

# *Girls' Night*

AN LA LOVERS HOLIDAY

## *Ellie and Hunter*

“Hunter, will you please stop pacing?” Ellie looked up from the food she was preparing and smiled at her wife. Dr. Hunter Vale, a brilliant trauma surgeon, used to high-stress situations, now looked as though she was going to pass out from nerves.

“I’m not pacing. I’m . . . double-checking,” Hunter pouted.

“For the fifth time?” Ellie asked, playfully. Goofy Hunter always made her smile. Of course, she loved *every* side of Hunter, but this one? This one was her favorite.

“El, this is the first girls’ night I’ve been invited to. I need to make sure everything is perfect.” Yeah, it was a little weird to be “invited” to something that happens every Sunday in *her* and Ellie’s house. But Hunter was always respectful of Ellie’s time with Jessie, Blaise, and Piper. Especially since Jessie would be going off to college soon.

“Technically,” Ellie said as she garnished the hors-d’oeuvres she had pulled out of the oven, “it’s not a girls’ night. It’s a holiday party.”

Hunter looked up with a frown. “So, Greyson and Cade will be here?”

“Well, no, but . . .” Ugh, Ellie couldn’t do it. She couldn’t bear the crestfallen look on her wife’s face. So, she gave in and agreed it was, indeed, a girls’ night. Hunter deserved that much at the very least. Every girls’ night, Hunter practically begged to stay. And every girls’ night Ellie reluctantly pushed

Hunter out of her own house. *Our house*, she corrected silently.

Ellie was still getting used to living in this beautiful beach house and calling it her own. It had been only her and Jessie for so long, but she couldn't deny feeling completely at home here with Hunter. It didn't hurt that her daughter absolutely *loved* it here. And loved Hunter.

Hunter stopped worrying about everything else and focused on her wife. She walked up behind Ellie, feeling her jump a little when Hunter wrapped her arms around her. Which Hunter knew was more from the excitement of being touched by someone head-over-heels in love with her than being startled.

“Hey.”

Ellie leaned her head back on Hunter's shoulder and smiled up at her. “Hey, yourself.”

“Am I getting on your nerves?”

Ellie chuckled. “No, love. But you *are* making me nervous.” She turned in Hunter's arms, so they were face to face. “You realize that everyone has been here before, right?”

Hunter shook her head, emphatically. “Not true. Eve and Lainey will be here tonight. And,” she leaned in and whispered dramatically, “*Kiara Adler!*”

Ellie laughed. “I adore you for inviting her, Hunter, but please, please don't call her by her full name when she's here. So, is that why you're so nervous? Because a supermodel will be here?”

Hunter turned serious. “No, baby. This is our first Christmas as a married couple. And I have so much to be thankful for.” She stepped back but kept her arms on Ellie's shoulders. “Look at you. There was a time when you didn't think you'd be *standing* in the kitchen and making all this mouthwatering food again. Yet, here you are. Though, I'm going to need you to take periodic breaks. Doctor's orders.”

Hunter knew she hovered. She couldn't help it. The day someone ran Ellie off the road, and she ended up in Hunter's ER, was imprinted on Hunter's brain. As were the excruciatingly slow weeks Ellie was in a coma. When Ellie woke up, Hunter praised any entity who would listen. And

as much as it pained her to see Ellie devastated by not being able to use her legs, Hunter could and would have lived with that as long as Ellie was alive and with her. Now that Ellie was progressing, even running, again, Hunter was getting better at not being so protective. A little.

“You were doing so well,” Ellie tsked with mirth. Hunter had a habit of going into doctor mode when she felt Ellie was doing too much after her accident. In the beginning, it had irked Ellie. She chalked it up to the pain and frustration of learning how to use her legs again. In reality, Ellie had been terrified that she never would. Too scared to see that Hunter was also afraid and doing her best to “fix” everything. Once they stopped reacting and starting actually talking, things got much better.

“I’m always going to worry about you, baby. I make no apologies for that.”

“And I won’t ask you to,” Ellie vowed. “But if you touch one of those beef tenderloins, you *will* be sorry.” She had been enjoying Hunter getting closer until she became aware that Hunter was trying to sneak food from the trays.

“Aww, come on, babe! I *never* get this stuff!”

Ellie raised a brow. “Never? Hunter, my love, I am in this kitchen more than I’m not.”

Hunter grinned wickedly. “You can’t count our sexy times in here.” She jumped when Ellie smacked her chest playfully.

“Do *not* tell Mo that,” Ellie demanded. “She will constantly be wiping the counters saying *eww*.”

Hunter doubled over in laughter. “Oh my god, you have her pegged. But can I tell Cass?”

“No! Only because Rebecca has probably already told her.”

Hunter’s eyes nearly bulged out of her head. “You told Rebecca?!” She snorted with laughter. Her woman was incredibly private. It made her feel good that she would be so open with one of Hunter’s best friends. “Well, shit. *That’s* why Cass was giving me sly grins across the counter the last time she was here. I thought she’d lost her mind.”

Ellie shook her head, pushing Hunter away with a laugh. “Why don’t you go and pace some more. I have to finish up in here.”

“I have a better idea.” Hunter grabbed Ellie once again and kissed her deeply.

“Mmm. I don’t think we have time for that, honey.”

Hunter gave Ellie a lopsided grin. “I wasn’t talking about *that*, baby. Though, I’m very open to that possibility if you are.” She tightened her arms around Ellie. “I thought maybe we could take ten minutes to ourselves, sit outside and just listen to the waves.”

“Is this your way of getting me to take a break?”

Yes. “It’s my way of needing a little Ellie time and recharge my batteries a little.”

Ellie smiled up at her wife. “I love you.”

“I love you, too, baby. Is that a yes?”

“That’s a yes.” Ellie reached behind her and grabbed Hunter’s hand. On legs that were still a tad unsteady, she led them to the deck.

# Jessie

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“Mom?” Jessie rubbed Ellie’s shoulder gently. Her mom cradled in Hunter’s arms on the chaise lounge by the pool was almost too cute to interrupt. Cute or not, she would typically love to scare the living daylight out of both her moms. But since Ellie was still rehabbing from her accident, Jessie took care.

“Hmm?” Ellie stirred sleepily. Something was nagging her foggy brain, but she was too comfortable to care. Being on Hunter’s warm body and in her strong arms was Ellie’s favorite place to be.

Jessie chuckled at her mom. For a woman who loved to wake up early and either run or bake, Ellie looked as though she could stay here for the rest of her life.

“Mom, you fell asleep.” *Something you’ve been doing a lot lately*, Jessie thought with a bit of sadness. Hunter explained that Ellie’s head trauma would have some lasting effects. Jessie was just grateful that her mom, other than a few small differences, was the same mom who raised her. “People are going to start showing up in about fifteen minutes.”

Ellie’s eyes popped open. “Shit!”

“Language,” Jessie reprimanded playfully.

Ellie rolled her eyes as she struggled to get up. Every time she moved, Hunter’s arms would tighten.

“Hunter, honey, we have to get up.”

“Don’t wanna.”

“Party,” Ellie reminded her wife. “Food.” No response. “Guests.” Still nothing. Ellie sighed, then smiled. She bent her head and whispered in Hunter’s ear. “*Kiara Adler will be here soon.*”

Hunter’s blue eyes opened, staring straight into the hazel eyes of her wife. “Huh?”

Ellie took advantage of Hunter's confusion and moved to get up. She accepted Jessie's helping hand with a muttered "thanks."

"What? Where?" Hunter glanced around, confused. One moment, she was taking a nice, sweet nap with her wife. The next, Ellie was off her lap, and Jessie was yelling something about guests.

"Fifteen minutes, doc!" Jessie called out as she helped her mom inside.

"What is fifteen . . . oh, shit! Girls' night!" Hunter scrambled to get up and ran after her wife and daughter. "Damn it! My first one, and I'm already screwing up!"

"Relax," Jessie laughed. "Geez, you're a trauma surgeon. You'd think a simple party would be easy."

"Simple party?" Hunter was incredulous. "Did you not hear me say "girls' night," Jess?"

"Just let her be, sweetie. She's nervous." Ellie winked at her daughter and held her hand out to Hunter. "Come on. You've made sure everything was perfect already. All that's left to do is to get freshened up."

Jessie shook her head as her mom and Hunter disappeared into their bedroom. She loved Hunter to death but didn't understand why Hunter would be so nervous about their friends. *Eh*, she thought with a shrug. Perhaps if she hadn't been going to these girls' nights for most of her life, she would feel a little nervous, too. Jessie smiled. This was going to be fun.

# *Blaise and Piper*

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“Don’t forget the wine,” Blaise said as she pulled into Ellie and Hunter’s driveway. Per usual, since they had started inviting more girls for girls’ night, she and Piper were the first to arrive. Of course, Blaise said it was to help set up. Did it matter that she knew exactly when Ellie would have everything ready? Including the food?

“You know, there’s something to be said about a mother who makes her underage daughter carry the alcohol,” Piper teased.

“That they’re smart?” Blaise quipped back with a wink. “It’s not like I’m making you drink it.” She laughed at her daughter, who muttered something about small miracles. Piper had already decided she didn’t like wine. Blaise thought it was better she not know how that decision came about.

She hitched the bag of presents up on her hip and rang the doorbell. There was a time when Ellie was still recovering from the accident that Blaise would just let herself in. She stopped that abruptly when she walked in on Ellie and Hunter in a very compromising position. On the counter. That image would forever be burned in her brain. Not that it hadn’t been hot. But it certainly wasn’t how she wanted to see her best friend.

That best friend opened the door with a huge smile. Ellie ushered them in, taking the wine from Piper but leaving Blaise to struggle with the gifts. It was Ellie’s way of punishing her friend for bringing presents when she was asked not to.

“You know you can just come in.”

“Nope.”

“Oh, come on! One time, Blaise. And we’re obviously not going to do . . . anything when we’re expecting people.”

“You guys are still in your honeymoon stage.” Blaise accepted help from a slightly blushing Hunter, along with a kiss on the cheek. “It can happen at any time.”

“Ugh, she’s telling the truth. Do you have any idea how gross it is walking in on your parents?”  
Piper groused.

Ellie’s eyes widened. “Blaise!”

“Like you can say anything, mom,” Jessie chimed in. She hugged Piper, then Blaise. “How many times have I walked in on you and Hunter making out?”

“Okay, okay. How about we get on a different subject before everyone else gets here.” Ellie suggested with embarrassment.

“Blaise, do *not* eat all the food!”

Blaise, who already had a mouthful of something delicious, looked up with innocence. “I’m merely making sure everything is edible!”

“Ooo,” Hunter taunted. “I think Blaise just said there was a possibility that something made by Ellie Vale could be bad!”

“I did not! Don’t say that to her. She’ll never make me red velvet cake again!” Blaise nearly threw a crab-and-avocado toast at Hunter, but it was too delicious.

“If you eat all of those toasts, I will offer everyone *except* you red velvet tonight.”

Ellie raised a brow as Blaise stared at her. In slow motion, Blaise brought the appetizer up to her mouth and ate the entire thing in one bite.

“I already touched it,” she mumbled around the food.

Jessie and Piper giggled at their mothers. Hunter couldn’t help but wonder if this was what every girls’ night was like. Hunter smiled. This was going to be fun.



# *Patty and Mo*

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“Do you have pillow fights in your pajamas?”

“Oh! For crying out loud, Mo! Have you ever seen me go to Ellie’s in pajamas?” Patty’s hand itched to smack Mo on the back of the head. It had been like this all day. God help her, Patty loved her wife. But sometimes the woman could be infuriatingly butch.

“Well, I don’t know! You kick me, Hunter, and Cass out, so all we have are our imaginations!”

“And your imagination chooses a pajama pillow fight?”

Mo shrugged. “Do you ever imagine what we do?”

“You sit around a table, eat junk food, drink, and lose your money,” Patty answered matter-of-factly.

Mo slumped in her seat. “Yeah. Maybe that’s why I spend so much time thinking about you, all sexy in a negligée, sipping champagne, and having some fun.”

“I’ll let you get away with that because you said I would look sexy.” Patty rubbed Mo’s thigh. “But if you repeat any of that at the party, I will smack you upside the head.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Mo reached into the backseat and got the gifts.

“Are you sure we didn’t need to bring more booze?”

Patty rolled her eyes. “I’m sure. You know Hunter has you covered with the beer. And Blaise usually brings enough wine to stock a bar.”

“Kay.” Mo took a deep breath. “Ready?”

Patty looked over at her partner. “Are you nervous?”

“A little. You won’t tell me what goes on during these things. How do I know I’m not going to walk out of here with a bunch of makeup and painted toes?”

Patty guffawed. "I promise to protect you from the pedicures, my dear." She rang the doorbell and nudged Mo. "I can't promise anything when it comes to a facial, though."

"What!"

"Hey, guys!" Hunter gathered Patty up in a bear hug, then slapped Mo on the shoulder. "Come on in."

"Facials?!"

Hunter frowned at her lifelong friend. "What are you talking about?"

"That's what they do at these things? Facials? That's what we've been missing? That's what we've been jealous of?"

Patty chuckled when Hunter looked at her with a mixture of confusion and alarm. She held up her large purse, patting it with her free hand. "Got everything we need right here," she said before pushing past the two gobsmacked women. She sent a conspiratory wink to Ellie and the others.

"Did you bring the face peel?" Blaise called out.

"Three different kinds!" Patty yelled back. "Even the one that feels like you're ripping off your face." She looked back at Mo and Hunter. "But once you feel how soft your skin is afterward, it's totally worth it."

"I, uh, think I forgot something in the car," Mo stammered.

Hunter caught Mo's arm. "Nope. You're stuck here with me."

"Stuck?" Ellie asked. "I thought you wanted to be here. If you want Blaise to call Greyson so you can go . . ."

"No! I want to be here, baby. I do! Please let me stay. I'll even be the first to get a facial!"

Ellie walked over to her wife and wrapped her arms around her neck. She had to get on her tiptoes to do it, but she ignored the pain because even in the face of girly torture, Hunter stood by her side.

"I love you. You know that, right?"

“Yep. I love you, too.”

“Good. Now close the door before Mo escapes.”

# *Rebecca and Cass*

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“So,” Cass craned her head and looked around Hunter and Ellie’s yard. “Do you see a good place to get grass stains on our clothes?”

Rebecca laughed softly. “Do *not* tell Blaise I told you that. There is a code, you know.”

“Like, what happens at girls’ night, stays at girls’ night?”

“Exactly.”

“And, if I spill the beans?” Cass wiggled her eyebrows. Being bad with Rebecca was her favorite thing to do. Being punished by Rebecca was pure heaven!

“If you “spill the beans,” no sex for two days,” Rebecca announced evenly. She knew precisely what Cass was doing. She also knew that if Cass thought there was a chance of Rebecca getting out the riding crop, she would blab all night long about the stories Rebecca has told.

“What! You wouldn’t do that to me, would you? Baby?”

“It would hurt me as much as it hurts you, Cassidy. So, do us both a favor and talk about safe subjects.”

Cass huffed. “Yes, Mistress.”

Rebecca leaned over and gave Cassidy a long, sensual kiss. “I don’t know about the grass stains,” she whispered against Cassidy’s lips. “But we may end up getting sand in some unmentionable places.”

“Since when don’t we mention places?” Cass teased. “I’ve been in *all* your places, baby. In more ways than one.”

Rebecca groaned. “Stop or we’ll end up with stains before we even get inside. The house, Cassidy. Inside the house.”

Cass laughed. "I knew that. Doesn't stop me from wanting to get inside, though."

Rebecca pushed Cassidy's face back with her soft hand. "You're incorrigible."

"Says the dominatrix," Cass called after Rebecca, who was getting out of the car. When Rebecca looked back at her with a raised brow, Cass smiled secretly. *That'll get me at least one round of punishment!*

"Remember the consequences, Cassidy," Rebecca said as they reached the front door and rang the bell.

"I promise to be a good girl."

Hunter opened the door just then and snickered. "You? A good girl? Impossible."

Cass held up a particular finger until Rebecca covered it with her hand. "It's the holidays, baby. Be nice." Hunter laughed. "You, too, Hunter."

The laughter died in Hunter's throat. "Um, yes, ma'am."

"Rebecca, are you reprimanding my wife?" Ellie came up beside Hunter, wrapping her arm around Hunter's waist.

"Um."

Both Cass and Hunter stared at the dominatrix. Rebecca Cuinn was not afraid of anyone. Most would find that to be an incredible feat after the life she had lived. But Ellie Vale, as sweet as she was, could be quite intimidating. Even for the indomitable Mistress.

"I hope so because we're going to have our hands full with Larry, Moe, and Curly here."

Rebecca laughed loudly when Cassidy and Hunter both let out a "hey!" in protest. "What I would like to know is, which one is Curly?"

In unison, Cass and Hunter pointed at Mo, who was currently being scared to death by Jessie and Piper demonstrating how to do a chemical peel.

# *Dani and Claire*

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“Ready?”

“No.”

Claire sighed at Dani’s grumpiness. “Dani, Ellie invited you here personally. Why are you so upset?”

“I’m not upset, babe. I’m scared.”

Dani shifted in the passenger seat of Claire’s car. She still hadn’t mastered driving with her prosthetic legs, which made her feel a bit *too* dependent. But Claire assured her every day that she loved helping. The old Dani wouldn’t have believed that. But ever since she had been able to help Ellie after her accident, new Dani understood. Yet, even that little bit of personal growth didn’t mean she couldn’t occasionally feel out of her depth. Like at this party.

“Scared of what, baby?”

“I’m not like any of those people in there, Claire.”

“I don’t think that’s true.” Claire turned in her seat to face her girlfriend. “Just because they’re put together now doesn’t mean they’ve had it easy their whole life.”

“Yeah,” Dani agreed reluctantly.

It was hard, though, to see those women as anything but beautiful, successful, and incredibly put together. All the things Dani was not. Claire thought she was hot, but that didn’t count. She was far from being successful with her job at the convenience store. Yeah, she was taking classes to get her associates degree in business. But that didn’t even compete with the success inside that house. Dani looked down at her prosthetic legs and just laughed silently. *Definitely not put together.*

“Dani, has anyone we’re going to be with tonight ever made you feel like they were above you?”

“No.”

“Have they made you feel like you were dumb, unwelcome, a lost cause, a charity case?” Claire knew Dani well enough to know what was going through her head when she got like this. At times it got so bad that Dani was convinced she was less of a person mentally because she was less of a person physically.

“No.”

“In fact, haven’t they gone above and beyond to make us *both* feel welcome and like family? They’ve helped us with anything and everything, including your legs. Not because they felt sorry for you, but because they love you.”

Dani hung her head in shame. Claire was totally right. Ellie, Hunter, Blaise, Jessie, Piper, and everyone else had been nothing but loving and understanding. And here Dani was, feeling self-conscious for no reason.

“You’re right, babe. I’m being dumb.”

“You’re being human, baby.” Claire took Dani’s hand. “Listen, I guarantee that every woman that comes in that house tonight has a story. Instead of looking at them as someone we’re not, see them as someone we can become. We’re just starting our lives, baby. We have so much room to grow into the women we want to be. I choose to see Ellie and them as role models.”

Dani smiled. “You’re already on their level, babe.”

Claire blushed and giggled. “Not quite. But we will be. Both of us. And we’ll get there together.”

“Forever. I love you.”

“I love you, too. Now I’m pretty sure I saw Ellie looking at us through the window. We should probably go in.”

“Yeah. Okay. Let’s go have some fun.”



# *Eve and Lainey*

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“I don’t know why I’m so nervous.” Lainey checked her appearance in the visor mirror.

“Nervous? You’re perfect, by the way.” Eve cleared her throat. “Your makeup and hair, I mean.”

Lainey smiled at Eve, giving her a little wink. She loved seeing the younger woman get flustered. She loved even more that *she* was able to do that. Perhaps it was wrong, but Lainey’s ego appreciated the boost.

“I’ve never done anything like this before. I didn’t go to parties when I was younger. Certainly not after I got married.” She glanced over at Eve. “I’m more of a homebody unless I’m with you.”

“You’re with me now,” Eve reminded her.

“You know what I mean. It’s usually just us. We explore wherever we are, eat, talk — all the normal things. But without anyone else. That’s what I’m comfortable with. *You* are who I’m comfortable with.”

Eve turned to give her full attention to Lainey. “Is that the real issue here, Lainey?” She asked carefully. Lainey had never backed down from social interaction before. In fact, she was great at it. She was always personable and engaging. But the more Eve thought about it, the more she realized those were all work situations. Nothing like this holiday party. “Are you afraid these women will see something between us?”

Lainey frowned. “No. I know Ellie knows already. And you’ve told Rebecca.” Eve raised a brow, and Lainey chuckled. “You don’t think I can see how she looks at the both of us? I don’t mind that you told her, Eve. In fact, I’m glad you have someone to talk to.”

“Do you?”

“You.” Lainey sighed when Eve gave her a look. “Ellie and I have talked on the phone, texted, and emailed a few times,” she confessed.

Eve wasn't surprised. Lainey and Ellie had gotten along quite well during the planning of the gallery opening.

"I'm happy you have someone," Eve said softly.

"I always have you," Lainey corrected. "*You* are my best friend. But with Ellie it's . . ."

"Less complicated," Eve offered. She took Lainey's hand when Lainey looked down. "Hey, I understand, okay? And it's one of the reasons why I thought this party would be good for us. Sometimes we get so caught up in our own bubble, we don't see the world around us. Ellie's accident opened my eyes to that. It's easy to throw money and favors around. What's hard is putting yourself out there and seeing others as more. As friends."

"I think you chose some excellent people to do that with," Lainey said, squeezing Eve's hand. She laughed. "I'm still nervous. This party has nothing to do with work," she said, unknowingly reiterating Eve's thoughts. "It's all personal. What do I talk about?"

Eve shrugged. "Hell if I know!"

They both laughed heartily. For two successful, sophisticated women, they were novices when it came to this kind of social gathering. One where art or business wasn't the focus. One where they weren't writing big checks. Well, Eve wrote the checks.

"Okay, how about this," Lainey began. "We stop overthinking it. We go in there, drink, eat Ellie's amazing food, drink some more, and see how it goes."

Eve smiled at her best friend. "Now, that's a plan I can get behind. Are you ready now?"

Lainey took a breath. "As I'll ever be." She caught Eve's arm before she got out of the car. "Just for the record, I'm not afraid of what people will think of us."

Eve reached out and cupped Lainey's cheek. There were no words, just one soft caress before the moment was broken by the front door opening.

## *Kiara and Lauren*

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“Kiara, I shouldn’t be here.” Lauren fidgeted uncomfortably in her seat.

“Why not? Ellie said I could bring a date.”

“You have your pick of women. I’m sure any of them would have been happy to accompany you.”

Kiara glanced over at Lauren. “We’re friends, yes?”

“Yes, of course,” Lauren answered in German. The women met at Sumptor Galleries, LA, where Lauren was the new curator. They became fast friends when they realized they grew up near each other in Germany. It didn’t hurt to have someone you could speak your native language with. It also didn’t hurt that Kiara was a former supermodel. “But I’m also Eve’s employee. Please don’t tell her I called her by her first name!”

Kiara tsked. “I’ve known Eve for a while, Lauren. I would venture to say she’d *rather* you call her that than be so formal. I also think she wouldn’t mind you being here and socializing with her. Besides, Ellie and Blaise are your neighbors, so to speak. You should get to know them better.”

“That’s my point, Kiara. I *don’t* know any of these people except Eve and Lainey. Cass is one of our artists, but Eve dealt with her, not me. I’m going to feel so out of place.”

Lauren had been apprehensive about working for such a prestigious gallery in a foreign country. Wanting to impress Eve, Lauren took her job very seriously, forgoing taking the time to develop friendships. She practically ate, slept, and dreamt of that gallery. Especially when Eve wasn’t there to oversee things herself. Lauren wanted to prove herself. She merely didn’t know if she could do that if she was mingling at some holiday party with her boss.

Kiara looked around at the parked cars, getting an idea of who was inside. It was an intimate gathering, but she could still understand Lauren’s hesitancy.

“Okay, crash course. Ellie, Hunter, and Jessie live here in this house. Hunter is a trauma surgeon, Jessie is a senior in high school, and Ellie is an amazing chef and the owner of Ellie’s where you like to eat lunch.”

Lauren eyed Kiara suspiciously at the admiration in Kiara’s voice when she said Ellie’s name. “Did you and Ellie ever . . .”

“Oh, no. Not that I didn’t want it to. She’s an extraordinary lady. But Hunter saw her first. Truthfully, it’s the way it should be. No one could love Ellie more than Hunter.”

“Including you?”

Kiara smiled. “Including me. Next, we have Blaise and Piper,” she went on, changing the subject. “I’m assuming that Blaise’s husband isn’t here since this was touted as a girls’ night. As you most likely know, Blaise owns the flower shop next to the gallery.”

Lauren nodded. “I love her arrangements. They’re so creative. She and Ellie are best friends, right?”

“Correct. Have been since Jessie was two-years-old.”

“I’m confused by Jessie, actually. And Piper, if I’m being honest,” Lauren confessed. “Ellie and Blaise seem too young to have teenagers that age. There’s also the little fact that Ellie is a lesbian. Not that a lesbian can’t have kids,” she amended quickly.

Kiara smiled. “Ellie had a rough upbringing. Religious parents,” she explained. “Jessie was the product of Ellie trying to convince herself and her parents she wasn’t gay. Obviously, it didn’t work, but the end result was stunning.”

“Wow. There’s so much I need to learn. Anyone can see how bonded Ellie and Jessie are. Stunning is a good word. Piper?”

“Blaise and Piper are a completely different story.” Kiara shook her head. “It’s quite the tale that I don’t have time to get into now. However, it involves kidnapping, a ton of money, and corrupt families.”

Lauren blinked. “You’re serious?”

“Very. Blaise Steele is the only person I know who can compete with Eve’s fortune. She’s very discreet about it and uses the money for others more than herself.”

“You’ll tell me the whole story sometime?” Lauren asked.

“If you allow yourself to become one of the group, without holding yourself back, you’ll hear the stories firsthand,” Kiara replied.

“How long have you been coming to these girls’ nights?”

“This is my first one.” Kiara laughed at the look on Lauren’s face. “I haven’t been invited until now. That was done out of respect for Hunter. She wasn’t comfortable with me going to the get-togethers without her. Of course, I would never make a move on Ellie, and I think she knows that deep down. Things were rough at the beginning for them, then the accident happened. I spent a little time with Hunter while Ellie was recovering. All I ever wanted was for Hunter to trust me on her own. This is the first time she’s invited me over. Believe me, it’s an honor.”

“So, all of your information came from?”

“Observations. Also, you’d be surprised what people reveal when you’re not *real* to them.”

“What does that mean?”

“I’m a poster on the wall, Lauren.” Kiara sighed. “That’s not important right now. Next, we have Patty and Mo.”

“Fine, we can move on only because we have to get in there soon. But we’re coming back to this later,” Lauren said with authority. She hated that Kiara saw herself like that. She didn’t know if that was how the others saw the ex-supermodel, but she hoped not.

“Hmm. Patty and Mo are Hunter’s oldest friends. Mo goes back to her school days. They’re both nurses. Patty considers herself the “mother hen” of the group. She’s very protective. Mo, on the other hand, is an acquired taste,” she joked. “She’s great, actually. A little rough around the edges, but she keeps this gang on their toes.”

“She sounds fun,” Lauren laughed. “So far, everyone sounds great. Who’s next?”

“Hmm. Rebecca and Cass. I swear those two put off a heat that would keep you warm on the coldest of nights.”

“I’ve seen them together,” Lauren said. “Like I said before, Cass has dealt mostly with Eve, so I haven’t had a chance to get to know her or Rebecca. But I agree with you wholeheartedly. Am I the only one who gets a bit horny when they’re around?”

Kiara snickered and shook her head. “No, you’re not. As hot as they are, they’re just as nice. Rebecca can be a little intimidating, but even that’s a turn on for some reason.” She shrugged. “As you’ve seen, Cass is an amazingly talented artist.”

“And Rebecca?”

Kiara frowned. “That’s a little hazy, even to me. I believe she’s a business consultant. She and Eve do business together, so she must be very good at what she does.”

“I bet she is. What about that car?” Lauren said, pointing to a small Toyota that stood out amongst the newer, fancier vehicles. “Who does that belong to?”

“Ah, that’s Claire and Dani’s car. I met Dani after Ellie’s accident. They’re both cute and *young!*” Kiara chuckled. “They were a little flustered when I walked in. Which flustered me since I didn’t know kids that age knew who I was. Anyway, they were also extremely talkative. Dani,” she shook her head. “Poor kid. Was kicked out of her house when her mother found Claire and Dani kissing.”

“Oh, no!”

“Yeah. Unfortunately, it gets worse. Dani’s ego wouldn’t allow Claire to help, and she ended up on the streets at sixteen. Two years later, she was in Hunter’s operating room, losing both of her legs.”

Lauren’s hand flew to her mouth. “Oh, Jesus! How horrible! What kind of mother could do that to her child?”

“I can’t even imagine,” Kiara answered. “There are many people here at this very house that would love to teach that woman a lesson. Because of Ellie, they took Dani under their wings. Ellie found Claire. Hunter forfeited any compensation for the surgery and pleaded with the hospital to

forgive Dani's bills. Blaise took care of Dani's prosthetics, and Eve pays for Dani's therapy. Dani and Claire are the adopted daughters of the group. They even call Ellie mom."

Lauren wiped a tear from her cheek. "That's incredible."

"Yes, it is. I wanted in on helping the two, but I think that will take a little time. While Dani was talkative around me, she was also guarded. I think her time on the streets made it hard for her to trust easily. I also think she hasn't fully accepted her role in the group."

"She still feels like an outsider?" Lauren guessed. Kiara nodded. "I understand that feeling. Not to Dani's extent, of course. It's just that I work for Eve. We're not friends. You're the only friend I have here, Kiara."

"Only because you shut yourself off, Lauren. Now is not the time to ask you what you're afraid of, so I'll talk about Eve and Lainey now. You know them as your boss, but they could be so much more than that if you allow it." Kiara looked towards the house. They had been sitting out here for a while now. She was going to have to wrap this up before everyone thought they were trying to find a way out of the party.

"Eve was standoffish a few years ago, I'll admit to that. We had met through acquaintances, and it took me more than a year to break through that outer shell. Even then, I didn't know Eve beyond what she permitted the world to see. Then Lainey came into her life. In all my years of travel, and the multitude of people I've met, I had never seen such an enormous transformation. Eve became a completely different person. For the better. She's always been philanthropic. However, now, instead of an impersonal check to some random charity, she's involved. Lainey did that for her. I didn't know Lainey before Eve, but I imagine the guidance was mutual."

"What is *their* story?" Lauren asked.

"No one knows for sure," Kiara admitted. "Neither Eve nor Lainey is affected by my superpower." She laughed.

"Your superpower of being a supermodel?" Lauren joined in on the laughter. "Does that mean you're not just a poster on the wall to them?"

Kiara rolled her eyes. "No. Too bad, though. They intrigue me enough to want to be nosy. But both are intensely careful with their outward emotions."

Lauren patted the pouting woman's knee. "Poor little supermodel. Okay, now that I've been properly filled in on everyone, we should probably go in. I think that curtain has opened upwards of twenty times. I wonder if they think the diva," she pointed at Kiara, "is waiting to make a dramatic entrance. Ohh! That was *not* a supermodel gesture!" Lauren grabbed Kiara's extended middle finger and squeezed.

"Come on. Let's go inside because I can't be sure they're *not* thinking that."

"Kiara? Thank you for taking the time to make me feel better."

"Did it work?"

Lauren smiled. "Yeah, it did. Most of all, it made me want to know these remarkable women even more. I haven't felt that way in a long time. Besides with you, of course."

"Of course," Kiara winked. "You can let down your guard here, Lauren. I promise you're in good company."



# *Party time!*

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“*Kiara Adler is here!*” Mo danced around like she had to pee.

“*Mo!*” Hunter whispered harshly. “Ellie said we’re not allowed to call her by her first and last name.”

“Dude, whatever we call her, there is a *supermodel* in your house! One that I used to have plastered all over my walls.”

Cass scoffed. “Used to. I bet you still hide your posters in the closet.”

Mo flipped Cass off. “Nothing about me has been in the closet for years.”

“Whatever.” Cass rolled her eyes. “Listen, guys, Kiara is a person just like the rest of us. How about you stop ogling her and treat her as such.”

“Cass is right,” Hunter said, cutting whatever was about to spew out of Mo’s mouth. She couldn’t let something like this ruin her first girls’ night. “Kiara has been really cool. Let’s try to do the same.”

“No last name? Progress.”

Hunter cursed gently as Ellie bumped her. “I’m trying, baby.”

“What you’re doing is standing over here in the corner with Cass and Mo. No offense to them, honey, but that’s what you do every girls’ night. I thought you all wanted to experience this.”

“Are we really going to have to have facials?” Mo whined.

“Yes,” Ellie said evenly. “Don’t worry. We’ll be gentle with you.”

“Wait, that’s real?” Hunter squeaked. “Stop being wusses, guys. It’s not that bad,” Cass chimed in.

“Oh? You’ve had them?” Ellie asked.

“Yeah, sure.” Cass shrugged. “Sometimes Rebecca likes to give them to me. I’m not about to say no to her. Not after what she does for me in return.”

Ellie held up her hands. “Okay. No details necessary.”

“Speak for yourself!” Mo said, always ready for details that included Rebecca. Not that she would tell Patty that. Or anyone for that matter. She enjoyed being alive too much.

Ellie chuckled. “Mingle. Talk to Kiara. Or Eve and Lainey.” She looked up at her wife. “Get out of your comfort zone.”

“I’ll be doing that with all the girly stuff,” Hunter winked. “But you’re right. We invited these women. I should be a better host.” She squared her shoulders, cleared her throat, and set off to talk to the nearest person that wasn’t Blaise, Piper, Patty, or Rebecca.

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“Aunt Wills sends her regards,” Rebecca told Eve cheekily.

“It’s too bad she couldn’t be here,” Eve responded smoothly.

“It must be hard for her to see her only niece via Skype.” Rebecca laughed. “Touché. For your information, she is coming to visit Cassidy and me next week and will stay for New Year’s.”

“That’s great. Honestly, Rebecca. I know she misses you. You know she’s welcome to use the jet any time.”

“Thank you, that’s quite generous.”

“It really is the only way to fly,” Lainey laughed. “Eve spoils me too much.”

“Nonsense.” Eve looked at Lainey and winked.

Hunter coughed lightly to get the others’ attention. “May I get you ladies anything?”

“I think we’re good,” Rebecca said, holding up her wine glass.

Eve sensed Hunter was offering more than her hosting duties. It still amazed her that a trauma surgeon, so calm and collected in the operating room, could be so nervous in social situations. On the other hand, social conditions were not Eve's forte either, so she could sympathize.

"You have a beautiful home, Hunter," Eve commented amicably.

"Uh, thank you. Ellie and Jessie have made it more of a home than it was. The kitchen has never seen so much action."

Rebecca nearly spewed her wine all over Eve, Hunter, and Lainey. She knew exactly what kind of action that kitchen has been seeing. Though, she didn't think this was the time to reveal that to Eve and Lainey. Hunter was nervous enough.

"Sorry," she coughed. "Wrong pipe."

Hunter hoped to hell she wasn't blushing. "Ahem, good thing I'm a doctor. We wouldn't want you to choke to death."

Rebecca smiled sweetly. "Yes, I'm very lucky."

Hunter practically turned her back on her best friend and focused on Eve and Lainey. "So, how is the gallery doing?"

Lainey laughed. "It's going very well. However, I think we're missing a bigger story right here."

"Nope. No. No story," Hunter stammered. "Unless Rebecca actually chokes." She tossed Rebecca a murderous look and received an exuberant laugh in return. "I should, uh, see if any of my other guests need anything. I'll be back around. Enjoy yourselves!"

"What was that about?" Ellie asked as she intercepted Hunter.

"Rebecca is having fun at my expense," Hunter pouted. "I said something about the kitchen seeing more action since you've been here and she . . . did that." Hunter sighed as Ellie laughed her ass off.

"I'm sorry." Ellie struggled to keep a straight face. "You are so incredibly cute when you're flustered."

“I don’t want to be cute. I want to be sexy to you.”

Ellie pressed up against Hunter. “You are. Especially when we’re showing that kitchen some action.”

Hunter laughed. “You’re killing me, woman. Now, stop making me horny so I can go talk to the supermodel.”

“Fine, go . . . wait. What?”

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“Excuse me. I don’t mean to interrupt.”

Kiara grinned at Hunter. “Please. This is your party. A fine one at that. You’ve met Lauren?”

“Briefly.” She held her hand out to Lauren. “It’s nice to meet you officially. You’re the new curator at Sumptor Galleries, right?”

“I am, yes. It’s nice to meet you.” Lauren looked around, then back at Hunter. “You have a beautiful home. I can imagine you sit out on the deck quite often.”

Hunter nodded. “Ellie and I fell asleep out there about fifteen minutes before everyone started showing up,” she confessed.

Kiara and Lauren laughed.

“I think I’m jealous,” Kiara said. Then she remembered who she was talking to. “Of the nap, I mean, not . . .”

Hunter touched Kiara’s arm. “I know,” she said sincerely. “Listen, all that other stuff? Forgotten. You did nothing wrong, Kiara. I hope you can forgive my insecurities.”

“Nothing to forgive, Hunter. In my eyes, we’re good.”

Hunter nodded. “Thank you.” She heard Blaise call Kiara’s name, and the woman made her apologies and left Lauren and Hunter alone.

“I, um, I don’t know you that well,” Lauren began. “But if I may say something?”

“Of course.”

“Before we came in here, Kiara gave me the rundown of everyone in this house. While she was thorough, her words didn’t truly hit me until I walked in here and met everyone. I put those stories together with the faces, and they were no longer just stories. They were your lives. Amazing, sometimes amazingly difficult, lives. Do you know what she said about you?”

Hunter shook her head, enthralled with Lauren’s narrative.

“She told me that there was no one who could love Ellie more than you do. I see that now. I see how Blaise and Eve are the givers. I see how Patty is the mother hen and Mo the comedian. I see how Jessie and Piper love their mothers. I see Dani’s discomfort, yet her gratitude. I see Claire guiding her along. I see how Rebecca and Cass look as though they shouldn’t work, but they are perfect for each other. And I see how *you* love Ellie as much as she loves you.”

“I — I didn’t know Kiara knew all of that.”

Lauren smiled. “She’s observative. And she thinks no one truly sees her, so they’re more open around her.”

“Not see her? Is that even possible?”

This time Lauren shrugged. “They see the poster on their wall,” she said, echoing Kiara’s earlier words.

Hunter looked over at Kiara, who was talking and laughing with Dani and Claire. A quick look at Mo confirmed what Lauren said, what Kiara thought. She felt shame that she was that person less than ten minutes ago.

“I see her,” Hunter said softly. She looked back at Lauren. “Thank you for telling me all that. I hope that you come by more often. I think Ellie would love to get to know you better. So would I.”

Lauren smiled brightly. “I would like that very much.”

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Ellie tapped a knife on her glass of wine to get everyone's attention. Once every eye was on her, she offered them a warm smile.

"First of all, Hunter and I want to thank everyone for coming here tonight. It started off a little awkward, but since we're all gathered together in the living room now, I think we've finally found our footing."

All the women looked around at each other and started laughing. It was true. Each person kept close to the person they were the most comfortable with. It was Hunter that started the trend of moving out of comfort zones.

"This party serves a few purposes," Ellie continued. "It's Hunter, Cass, and Mo's first girls' night. And despite their constant protesting, I'm certain they enjoyed the pampering as much as they did the drinking and eating."

The three stooges held up their beers in salute. Cass was right. A bit of pampering from the one you love wasn't so bad. And their skin felt amazingly soft!

Ellie grinned at her goofy wife before moving on. "We also wanted to celebrate Rebecca and Cass's engagement." She paused while people clapped. "They've been engaged for a while now but held onto that *tiny* bit of information."

"In our defense," Rebecca spoke up with amusement, "you went and stole our thunder by being in a coma."

Hunter's eyes nearly popped out of her head. "Rebecca!"

Ellie merely laughed. This was something they had joked about many times on their every other Sunday night tradition. Unfortunately, Hunter hadn't been in on those previous jokes.

"Hunter, honey, it's okay." Ellie motioned for Hunter to get closer. "We're just joking."

"You being in a coma was not a joke," Hunter groused.

"You're right. It wasn't. But I'm here now. *Standing* beside you. It helps me get past it by not letting it make me sad anymore. Aunt Wills says that's a good thing, honey."

"Oh." Hunter shuffled her feet. "Sorry, Becca."

“It’s all right, Hunter. I was there, remember. I saw everything you went through. Everything Ellie went through. I don’t take that lightly.” Rebecca took a step towards Hunter and Ellie and held out her hands. When they took them, she continued. “Aunt Wills advised me to follow Ellie’s lead on this subject. That’s all I’m doing. Okay?”

Hunter nodded, and Ellie squeezed Rebecca’s hand, mouthing a “*thank you.*”

Ellie cleared her throat. “Now that we’ve cleared that up let’s move on. I’ve covered girls’ night, the engagement, and I don’t think we need to rehash me walking. What else is there?” She tapped her bottom lip with a slender finger. “Ah, yes. We have a few thank yous to hand out.”

That was Hunter’s cue to go and get the “rewards” from the kitchen. She came back with a box full of smaller boxes.

“These small tokens don’t even come close to thanking everyone for what they’ve done for us,” Ellie said with emotion. “These past few months have taught us how precious life is. Not to mention how precious friends are, old and new.” Ellie gave Lauren and Kiara a friendly smile.

“Ellie is being modest about these gifts,” Hunter corrected with enthusiasm. “She’s been working on these for weeks, perfecting them. Let me tell you, that’s not an easy task when you can only stand for so long. But, man, she hit it out of the park with these. They’re these personal pies made especially for everyone here. Can’t get them anywhere else. Unless, of course, we all beg her to put them on the menu at Ellie’s Diner.” She put the box down, took two smaller white boxes out, and handed them to Kiara and Lauren. “Merry Christmas,” she said merrily.

Lauren took the box from Hunter and held it up to her nose, taking a big sniff. “I’m so glad I was invited tonight,” she said reverently. “I mean, thank you! So much! And Merry Christmas!”

Kiara and the others laughed. “I second everything Lauren just said.”

“Blaise, Eve, and Rebecca,” Ellie began again when the laughter quieted. “With your help and guidance, Hunter was able to fulfill her desire to quit her job as a trauma surgeon and open her own clinic. Blaise and Eve, you not only invested your money, but you invested your time and your faith in us. Rebecca, your expertise has already proven to be instrumental in the clinic’s success.”

Hunter waited until Ellie was finished talking, then handed out the small white boxes to each woman Ellie had just thanked. “Merry Christmas! I would also like to give my thanks for your help with the clinic. Not only has it gotten me out of trauma, but it also lets me spend more quality time with Ellie and Jessie. My heart is much lighter now.”

Blaise dabbed at a tear that threatened to escape. “Thank you is not necessary. I’m happy to do good things with this money. You deserve to be happy doing what you love, Hunter. And you being happy makes Ellie happy.”

“I agree with Blaise,” Eve chimed in. “Money isn’t what is important in life. It’s the people you have to share it with. I didn’t understand that until recently.” She discretely brushed Lainey’s hand with hers. “I never imagined that opening a gallery in LA would also bring more people into my life. People I’m honored to call friends.”

“Oh boy!” Ellie gave Eve and Blaise a watery smile. “I should keep going before I lose it. Lainey, you have become such a great friend to me. To us. Whenever I’ve needed you, all I’ve had to do was pick up the phone, and you’d answer. I sometimes wonder if you’ve been a psychiatrist in a previous life,” Ellie laughed.

Hunter brought out a white box, bowing as she gave it to Lainey. “Thank you for being there for my girls,” she said quietly. “Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas,” Lainey responded. “I’m far from being a psychiatrist, but I’m honored to be your friend.”

Ellie took a breath. “Patty and Mo. What can I say?”

“Good things, I hope,” Mo said a bit loudly, then ducked when she thought for sure Patty was going to wallop her on the back of the head.

Ellie laughed. “Yes, good things. Like how loyal you’ve been to Hunter. You both worked so hard, possibly more than you should have by splitting your time between the hospital and the clinic. I don’t think we could have gotten the clinic up and running without you. And if I want to make it through the rest of this, I’ll thank you later for how you were there for Hunter when she needed you the most.”



Hunter brought out two white boxes and handed them to her longtime friends. “Merry Christmas. I love you guys.”

“We love you, child. Come here.” Patty gathered Hunter up into a tight hug, motioning for Ellie and Mo to get in on it. Before everyone knew it, they were all in on it. The hug lasted for a good minute.

“Seriously, you’re all making this difficult to get through without becoming a blubbing mess,” Ellie sniffled. “Um, okay. Whew. Dani and Claire. You two have become like daughters to us. Not just to Hunter and me, but to all of us old ladies,” she laughed. “Dani, your tenacity is inspiring. And the way you’ve helped me navigate what transpired after the accident is beyond the measure of gratitude. Claire, your love and devotion to Dani show us all that, in the end, love is truly the only thing that matters in this harsh world. But since we all know love doesn’t pay the bills, we wanted to offer you both well-paying jobs.”

Ellie nearly lost her composure when Claire began to cry softly. Dani managed to keep the tears in check, but Ellie could see her bottom lip trembling.

“You don’t have to choose now, but I’ve discussed this with the others, and you have a multitude of places to select from. The diner, the flower shop, the clinic, the gallery. That includes higher education if you want it.”

Hunter handed them their white boxes. “Merry Christmas,” she said softly. She could never give Dani her legs back, but she would do anything she could to help Dani and Claire live a good life. “We love you.”

Dani threw her arms around Hunter. It was something Ellie never thought she’d see. The young woman had come to terms with the loss of her legs and even Hunter’s role in that. But there was always a bit of restraint between them. Hunter because she was afraid of overstepping her bounds, and Dani because she was still in the process of accepting life as it had become.

“This is too much,” Dani sniffed.

“It’s not enough,” Hunter corrected. She looked into Dani’s eyes. “This is your opportunity, Dani. We want to give you the things your mother didn’t. Love, support, and acceptance. Take it. Run with it.”

“Is that a leg joke?” Dani said with a totally straight face.

“No! I . . .”

“I’m kidding, doc!” Dani laughed. Sobering quickly, she hugged Hunter again. “Thank you for keeping me alive.”

Hunter pulled Claire into the huddle with them. Ellie was content to stand back and watch the three of them bond. That in itself was a Christmas miracle.

“I only have a couple more, so if everyone could bear with me and hold it together. I’m speaking to myself mostly,” she smiled. “After I’m done, I want you all to dig in! We have more where that came from, plus more drinks!”

“Child, I think you need to hurry. Whatever you cooked up for us smells too enticing to ignore!” Patty teased.

“Almost! We’re to Cass now!”

“Uh,” Cass fidgeted nervously. The whole time Ellie and the others had been making their speeches, she had been standing quietly next to Rebecca, trying not to cry. She didn’t know if she could continue to do that if Ellie said something sweet to her. “I think you covered me when you talked about the engagement.”

“Not quite,” Ellie responded. “First, I want to thank you for the mural you did for the diner and the clinic. Your talent is as big as your heart. Thank you so much for being a rock for Hunter when she needed one to lean on.”

Hunter handed Cass her gift. “Merry Christmas, Cass. Thank you for everything.”

In a rare show of emotion, Cass hugged Hunter. “Anytime, Hunt. Like I know you’re there for Rebecca and me.”

“Anytime,” Hunter responded in kind.

“Ahem, you have a couple more of those things, so I’m guessing Ellie isn’t done.” Cass stepped back until she was next to her fiancée. She smiled when Rebecca’s arm automatically slipped around her waist.

“Cass is right. We’ve made it to Piper.” Ellie smiled at Piper. It was a motherly smile. A smile that could warm you from the inside out. “I wish we could have watched you grow into the lovely young woman you are today. You’re the spitting image of your mother in both appearance and spirit, and I can’t tell you how happy that makes me. I know we’ve only known each other for a relatively short time, but I want you to know that Hunter and I love you dearly. Your mom has asked us to be your Godparents, and we wholeheartedly accepted. We hope you accept us, as well.”

Piper gave Ellie a bright smile. “Wholeheartedly,” she repeated with feeling. Of course, there was more hugging. How could there not be after that? “There’s just one problem I can see at this moment,” Piper announced in her quiet, New Zealand accent.

“Problem?” Blaise asked in the same accent, though not quite as quiet.

“Yeah. I don’t mean to be selfish, but I didn’t get my gift. If I have to miss out on whatever Ellie made, I’m seriously going to reconsider this whole Godparent arrangement out of protest.”

Hunter barked out laughter. The kid was right. She still had Piper’s gift in her box. “My bad.” She held the gift out and bowed. “Merry Christmas, my Godchild.”

Piper giggled. “Merry Christmas, Fairy Godmother.”

“Hey! Was that a gay joke?” Hunter quipped.

Piper shrugged. “If the slipper fits.”

Joyous laughter filled the room once again. It had become more of an emotional rollercoaster than any previous girls’ night in history. Yet, to Ellie, it had been perfect. Now if she could just get through this last gift.

“As you can see by Hunter’s box of gifts, we’re down to the last one. I hope no one takes offense when I say I saved the best for last. My beautiful, intelligent, wonderful daughter.”

“Mom.” Jessie blushed.

“What? Ask anyone here and they’ll tell you I’m speaking nothing but the truth.” Ellie took Jessie’s hands in hers. “I don’t know if I would have survived without you these past few months.

Between you and Hunter, you kept me going with your positivity, support, and love. I couldn't have asked for a better daughter than you."

"I take after you," Jessie said softly.

Ellie smiled. "Thank you for saying that. I did my best with you, hoping to hell that was enough. Now, here you are close to graduating high school and going off to Harvard." She cupped Jessie's cheek. "My baby is going to Harvard," Ellie repeated with a mixture of pride and sadness.

"You made me promise," Jessie reminded her with a shaky voice.

"Oh, yes, I did. This is what you have dreamed of, and I want you to live *your* life, Jessie. No one else's. I'm incredibly proud of the young woman you've become. But I need you to know that you will *always* be my little girl."

"And mine." Hunter's voice broke with emotion and she hoped she didn't start blubbering like an idiot. At least, not before she got out what she had to say. "Trauma often brings people together or tears them apart. If anything good came out of your mom's accident, it's the bond you and I created. Now, I have one more of these little gift boxes, but," Hunter put down the box and took a piece of paper out of her back pocket. "I would like to give you this instead."

Jessie accepted the offered paper and unfolded it. As she read, the lines began to blur behind the tears that started to flow. She looked at her mom, who nodded. Then she looked up at Hunter whose face was the picture of fear and anticipation.

"You want to adopt me?"

Hunter nodded. "I do, Jessie. I love you and your mom more than anything. I would be honored if you thought about letting me be your other mom."

"Could I have your last name, too?" Jessie asked shyly.

A tear rolled down Hunter's cheek. "Nothing could make me prouder."

Jessie launched herself into Hunter's arms. "Yes!" She stepped back marginally. "Can I still call you Doc?"

Hunter laughed. “You can call me whatever you want. Just know that when you get your Ph.D. I will be calling you Doc, Jr.”

“I’ll take it!” Jessie turned to Ellie. “How long have you known about this?”

“Way too long!”

Hunter wrapped her arm around Ellie’s shoulders. “Your mom wanted to tell you the moment I asked for her permission.”

“I would argue, but it’s true.”

Jessie rolled her eyes, but on the inside, she was dancing with joy. Hunter made her mom happy and she loved her for that. Every other reason was the icing on the cake.

“Okay, I’ve stayed quiet long enough,” Blaise announced. “Someone find us a bottle of champagne. We have some celebrating to do!”

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“You realize that we’re all crashing here tonight because you’ve plied us with a ton of alcohol.” Eve stretched out on the couch, looking very comfortable. And very un-Eve like in her unguarded state. There was no moving for her, though, since Lainey was currently passed out with her head on Eve’s lap.

“Do I need to bring out the sleeping bags?” Hunter asked sleepily. She and Ellie were curled up together on the loveseat, fighting to stay awake. They were close to losing the battle.

“We don’t have any, honey,” Ellie answered. She could barely keep her eyes open. After the champagne toast, the hard liquor came out. Since Jessie, Piper, Dani, and Claire were underage, they were safe from an ugly hangover the next morning as were Kiara and Lauren, who didn’t partake in more than the champagne. Everyone else, however, was in for a rude awakening.

“Oh, yeah. We should probably get some.”

“Okay, honey, we will.” Ellie patted Hunter’s tummy.

“I want a sleeping bag.” Cass rolled her head to her left and locked eyes with Rebecca. They were sprawled out on the floor next to the fireplace. “Can we get a sleeping bag, babe?”

“Will one fit both of us?”

“We’ll make it work. We’ve been in tighter situations before.” Cass snickered, repeating the word “tighter” in a loud whisper.

“TMI, Cass,” Patty muttered. She held a surprisingly comfortable position on the chaise lounge side of the sofa with Mo stretched out beside her.

“Let her talk if she wants, mama!” Mo whined.

“Mo, you’re about to get a headache,” Patty warned.

“Already have one. Wanna sleep. Hey, Ellie?” Mo called out drowsily.

“Hmm?”

“Do you have any of that face goo left?”

Everyone chuckled quietly.

“I’m sure I can find you some, Mo.”

“Why is the room spinning? There’s something wrong with your house, Hunter.” Blaise closed her eyes, but that didn’t help. It was a good thing she was laying down. Otherwise, she’d be on the floor, flat on her ass, instead of . . . She tried lifting her head to examine her surroundings and immediately regretted it. She decided she no longer cared where she was. It was comfortable enough.

“Is it always like this?” Kiara asked Jessie and Piper quietly.

“Not this bad,” Jessie answered with a grin. “I guess Hunter, Mo, and Cass brought out the worst in them.”

“Except *my* mum,” Piper corrected. “Every other Sunday night, there’s something wrong with the house.”

Lauren covered her mouth to keep her laughter quiet. “I love seeing this side of them. It makes them more human — especially Eve. I’m less afraid of her now. Well, maybe this much,” she said holding her thumb and forefinger less than a millimeter apart.

“Speaking of sides of them,” Piper said. “Let’s see the results.”

They all brought out a piece of paper. They read, checked, looked at the sad state of the adults — minus Kiara and Lauren — and wrote more notes.

“Bingo!” Jessie called out.

“No! I was almost there!” Piper cried. “What did I miss? I have mom’s grass stains. I have Rebecca and Cass’s sand burns. I even have Patty and Mo’s little make-out session. What did I miss? Don’t tell me you got something on Eve and Lainey,” she whispered. She had been watching them all night. A lot of good it did her.

Jessie grinned. “No. They’re still a mystery to me. But,” she pointed at Dani. “Hickey.”

Claire buried her red face in a smirking Dani’s neck while Kiara and Lauren watched the four girls with amusement. Neither woman knew what it was like to have kids. Yet, somehow, having these four playing a bingo game that consisted of the intimate acts of their adult counterparts seemed normal.

“We’re going to have to get invited to these things more often,” Kiara suggested.

“Are you kidding? I’m buying a sleeping bag and camping outside their door every other Saturday night!!”

*Happy Holidays from Ellie, Hunter, Jessie, Blaise, Piper,  
Patty, Mo, Rebecca, Cass, Dani, Claire, Eve, Lainey,  
Kiara, Lauren, and ME!*