kinds. Why don’t you set things up out here, and I’ll get the refreshments. Blaise? Want to give me a hand?”

Blaise shrugged and followed Ellie into the kitchen. She stood at the counter and waited.

“You’re not going to help me?” Ellie asked.

“Oh. Were you serious? You *never* let me touch anything in your kitchen. I thought this was just a ruse to get me in here because you had something to say to me.”

“Well, to be honest, it was. But you can still help.”

Blaise stepped up and held her arms out. “Hit me.”

“How do you feel about being paired with Rebecca?”

“It’s fine. Why wouldn’t it be?”

“I saw your face, sweets. You didn’t look very happy.”

“That’s just my RBF.”

Ellie chuckled. “You don’t have a resting bitch face. But it is very expressive. I thought you and Rebecca liked each other.”

“We do. I think Rebecca is great. If I had a look it was probably worry. She and I haven’t spoken much on a deeper level than drunken slurs.”

“And that worries you?”

Blaise sighed. “Honestly, I’m not sure what I feel. So, I’ll go in there, have a seat, and do what I do best.”

“Eat red velvet cake and drink whiskey?” Ellie teased.

“Exactly. Whatever happens will happen.”

THE INSIGHT

(EVE & DANI)

Hunter had moved the furniture around enough to set up eight “workstations” around the living room. Each were supplied with paints, brushes, glitter, glue, markers, and the ornaments. Since Hunter wasn’t fluent in art, she did her best at picking things out that she thought could be used for this crafty little adventure.

“Sorry about the rudimentary supplies,” Hunter said as Eve sat down at one of the stations.

Eve smiled. “A true artist is able to use whatever is available at her fingertips. Besides, this is perfect, thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Hunter ushered Dani — who resisted ever-so-slightly — to her chair. She almost felt sorry for the kid. “This is all about getting to know each other and having fun. So, um, have fun!”

Eve turned her attention to Dani who was fidgeting in her chair. “Hello, Dani.”

“H-hi.”

Eve tilted her head and studied the young girl in front of her. Strong cheekbones. Long, narrow nose. Full lips. Almond eyes. Her olive skin spoke of a Mediterranean ancestry.

“Are you afraid of me?” Eve asked calmly.

“Isn’t everyone?” Dani’s non-answer was tentative. “You’re, like, super intimidating.”

“Am I? Why do you think that is?” *Good lord. I sound like Willamena!*

“I dunno. Cuz you’re, like, *you*.”

“I am that,” Eve laughed. “It’s quite difficult to be someone else. Believe me, I know.” She picked up an ornament and handed it to Dani. “Draw how you see me right now. Then, when we’ve spoken more, draw how you see me then on the other side.”

“I ain’t an artist.”

“Art is all about expression. Have you ever seen a Jackson Pollock?” Dani shook her head. “Well, he *literally* throws paint onto a canvas.” Eve took her phone out and pulled up a photo to show Dani.

“I could do *that!*”

Eve laughed. “Don’t dismiss the artistry. There is a method to his madness. Expression of emotion is what I like to call it. You don’t need to know how to draw in order to express yourself. Give it a try.”

Dani chose a black marker and began drawing. Eve chose paint as her medium. Dani’s strength — realized or not — was too intriguing not to capture.

“We’re not so different, you and I,” Eve said as she began to paint.

Dani snorted. “Yeah, right! Look at me. I’m homeless — or used to be. I got no legs. You? You’re, like, perfect. Rich, beautiful, educated. . .” Dani’s voice trailed off. She could feel her face grow as hot as a freakin’ chili pepper. She just told Eve Sumptor she was beautiful. It was true, but Dani didn’t need to say that out loud.

After careful consideration for what Dani said and how she would respond, Eve sat up a bit. “I have a scar,” she patted her torso. “Right here. From when my father shot me right before I killed him.”

Dani’s jaw dropped and her hands clenched. She heard a slight crack before realizing she needed to loosen her grip. *Holy crap! Was Eve really the mafia?!*

“When I was fourteen,” Eve continued, easily reading Dani’s distress. *That mob thing is really going to take off now.* “He murdered my mother and I turned him in. He vowed to make me pay, and since I knew he had powerful friends, I believed him. So, I ran away. I ran all the way to Paris to get away from him. Unfortunately, his reach was long. The woman I thought could help me, worked for my father. As he promised, he made me pay. My body was sold until I found the courage and opportunity to run again.”

Dani was so enthralled she forgot all about her ornament. How did a woman like Eve Sumptor live through that to become who she is now?

Eve leaned forward. “There are people who go into a gallery and walk through as though they had a time limit. They glance at the beautiful façades, then move on to the next, never really seeing the depth of emotion the artist put into the work. When people look at someone like me, they never really get past the mask. I — like all the women in this room — worked hard to get to where I am now. It was painful. It was difficult. And, it was worth it.”

“H-how? How did you? I’m struggling.”

“I accepted help,” Eve confessed.

Dani frowned. Eve was so strong. Dani couldn’t imagine her needing help from anyone else. Then again, she never would have imagined what had happened to Eve.

“You don’t like people helping you, do you?” Eve guessed. Dani shook her head. “You think it makes you weak?” Dani nodded. “I used to think that way until I realized my pride was what was hurting me the most. Someone once told me that strength is being able to ask for help. I didn’t believe that at first.”

“You do now?”

Eve nodded. “Strength is knowing your limitations and letting people in when you need them. Everyone in this room has struggled, Dani. You thought you were different than us, but you’re not. We may not have been on the same path as you, but we’ve gone down similar roads. They all lead to a decision. We want to be there for you and Claire. We want you to know that no matter how hard it seems right now; it will get better. There are no better teachers in the world than who you have surrounding you at this moment. Learn from them, Dani. Allow them to help.”

Dani looked around the room. She had the sudden urge to sit down with every single one of them to learn more of their story. She looked back at Eve. “Thank you.”

(AUNT WILLIS & CLAIRE)

“You look worried.” Willamena watched Claire watching Dani.

Claire shook her head and focused on Aunt Wills. That’s what the paper said, but Claire wondered if she should call her Dr. Woodrow. Or Ms. Wills. Wow, she *really* needed to branch out and get to know these women better. With Ellie and Hunter, that was easy. They were like her family. Blaise and Eve were helping pay Dani’s freakin’ bills. The others have been incredibly supportive. Why hadn’t Claire taken the time to do this before now?

“I’m always worried about Dani,” Claire answered finally.

Willamena studied the young woman, then handed her an ornament. “Why don’t you draw whatever comes to your mind on that.”

Claire gave Wills an awkward smile. “Isn’t that what therapists do for kids when they try to get them to open up?”

Willamena chuckled. “Sometimes. But it is effective.” She placed a hand over Claire’s. “I’m not trying to “shrink” you. However, I do think you could use someone to talk to.”

“Because of what happened to Dani?”

Willamena shook her head. “Because of what happened to you. Dani wasn’t the only one hurt by what happened.”

“I still have my legs,” Claire pointed out.

“Perhaps. But what about your trust? What about your ability to feel secure? What about the anger?”

Claire frowned. “How did you know I was angry?” Did she show it? Did Dani know?

“I’ve been doing this therapy thing for quite a while, dear. Honestly, I would be more concerned if you weren’t a bit angry.”

“What Rita did to Dani was horrible. What kind of mother does that?”

“Claire, I think your anger towards Dani’s mother is normal. Anyone who treats a child, *their* child, like that deserves nothing less. But you need to come to terms with your anger towards Dani.”

“Dani? I — I don’t. . .” It was dumb to lie to someone as perceptive as Aunt Wills. “Maybe I am a little, but I think I’m good at hiding it.”

“Until you’re not,” Willamena said softly. “You’re worried about her with Eve because you feel if she gets agitated, she may run. Again.”

Claire blinked at Aunt Wills. “Wow. You really are as good as everyone says.”

“Aww, they talk about me?” Willamena shook her head with a shuffle. “Don’t answer that. I take it, by your reaction, that I’m close?”

“You’re, like, spot on. I don’t know what to do for her. Everyone here has pitched in one way or the other. They’ve opened their houses and their arms to us. They’ve bent over backwards for her. For *us*. Yet, Dani still lets her freakin’ ego get in the way most of the time.” Claire just realized she said “freakin’” to the doc. “Sorry.”

Willamena smiled. “Believe me, I’ve heard worse. I don’t want you to think I’m trying to drum up business here. In fact, I moved to LA to semi-retire. But if you would like to talk more, perhaps bring Dani, I’d be happy to help. Pro bono, of course.”

“Why is everyone helping us?”

It wasn’t suspicion in Claire’s voice, but pure wonder. She genuinely couldn’t fathom why strangers would do so much for nothing in return.

“Look around you, my dear. The women in this room have scratched and clawed their way to where they are now. We all have a past. However, in your case, our past is your present. Meaning, we’ve been where you are. If we can help you navigate your way through this journey, and perhaps make it a tad less arduous, we would like to. Not because we feel we have to, but because we want to. And we can. Never look a gift horse in the mouth.”

Claire crinkled her nose. “I never got that saying.”

Willamena laughed. “It’s an old saying from the 1500 or 1600s. If someone gifted you a horse, it was considered distrustful to look in their mouths at their teeth.”

“Why would anyone do that anyway? Unless they wanted to make sure they had all their teeth.”

“Looking at the teeth was a way to gauge the animal’s age. But by doing so, you’re essentially telling the one giving the gift that you don’t believe they would give you something of quality.”

“Oh.” Claire thought about it for a moment. “I guess I understand. By questioning why you would offer your services or why the others would offer help, we’re basically saying we don’t trust that you’re doing it out of legit caring? Like, you have something to gain from it?”

“Exactly,” Willamena smiled proudly.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean anything like that.”

“I know, dear.” Wills reached over and picked up Claire’s ornament. The young woman never even realized she had been drawing while talking. It was no Eve Sumptor painting — nothing was really — but, it was discernible. A figure that appeared to be Willamena stood close to a girl in a wheelchair. A third figure, who Willamena thought was Claire stood further away.

“Do you feel she’d leave you again if she didn’t think she needed you?” Willamena asked directly.

“That’s the problem. I don’t know. I’m constantly scared that if I do something wrong or make a wrong move, Dani will bolt again. I don’t know if I could handle that a second time.”

“Has Dani talked to a therapist?”

“Only her physical therapist. She doesn’t like shrinks.” Claire’s hand flew to her mouth. “I’m so sorry!”

Willamena merely smiled brightly. “Again, I’ve heard worse. Call me, Claire. Set up a time for us to talk more freely. When you’re ready, we’ll talk about incorporating Dani into the conversations.”

“Is this what you would have offered had Dani chosen you and not Eve?” Claire wondered aloud.

“Perhaps. But that doesn’t change the fact that I’m offering it to *you* now.”

Claire nodded. “I keep saying this to you and the others quite a lot, but. . .thank you, Dr., uh, Ms. . .”

“Call me Aunt Wills,” Willamena smiled. “And you’re welcome. Now, would you like a new ornament? Maybe we could try something a little more festive?”

Claire snorted. “That’s probably a good idea.”

(JESSIE & CASS)

“Hey, Cass!”

“How you doin’, kiddo?”

Jessie grinned. “A little nervous, actually.”

“Huh? Why would you be nervous?”

“Uh, because you’re like a famous artist and I have to make an ornament for you!”

Cass snickered. “You could draw a smiley face and I’d think it was fantastic.” She tossed Jessie an ornament, then got her own. Poised with a paint brush, Cass sat back in her seat and crossed her legs. “So, tell me about yourself.”

Jessie laughed. “You’re a goof.”

“Heh, Rebecca says that quite a lot.”

“How are you two doing?” Jessie knew that she was closer to Cass’s age than Rebecca was. Yet, the two seemed to work perfectly. She couldn’t imagine seeing Rebecca and not seeing Cass with her.

“We’re great! I think people wonder a lot about the age difference. Kinda like you just were, huh?” Cass winked at Jessie. “We have zero problems keeping up with each other.” *Intellectually and other ways*, Cass added silently. “Truth is, even though I’m closer to your age, your generation confuses the heck out of me.”

Jessie rolled her eyes. “Dude, my generation confuses *me!*”

Gossip! This is what Cass always thought girls’ night was about. Eating, drinking, getting the scoop. Cass had the first two down like a pro. It was time to hone her skills as a “scoop getter.”

She'd have to ask Rebecca later if she could be the official scoop getter. Or maybe they have to vote on it. She shook herself. *You're not doing a very good job!*

"Yeah? You got a dude messing with your heart in college?"

Jessie raised a brow. "You're assuming I'm straight."

Cass nearly choked on her own spit. "I — I, uh. . .you're not?"

Jessie sighed. "I don't know, actually. There's no *dude*. There's no one. I'm just not interested, I guess."

"Why do you think that is?" Cass glanced at Aunt Wills. She should probably be over here having this conversation with Jessie. But Cass thought her question was something Dr. Woodrow would ask. Hell, Aunt Wills had asked Cass that many times.

"Maybe because I grew up with a mom who never had a relationship?" Jessie shrugged. "I don't know, Cass. I see all these women in this room who are in loving relationships and I think that's what I want. Then I see Blaise and Greyson together and I think *that's* what I want. I just don't know what I am."

"Oh, kiddo, it's not about *what* you are. It's about *who* you are."

"But I don't know what label to use."

"Why do you need one? Look, I'm a lesbian. A proud one at that. I'm androgynous. I'm butch. Some may say I'm gender fluid. That's a lot of labels, right?" Jessie nodded. "The *only* label that's truly important to me is Rebecca's wife. If you're not sure who you are yet, or you prefer not to put a label on yourself, then don't."

"But isn't that frowned upon in the community?"

Cass knew Jessie was talking about the LGBTQ community. "Not to those of us who are genuinely inclusive. You are who you are. You don't need a letter of the alphabet to define that."

Jessie sat back and blew out a breath of air. "What do you think mom will say about all of this? That I'm not sure what I want in life? Including whether I still want to be a doctor?"

“Whew. I would not want to be your age again. Oh, um, that doesn’t help you. Listen, I think your mom is one of the most understanding and loving people I know. I think *you* know no matter what you did, she would stand by you.”

Jessie smiled. Her mom *did* say that. She didn’t know why it was easier to believe coming from Cass. “What about Hunter? She helped get me into Harvard. If I don’t become a doctor . . .”

“If you don’t become a doctor,” Cass interrupted. “Hunter would be fine with that. She will be proud of you whatever you decide to do. Jessie, Hunter knows what it’s like to be somewhere she doesn’t want to be. She would never want that for you. I think we put too much undue pressure on ourselves by worrying about what others think of us. You gotta just do you.”

Jessie studied Cass for a moment with a critical eye. “You’re not bad at giving advice,” she said finally.

Cass smiled proudly. “Thanks!”

“You’re terrible at taking your own advice, though.”

“Huh?”

“You let mom intimidate you! And Lainey. And Eve.”

“Now hold on. That’s different!”

“How?”

“Because.”

“Because is not an answer, Cass.”

“Yeah it is!” Cass huffed. “It’s different because. . .” *Why was it different?* “Well, because they’re incredible women who have done incredible things in their lives. It’s only natural to be a little awed by them.”

Jessie was surprised Cass answered that honestly. “You’re pretty incredible, too, you know. Your art is amazing. Just remember who *you* are.”

Cass smiled. “Thanks, kid. Let’s get these ornaments done before we get in trouble.”

(KIARA & MO)

“I think we’re supposed to be talking and getting to know each other,” Kiara said with mirth.

“Kay.” Mo spun a marker around. What the hell was she supposed to say to Kiara Adler? The woman was a freakin’ supermodel. They had nothing in common.

This is going well, Kiara thought as she watched Mo pick up and put down everything on their table. “You’re a nurse?”

Yeah, I’m not cool like you. “Yeah.”

“I think that’s fantastic. It takes a special person to be a nurse,” Kiara said genuinely.

Mo stopped messing with the pens and paints and looked up at her partner. There was nothing but honesty on that beautiful face. “Really?”

“Of course. I certainly couldn’t do it.”

Mo’s brows furrowed. “But you’re a supermodel,” she said as though that explained every single problem in the entire world.

“Former,” Kiara corrected. “And though it’s a bit more complicated than standing in front of a camera or walking down a catwalk without falling on your face, it’s not saving lives. You work in the ER, correct?”

Mo nodded. Her fidgeting was forgotten, and her focus was completely on Kiara.

“You’re in the thick of it there. I can’t imagine some of the things you’ve seen.”

Mo snorted. “No, you can’t. Sometimes I wonder about people when they come in with objects in unmentionable places.”

“Oh dear,” Kiara laughed.

“Yeah.” Mo lost her smile. “Some of the other things I see, though. . .it can be pretty horrific. I was there when Rebecca was brought in back in the day. And Ellie not too long ago.” She shook her head. “It’s times like that I wonder how people can be so cruel to one another.”

Kiara knew about Ellie's accident. It had been devastating to learn the facts behind that. Rebecca was still a mystery to her. One she wouldn't mind discovering. Why had she been in the hospital? She set that aside and focused on the woman she was getting to know now.

"If only there were a simple answer to that, perhaps we could fix it." Kiara picked up a marker. "Hopefully you can forgive my lack of artistry."

"I'm sure it'll be perfect," Mo said without hesitation as she began working on her ornament.

"Why?"

"Huh?"

"Why are you sure it'll be perfect?"

"Uh, 'cuz you're, you know, you." Mo didn't understand the question, so she gave the most honest answer she could come up with.

"Kiara Adler," Kiara said solemnly.

"Well, yeah." Mo watched Kiara shake her head and was even more confused. Who wouldn't want people to think they're the greatest? "Why does people thinking you're perfect make you sad?" she asked suddenly. Can't get the answers if you don't ask the question, right?

Kiara appreciated Mo's candidness. "The higher the pedestal, the longer the fall," Kiara answered. "Don't get me wrong. I'm grateful for the things in my life. I'm grateful for the life I've lived and the job I've had. But it's hard to leave that all behind, to turn off the façade and just be Kiara when no one will let you. It'd be like you going home and having people constantly coming through your door asking you to tend to their wounds 24/7."

Well, shit. Mo had never thought of it that way. Damn, she would hate that. She already gets annoyed when people learn she's a nurse and automatically start asking her medical questions. One or two were fine. But if that's the only reason someone was talking to her . . .damn.

"I'm sorry. I've been calling you Kiara Adler. That's dumb. I didn't realize how annoying that was for you until now."

Kiara chuckled. "I don't know if I would call it annoying. However, yes, I would prefer my friends call me Kiara."

“Are we friends?”

“I’d like to think so. We would do well with talking to each other more, which is why I think this little experiment Hunter thought of is brilliant. People tend to migrate towards the ones who they’re most comfortable with. I understand that. But if we don’t take the chance on going outside our comfort zone, how will we ever see beyond the surface?”

“Do you all talk like this all the time?”

The “you all” made Kiara wince. She thought they were getting past her formal title. “Models?”

“Nah, you and Ellie and them. Is this what girls’ night is? Like, talking all deep and shit?”

Kiara burst out laughing. “Well, I haven’t been to one of these infamous girls’ nights, yet. We’re not counting last year’s holiday party. But I think it has more to do with just having fun and letting loose. The “deep talk” is saved for you.”

“Really?” Mo watched the edges of Kiara’s lips turn up, and she knew she was being teased. “You suck.”

“Finally!” Kiara howled.

Mo lost it. Here this beautiful woman was honestly happy to be told she sucked. And she said she and Mo were friends. It was time Mo started treating Kiara as a true friend.

“Get used to it. I don’t hold back on the insults when it comes to my friends,” Mo grinned.

“I’d expect nothing less. Now, are you going to use that marker or just hog it all night?”

(ELLIE & LAUREN)

“I’m so glad you picked me out of that hat,” Ellie said. She peeked around them. Everyone was deep in conversation. They were laughing, bending their heads together, painting, drawing. .getting to know each other. It was heartwarming.

“So am I. I’ve been meaning to tell you that your pies are. . .”

Ellie shook her head and waved her hands. “Nope. That’s work and the one thing you know about me. I bake. No big reveal there.”

“Alright,” Lauren smiled. “Well, I’m terrible at interviewing. I’m surprised Rebecca took a chance on me and told Eve I was the right candidate for the gallery.”

“I’ve seen you do your thing in the gallery. They made the right choice. But that’s also work, so moving on. How about you tell me about your family? Or maybe some of your Christmas traditions since we’re tasked with making ornaments for each other?”

“Oh, well,” Lauren cleared her throat. “As you can probably tell, I’m from Germany. My family is very highly respected and influential. That’s why I decided to leave my country to travel and study.”

“You wanted to make your own way in the world?” Ellie guessed.

“Genau, er, exactly,” Lauren beamed. “As for Christmas traditions, I don’t have any. I’m Jewish.”

Ellie’s eyes popped open. “Oh my gosh! How did I not know this? I’m so sorry! If I had known, I would have. . .um, bought a menorah?” She chuckled softly. “That sounded terrible, didn’t it?”

“Not at all. I appreciate you wanting to be inclusive. To be honest, I haven’t been very good at observing my religious holidays.” Lauren leaned in and lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “I don’t have a menorah.”

Ellie crossed her heart. “I won’t tell a soul. Should we pinky swear on it?”

Lauren laughed and held up a pinky. The deal was sealed when she and Ellie hooked their pinkies together and shook on it.

“I’m so glad Hunter came up with this idea,” Lauren revealed.

“So am I.” Ellie was proud of her wife. “If for no other reason than to see Mo with Kiara.”

Lauren giggled. “That’s a great pairing! From what I’ve seen, Mo doesn’t hold back much. She’ll find out Kiara doesn’t either.”

“Oh, to be a fly on the wall near them.” Ellie craned her head a bit to see if Jessie and Cass were doing okay.

Lauren followed Ellie’s eyesight. “I would think they know each other pretty well already,” she remarked when she saw who Ellie was looking at.

Ellie shook her head. “Cass isn’t as outgoing as you may think. If she could stick to Rebecca’s side, she would.”

“I didn’t take her for shy.”

“Oh, she’s not shy. There are just some people she’s more comfortable with. I think there’s a difference between shy and cautious. Someone she thought she knew very well betrayed her, so she plays it close to her vest.”

“Understandable,” Lauren murmured. “What do you do when you’re not baking or cooking?” she asked suddenly. Her ornament sat in her hand, and she realized she now knew more about Cass than she did Ellie.

“I run. Well, I’m getting back into it now after the accident.”

Lauren knew all about Ellie’s accident. When word had reached the gallery, it was the first time Lauren had ever seen Eve visibly shaken.

“Have you always like running? I’ve tried, I just can’t find that runner’s high that people talk about.”

“I have. Running is how I clear my mind. I came close to going to the Olympics.”

“Wow! Did you get injured?”

Ellie looked at her daughter and smiled. “No, I was awarded something far more precious than gold.”

“Your relationship with your daughter is inspiring.”

“Thank you. I love how close we are. That’s why it’s so hard for me to know she’s going back across the country in a few days.”

“I bet. At least you can be proud of the young woman she has become.”

“That is true.” Ellie couldn’t disguise the pride in her voice even if she wanted to. “You’re still young, but have you thought about having kids?”

“Oh!” Lauren made a sound. “I’m not as young as you think. But to answer your question, I haven’t really thought about it. I believe if I did want kids at some point, I would most likely adopt. I’d want to be one of those people the birth mother thinks of when she makes the decision to give her baby a better life than she can give at that time.”

“That’s so sweet! Oh, I think we’re going to be great friends.”

“I hope so. I heard there were sleeping bags this year. I almost can’t wait until next year to do this again!”

“You don’t have to. I’ve been remiss in inviting both you and Kiara to our bi-weekly girls’ nights. You now have a standing invitation.”

“Oh, if I had the audacity, I’d be up out of this chair and doing the Schuhplattler!”

“Wait, what is that?”

Lauren chuckled. “It’s a German dance.”

“That’s it.” Ellie stood. “Everyone, after we’re done here, Lauren and Kiara are going to teach us the Schuhplattler!”

“What?” Kiara’s jaw dropped.

“I’m sorry!” Lauren gave Kiara an apologetic, yet cheerful look.

“Is that something sexual?” Mo asked. Loudly. Patty groaned. Cass reached over and smacked Mo upside the head. “Ow! That was a perfectly legit question!”

(PATTY & PIPER)

“How’s life going, child?”

Piper shrugged. “It’s been kind of boring since Jessie left.”

“Have you decided what you wanted to do?” Patty asked carefully. During one of their last girls’ nights with Jessie, Patty overheard a conversation between the two young girls. Jessie had asked Piper what school she wanted to go to. Piper didn’t have an answer. Much to Blaise’s credit, she never pushed her daughter in any one direction. Patty probably would have done things differently. Then again, Piper’s upbringing has been anything but ordinary.

“Nope. I’ve taken a couple of shifts over at Ellie’s. I’ve done a few flower things with mom. Eve has let me sit with Lauren once or twice. But nothing is really grabbing my attention.”

“What about the medical profession?” Nurse Patty would love nothing more than to have someone as intelligent as Piper on her team. The girl had a head on her shoulders that could rival the great scholars of the world. Perhaps that’s why Piper got bored easily.

“Nah. I think what you, Mo, and Hunter do is great. Heroic even. But I don’t think that working in a hospital is for me.”

“May I ask what you were interested in before you got here to the States?”

Piper hadn’t thought much about her time in New Zealand since her mom found her. It confused her. She never felt as though she was in danger growing up. But she always felt there was something. . . wrong. She was never without someone around her. She now knew they were guards hired to keep her exactly where she was. Tutors — the best in the world — were brought in. Piper was, in a word, isolated. There wasn’t much for her to be interested in. Even her studies were generalized. Piper had a broad range of knowledge. So broad that she was never able to narrow down anything that grabbed her attention.

“I studied,” Piper answered finally. “I played games on the computer. I watched TV.” *I dreamt of the places I would go if I were ever allowed outside the walls where I grew up.* “There is something that interests me.”

Patty leaned forward and gave Piper her undivided attention. “Lay it on me, child.”

“I want to travel. I want to see what the world has to offer. Did you know that I spent the first sixteen years of my life in a lake house in New Zealand? I could look out at that lake and see forever. But I also saw no way out. I considered learning how to swim long distances just to get out of there.”

A tear ran down Patty's cheek. "Were they. . .did they?"

Piper shook her head. "No one ever hurt me. In fact, they treated me like royalty, but I think a part of me always knew something was off." She sighed. "I love my mom, Patty. Very much."

"But she can be overprotective," Patty guessed. She'd seen it herself. It was especially bad when Blaise was in the hospital giving birth to Ezra. "You can understand that, right? The poor woman had her child snatched away from her."

"Oh, I know. That's why I'm so restless, I think. The things I want to do involve me leaving her again. I don't know if I have the strength for that. Or if she does. We just found each other."

"The difference is, child, you *know* where each other are now. If you leave to live your life, you can come back. I think Blaise will understand that."

"Have you *met* my mother?"

Patty laughed. "I have! She plays it tough, but she's just a softy. Have Ellie make her a red velvet cake when you tell her you have plans for your life."

Piper giggled. "I don't have plans yet. I know I want to travel, but I want it to mean something. If I have to leave mom, Greyson, and Ezra, I want a good reason to do it. I want them to be proud of me."

"Child, they're already proud of you. However, you have a room full of women in this room — some with connections all over the world — who can help you find the opportunities you're looking for."

Piper glanced around the room, her eyes eventually landing on Eve. "Eve has a home for girls in Paris," she said, almost to herself. "Maybe I could start there? Mom would be content that I'm keeping it in the family, so to speak. She can get used to me being gone, I could get used to being gone, and then I can start moving around more."

"That mind of yours works pretty fast," Patty said with awe.

Piper brought her gaze back to Patty and smiled. "It has to. I know you've heard mom go off on tangents before." She snapped her fingers quickly. "You have to think fast to keep up with her."

They had a nice, long laugh in an “it’s funny cuz it’s true” kind of way. Piper thought how nice it was to talk openly about this. She was glad she got Patty. She didn’t think she would be this open if it had been someone like Hunter. Patty was the momma of the bunch. If anyone could keep these strong-willed women in line, it was her.

Patty’s thoughts paralleled Piper’s. The conversation had been wonderfully delightful and insightful. She understood Piper’s need to get outside of her walls. Patty hoped Blaise would. *Red velvet and whiskey will help. So will friends.*

“What are you going to draw?” Patty asked Piper, craning her neck to see her ornament.

“Hey! No peeking. Thank you, by the way. For listening.”

Patty smiled. “No need to thank me for that. We’re family. I’ll always be here, as will everyone else. You’re never alone, Piper.”

(REBECCA & BLAISE)

Blaise tapped her nail on the table. It had been five minutes, and neither she nor Rebecca had spoken. Someone was going to have to cave. She’d be damned it would be her. As long as her glass was filled, she was fine with sitting here all night.

Rebecca smiled secretly. Blaise was going to wait her out. The question was, though, when did they get to this competitive stage? Had it always been there? There was a time when Ellie didn’t like her much, but that was because she thought Rebecca was an ex of Hunter’s. Surely Blaise didn’t think Rebecca had the hots for Greyson? Whatever it was, it had to end now. Rebecca had had enough drama in her life.

“Okay, Blaise. You win.”

Blaise raised a brow. “Win what?”

“Whatever you want. I spoke first. Now we can get over this ridiculous game.”

“I wasn’t. . .” It was childish to refuse the obvious. Hell, it had been childish to play the game at all. Blaise shook her head. “I’m sorry.”

“What would help more than an apology is an explanation, Blaise. I thought we were good.”

“We are.” She sighed. “My attitude lately is no one’s fault but my own.”

“Would you like to talk about it? I may not be as great as Ellie is at listening, but I can hold my own.”

Blaise smiled reluctantly. “You are. A great listener, I mean.” She picked up an ornament and a marker and sat back in her seat. “I guess I’m feeling a bit insecure in my place here.”

Rebecca tilted her head. Her silver eyes peering at Blaise intently. “Your place is Ellie’s best friend. Jessie’s godmother. Piper’s mother. *My* friend. *Our* friend. And not our *token* straight friend.”

Blaise looked down at her pajamas. She had gotten them as a joke. But once she put them on, it felt all too real. “I’m not gay.”

Rebecca’s eyes opened wide. “You don’t say! Are you sure? Maybe you just need a good pu. . .”

“Stop!” Blaise laughed. “I’m perfectly satisfied with my husband.” She tapped her pen on the ornament. “I can’t lose her,” Blaise said softly.

“Are you talking about Ellie or Piper?”

“Both?”

“You won’t. That’s not even possible. How could you think you would?”

“You and Ellie are close. Lainey is here now, and they spend a lot of time together. You all have more in common with Ellie than I do.”

“Because *we are* gay?” Blaise shrugged. “Blaise, Ellie coming out didn’t change who she is at the core of her being. You two have been best friends for a long time. You helped her raise Jessie. No one’s sexuality changes any of that. Look around you. You’re not losing anyone. You’re gaining a bigger family.”

“I know I’m being daft, believe me. I think Jessie leaving for school has me feeling nostalgic.”

“Do you wish it were the three of you again?”

“No!” Blaise said emphatically. “That would mean I wouldn’t have Piper with me. Or all of you. But Jessie leaving means Piper may do the same soon. Everything is changing.” That was the root of Blaise’s woes. She had had Jessie and Ellie with her for almost half of her life. While Blaise loved the idea of their circle growing, she couldn’t help but feel the center of that circle was disappearing.

“That’s life, babe. It changes.”

“I know. I’m not ready. I just found my daughter, Rebecca. Maybe I hold on too tight, but I can’t help it. That goes for Ellie, too. There was a shift in our relationship after her accident. I couldn’t help her. . .”

“Hang on. You *did* help her. I’d argue you helped her more than anyone.”

“But . . .”

“No but. Her parents tried to take her daughter away from her. They tried to take Ellie. *You* stopped that. Do you think Ellie would have survived if her parents had succeeded? Do you think Hunter would have survived?”

Blaise thought back to Ellie’s accident. She hated thinking about it. Every time she closed her eyes, she could see how frail and broken Ellie looked. Blaise had never seen her best friend like that before. She hoped never to see it again. But Blaise also remembered how Ellie had treated her. Even knowing it had nothing to do with her and everything to do with Ellie’s frustration, it still bothered Blaise. “I really am being stupid, aren’t I?”

“You’re human,” Rebecca countered. “Which I’m happy to see.” She winked and received a middle finger in return. “Blaise, we love you — *despite* your sexuality.”

“You’re mean,” Blaise chuckled.

“You should see me when I have my mask on.”

Blaise pursed her lips. “Is that an invitation?”

Rebecca grinned. “If I weren’t happily married, maybe it would be. You could certainly use a little loosening up.”

“You think I’m uptight?” *Greyson would beg to differ.*

“No, I think you’re allowing the past to contaminate your present.”

“You can tell your aunt is a psychiatrist,” Blaise teased.

Rebecca laughed. “While that’s true, that observance is based on personal experience. I nearly let my past ruin my future with Cassidy. I know what it’s like to hold onto pain and guilt. It’s not fun, Blaise. And it’s unproductive.”

“I don’t know how to let go of the guilt I feel for Piper growing up without me. Or not taking the threats against Ellie more seriously.”

“From what I understand, you were not to blame for Piper. I also know for a fact that you wanted to turn the city upside down when Ellie told you about what was going on.” Rebecca reached across the table and took Blaise’s hand. “The key — and I only recently discovered this with Cassidy’s help — is to stop blaming yourself for things that aren’t your fault.”

“It’s that easy?”

Rebecca laughed. “Not at all. But with the help of your *friends*, it can be less difficult.”

“I really am sorry for the way I’ve been acting.”

“I don’t need apologies, Blaise. We’re solid. But Ellie may need some answers. She’s worried about you.”

Blaise smiled. “I know. She’s been hovering a bit tonight. I’ll talk to her. But first, we have to finish these ornaments. If I know Ellie, she’s going a little crazy inside having to look at an empty tree.”

(LAINEY & HUNTER)

“This was a really great idea, Hunter.”

Hunter fidgeted slightly, giving Lainey a timid smile. “Thank you. I thought maybe we would be a little less intimidated by each other if we knew each other better. And by we, I mean me,” Hunter laughed.

“You, Cass, and Mo baffle me. Three of the most successful, strong women I know, and you’re shy.”

“I don’t think shy is the right word,” Hunter responded. “Women like you test our confidence.”

“Women like me? Why is that? What is so different about me?”

“I think Cass has told you this before, but your strength is as inspiring as it is terrifying. You call us out on our bullshit. You don’t let us get away with being idiots.”

Lainey laughed. “And *that’s* what intimidates you?”

“Nah, I think it’s more about how much you see when you look at us. There’s no hiding our fragile egos and feelings from you.”

“Now you sound like Eve,” Lainey chuckled. Her wife was constantly — from the beginning — telling Lainey she “saw too much.”

“See!? If Eve Sumptor can be intimidated by you, imagine how we peons must feel.”

“You are far from a peon, Dr. Hunter Vale. The work you’re doing for the homeless is incredible. You shouldn’t sell yourself short. Cass is an amazing artist. Mo. . .well. . .”

Hunter snorted with laughter. “She’s an acquired taste.”

“I was kidding. Mo is a fantastic nurse. To be honest, I see her changing. Especially when she’s working with you on Skid Row. I think it’s humbling her.”

“It’s humbling me. To think Dani was out there. . .” Hunter shook her head. “Listen, I wanted to thank you again for your generous contributions to the clinic.”

“No need to thank me. We’re happy to help. I’ve never had the kind of money Eve does. Even being married to her, I don’t feel it’s mine. She, of course, tells me differently every day. But I couldn’t imagine not doing something helpful with it now that I can. Eve has always been incredibly generous. Now that I carry the Sumptor name, I want to continue that.”

Hunter nodded. Eve found herself a good woman. And vice versa. They complimented each other very well. She liked to think she and Ellie did, too. Hunter looked around the room.

Everyone was with the person they should be with. Whether they came here with them, or they were paired with them. This little experiment worked out very well if she said so herself. Hunter's eyes landed on Ellie, who was laughing joyously with Lauren.

"She's made me so much better," she said reverently.

"I think she's made everyone better," Lainey added. "Maybe we all have had a part in making a difference in each other's lives. That's why we've found our way to each other."

Hunter looked back at Lainey. "I think you're right. Before I met Ellie, I didn't think I could have this, that I deserved this. Now I can't imagine my life without all of you in it. You're my family."

Lainey smiled brightly. "I'm glad you feel that way. And thank you for including Eve and me. She needs this. I know this past year has been a huge change for her. For all of us, really. My boys, Bella. But especially for Eve. She has a family now. And with you and the ladies here, we're only expanding that family."

Hunter began to get a little misty-eyed. "We should, um, work on our ornaments before I can't focus anymore."

Lainey nodded knowingly. "Are they really going up on your tree?"

"You bet!"

"Imagine. Having an original Eve Sumptor and an original Cass Giles up on your family Christmas tree."

"Huh. I didn't even think about that! I wonder how much they'll go for. . ." Hunter stroked her chin as though she were plotting. Then she saw Lainey giving her the squinty eye. "I'm kidding! Don't get Eve's goons after me!"

THE OUTCOME

The entire group stood back and looked at the tree. It wasn't complete by any means, but there were now sixteen extraordinary, very unique ornaments adorning it. They ranged from words of love and family, to stick figures, to colorful expressions of feelings. Of course, then there were Eve and Cass's contributions. Works of art that depicted the group of women in different ways.

Eve captured their joy. The faces of each woman delicately painted in laughter. They were with their partner of the night — a realization of the importance of the experiment. In getting past the façades, they had found a deeper bond with each other.

Cass captured their love. On her ornament, the ladies were paired with their loved ones. Families held onto each other. Lovers gazed into each other's eyes. Friends hugged merrily. It was a marvel how such intricacies could be done on such a small object, but Cass somehow made it happen.

Ellie came up beside Hunter and slipped her arm around her. "Look around you, honey. You did this."

Hunter glanced around. Those who once stood close to those they were most comfortable with now mingled. Those who intimidated others the most, now laughed heartily, without pretense or doubt. Those who once thought they didn't belong, now ruled the attention of those around them.

"*We* did this, baby." Hunter turned to face her wife, wrapping her arms around Ellie's waist. "Promise me we'll always do this. No matter how big our family gets, I want to open our house to them. To this."

"I promise." Ellie stood on her tiptoes and kissed Hunter sweetly on the lips. "You know what comes next, right?"

"Uh, with all these people in the house?"

"Hunter Vale!" Ellie laughed. "I meant you need to get the sleeping bags out. The heavy drinking is about to commence."

“Oh.” Hunter gave Ellie a sad look before winking at her. “I’m on it, babe! Mo! Cass! Give me a hand.”

Mo and Cass gave each other a look, then shrugged. They didn’t know what Hunter wanted, but they were all in, whatever it was.

“Blaise? Rebecca?” Ellie called. “It’s time for some big-girl drinks.”

“Yes!” Blaise high-fived Rebecca and high-tailed it to the kitchen.

“Is this how it always is,” Aunt Wills asked Eve who was standing next to her.

“Last year, I passed out on the couch with Lainey’s head on my lap.”

“Oh my.” A smile bloomed on Aunt Wills’s face. “I’m really going to enjoy living in LA with you ladies.”

“Wait until you get on the Bingo board.”

Jessie’s head whipped around to Eve. “You *knew* about that?”

“I may have had an awful lot to drink, but I was still lucid, Jessie,” Eve winked. “At least now you’re no longer confused about Lainey and me.”

Jessie buried her face in her hands. “I think I need a drink.”

“Think your mom will allow it?” Dani asked, hopefully.

“Not even a little,” Ellie answered as she breezed by. “I will, however, make you non-alcoholic versions of what we’re having.”

“That’s not the same!” Piper whined.

“Sure, it is. Just use your imagination.”

Aunt Wills laughed. “Yep. Definitely going to enjoy living here.”

MERRY CHRISTMAS, HAPPY HANUKKAH,
HAPPY HOLIDAYS FROM ELLIE, HUNTER,
JESSIE, BLAISE, PIPER, PATTY, MO, REBECCA,
CASS, AUNT WILLS, DANI, CLAIRE, KIARA,
LAUREN, EVE, LAINEY, AND ME!