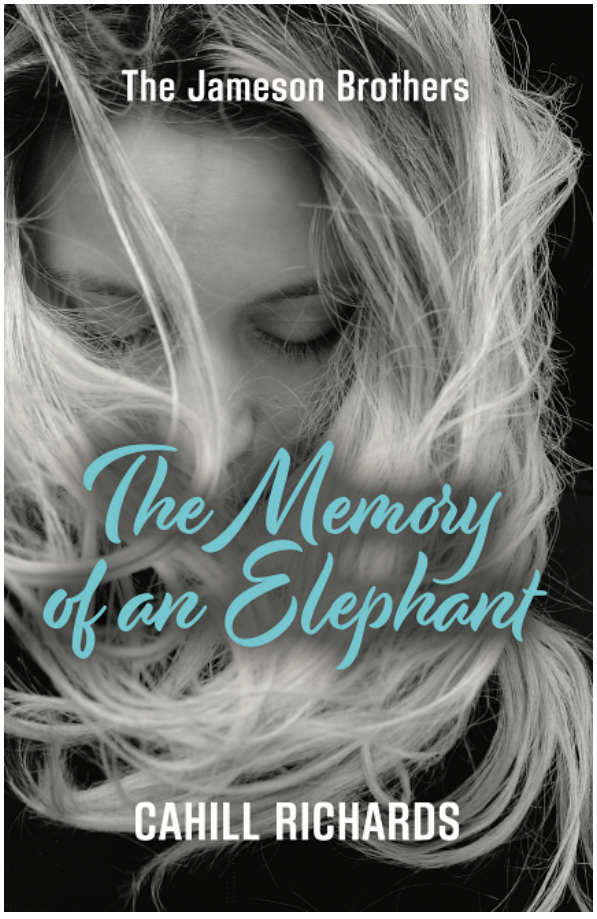


Haunted by their pasts, rock star Marcus Jameson and struggling singer Bethany Waters find unexpected love. But as old wounds reopen and buried secrets emerge, can they overcome their demons before everything they've built falls apart?

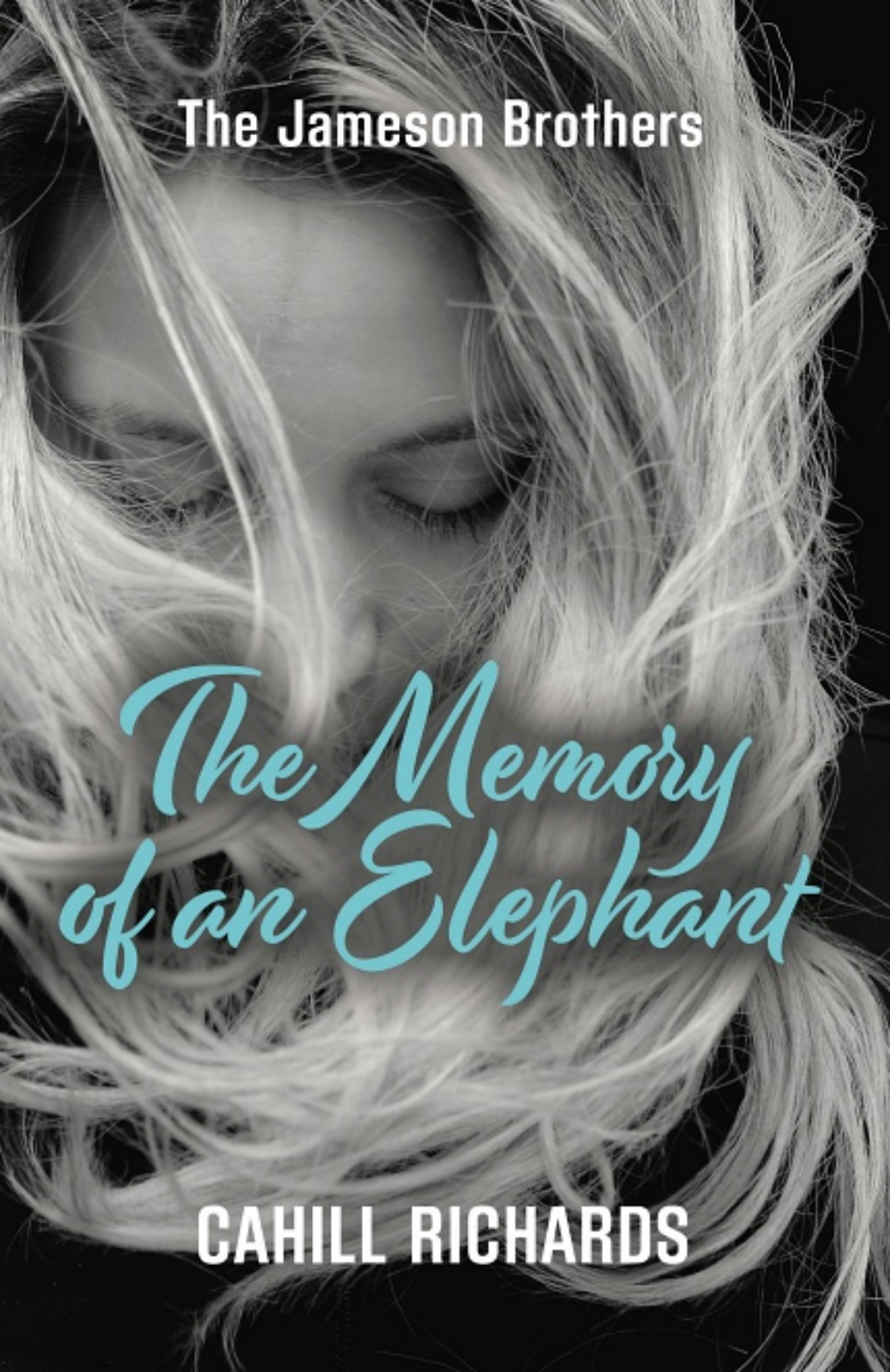
The Jameson Brothers: The Memory of an Elephant

By Cahill Richards

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The Jameson Brothers
The Memory of an Elephant
CAHILL RICHARDS

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CHAPTER 1

Bethany

Marcus's phone alarm sounded as he lay on top of Bethany on the newly christened leather sectional in the formal living room. They'd christened both dining room tables. Bethany had been reluctant to make love on the smaller children's table at first, but Marcus had soon convinced her otherwise as he'd undressed her there and let his lips wander all over her. They'd moved to the big table before ending up in the living room, and she'd set his alarm to remind them both that Gabrielle needed to be picked up from school.

"Baby, you need to get dressed and go get your daughter," she told him as she shut off the alarm, and Marcus groaned as he reluctantly pulled out of her.

"Hold on a second, Angel, and I'll grab ya a towel," he said, kissing her before he got up, but the look on her face as she felt things happening down below confirmed the urgent need of a towel for Marcus.

"Hurry, baby," she said. "I don't want to mess up the new sofa."

Marcus bolted away, stark naked, then rushed back into the living room carrying a roll of paper towels. "Sorry I couldn't get ya something softer, love," he said, handing her a wad of towels from the roll. "We're goin' to have to start leaving some proper towels lying about the place, I suppose. And remind me to buy a load for the downstairs bathrooms. I'll run upstairs and get ya a real one, Angel."

"These will work," she said, stuffing the paper towels between her legs. She sat up, clenching her legs together to keep them where they were, and Marcus knelt before her, putting his head to her middle.

"Maybe we ought to start putting a raincoat on the bishop when we're testing out the new furniture," he said, chuckling.

"Yeah, maybe," she said, grinning at him. "It's okay. I'll clean up while you go get Gabrielle. I should probably polish our ass prints off the dining room table anyway. Do you think you could find my clothes for me?" she asked with an expectant smile, and Marcus stood up, hoisting her over his shoulder.

"We'll track them down on the way upstairs," he said, patting and rubbing her bare bottom. "And by the way, have I told ya lately that I love you?"

"Several times," she said, giggling. "But it sounded more like I… love… YOU!" she said, putting on a climactic vociferation.

Marcus snorted with laughter and sprinted to the dining room, stooping down to retrieve their clothes with her still over his shoulder, then hurried up the stairs to their bedroom.

"You have a really nice ass, Fionn," she said, calling him by his first name, the one he never allowed anyone else to use, as she peered down at his butt cheeks.

"I could say the exact same thing, Angel," he said, giving her bottom a playful swat before he bent over and deposited her on their bed, then kissed her. "Any chance of a quick one before I have to head off?" he asked, one eyebrow raised.

"I'm not sure you know the meaning of the word quick. You're more of a marathoner than a sprinter, Fionn," she remarked, and Marcus nudged her legs apart, moving himself between them.

"I promise I'll make it a proper sprint this time, darlin'," he said as he put himself inside her once more.

Once they'd both crossed the finish line, Marcus kissed her tenderly and went into the bathroom to clean himself up, then brought her a warm, wet washcloth and cleaned her too.

"I think we need a good, long soak in the tub together after we put Gabs down for the night," he said. "After I get ya messy a few more times, like."

She gave him a satisfied smile and sat up, reaching for her clothes, and began putting on her bra as Marcus stepped into his jeans and buttoned them.

"I'll help ya into the shower when I get back, Angel, and after that I'll head out and get us a pizza. Maybe we can christen the family room tonight after Gabs goes to sleep."

"Mmm, my Fionn naked on linen," she said with a naughty grin. "We'd better bring a towel or two."

Marcus picked up her panties, turned them right side out, and eased them up her legs, kissing her thigh as he did. "I'm goin' to enjoy the absolute fuck out of bein' here with you day in and day out, Bethany Grace. I just hope ya don't get completely sick of me."

"How could I get tired of being with you, Marcus?" she said, entirely serious. "I've never wanted to be anywhere or with anyone more in my life."

Marcus sat down beside her and put his arms around her, and she snuggled into him, slipping her arms around his neck. "I feel the exact same way, Angel," he said as he stroked her back. "You make this house a home."

They sat quietly, just holding each other for a few moments, and then Marcus handed her tank top and hoodie to her. He untwisted her shorts and slipped her right foot into the leg hole of the cutoffs before bringing the cast on her left leg through the other opening. Her other clothes back on, she pulled the shorts up her legs the rest of the way, wriggling to get them over her bottom. Marcus backed up to her and said, "Put your arms around my neck and I'll give ya a lift downstairs, darlin'. You can relax in the family room until I get back, unless you'd rather stay up here."

"I'll go downstairs. I want to see Gabrielle's face when she sees the house," she said as she wrapped her arms around his shoulders, and

he hoisted her onto his back, holding her under her thighs as he stood up.

"I think she's goin' to be absolutely thrilled to see her room mostly put together," Marcus said, trotting out of their bedroom. "You haven't seen it yet. Would ya like to make a stop there?"

"I'll see it with Gabs," she said, kissing the back of his neck. "I don't want you to be late to get her."

Marcus nodded and descended the stairs, set her down on a sofa in the family room, then brought her crutches to her, leaning down to give her a kiss. "I should be back in about thirty minutes or so. Do ya need anything at all before I go, Angel?"

"I just need for you to come back safely to me," she said with an adoring smile. "I love you, Fionn."

"I love you, too, Angel," he said, stealing one more kiss. "See you soon. Don't go tryin' anything dangerous now… like gettin' off that sofa," he teased, his lilting Irish accent softening the warning.

"I'll be careful," she said with a grin.

Marcus turned to leave, and she watched him go. When she was sure he'd left, she pulled herself up with her crutches and found some furniture polish, then set off for the living room to retrieve the roll of paper towels. She wiped down the leather sofa, then went into the dining room to clean both tables, grabbing her phone from the smaller table where it had been left in the heat of passion. Once she was finished, she made her way back into the kitchen to stow the can of polish and paper towels, smiling to herself as she thought about the afternoon she and Marcus had enjoyed.

Her tasks completed, she returned to the sofa in the family room, grabbed the remote, and turned the flatscreen on for some noise, then picked up her phone to call her best friend and bass player Garrett. He answered after a couple of rings, and she took a deep breath, steeling herself for the conversation she was about to have.

"Hey, Gare," she said as cheerfully as she could. "Just checking in to make sure you guys are ready for the trip."

"Hey, Beth," Garrett said, a smile in his voice. "How ya doin', Honey Bee?"

"I'm good," she said. "I miss you guys, and I can't wait to see you tomorrow."

"Is the lap of luxury getting dull so soon?" Garrett said with a chuckle. "Damn, girl, I'd be enjoying the fuck out of it if I were you."

"I am," she said with a giggle. "Are you ready to come out?"

"Uh, yeah, I think I am, Beth. I think we're all packed and set. Our flight leaves at like ten and we arrive around twelve-thirty your time, so I'm guessing we'll be up to the studio by three or so."

"Awesome, I can't wait," she said enthusiastically. "Garrett, are you alone right now?"

"I'm on the couch and Spence is in the bedroom watching some shit on his phone. Why?" Garrett asked, his tone shifting.

"I need to tell you something and I want it to be just between us for right now, Gare. No speaker, okay?" she said.

"That sounds ominous," Garrett said with a nervous laugh. "What's up?"

She took a deep breath and let it out before she said, "Remember the day I called you when I was going to have my leg X-rayed, and you were joking and asked if I'd run away with Marcus Jameson?"

"Yeah, vaguely," Garrett said tentatively.

"Well, I hadn't then, but I kinda have now," she said, relieved Garrett couldn't see her cheeks turning pink.

"Whoa," Garrett exclaimed. "You hooked up with Marcus?"

"Yeah. Way more than hooked up. He asked me to move in with him, Gare, and I said yes," she said softly. "I really love him. And he loves me, Garrett. I'm sitting in his new house… our new house… right now."

"Holy shit, Beth," Garrett said, sounding completely stunned at her revelation. "You love him?"

"I'm so in love with him I can't see straight, Gare," she gushed.

There was a heavy pause on the line as Garrett processed the information, but finally he let out a long breath. "I'm really happy for you, Beth. Really, I am. Does this mean no more touring?"

"Of course not," she assured him. "Marcus knows I'll be going back on the road once my leg has healed, and he's okay with it… well, mostly anyway. He says we'll just have to get creative to make it work."

"I take it you want me to break it to Will and Spence… before we catch you two all over each other?" Garrett asked.

"I was hoping you could tell them tonight, Gare," she said. "I'm hoping to avoid any weirdness when you get here tomorrow."

"You know Spencer's gonna freak the fuck out, right? He's always gonna have a thing for you, Beth."

"Yeah… I know. That's why I thought it might be better coming from you. You're the only one who can actually contain him. And he absolutely *cannot* make a scene in front of Matt or Taylor—and especially Marcus," she stressed. "Marcus still hasn't forgiven him for the way he acted when I told you guys I broke my leg."

"Understandable," Garrett said. "Spence was pretty much a huge dick about the whole thing. I think it was mostly jealousy talking, though. Does Marcus know you used to hook up with him?"

"I haven't told Marcus outright, but he's kind of guessed. He's not too fond of Spence, and between that and Taylor and Matt thinking we should replace him…"

"If he acts like an asshole, he's all done," Garrett said, completing her sentence for her.

"That's what I'm thinking, yeah," she said.

"Maybe that'd be better for you in the long run, Honey Bee," Garrett said, letting out a deep breath. "I'm not sure how you've put up with him this long, the way he's always hovering."

"He knows I'm never gonna be with him again. I was young and stupid back then, but I'm not falling for his bullshit anymore. He needs to move on and get a girlfriend already."

"I feel ya, Beth, but no one will ever live up to you, girl," Garrett said with a chuckle.

"Seriously, Garrett," she said. "You have to convince him to tone it down. You guys are gonna be here for a while, and Marcus is gonna be watching closely. If Spencer is even a little out of line, it won't be pretty. And even though Spence is a complete asshole sometimes, we've still been friends for a long time. I know how much the band means to him, and I don't want his thing for me to ruin our chances of Courtesan finally catching a break."

"I'll do my best, Beth," Garrett promised. "Spencer's probably gonna be really bummed when he finds out, but I'll try to convince him to put on a happy face."

"Have you guys been practicing? Have you gone over the things I told you to work on with him and Will?" she asked, praying he had.

"Yeah, we've run through a lot, and I think they sound better. I'm hoping maybe Patrick can work with Will some. Is he gonna be around?"

"I don't know," she said. "His wife just had to have emergency surgery and she's still recovering, but they're at Matt's house, so maybe he can come down one afternoon. I know he has to do a show Friday night."

"I thought he was just doing session work right now," Garrett said.

"He is, but he's been filling in for Taser's drummer, Corey Hamich. Corey broke his arm and he's been out for a while," she explained. "And Patrick's brother Liam is filling in for Julian on lead

guitar. Maybe we can all go to the show Friday night. I can text Li or his fiancée, Mara, and have you added to the guest list."

"Well, aren't you just hobnobbing with rock royalty these days, Ms. Waters. Next you're gonna tell me you know Mark Drummond and Brett Hollingsworth personally now," Garrett teased, and she grinned to herself.

Taser's bass player, Mark Drummond, was one of Garrett's absolute heroes. He'd always modeled his own playing on the style and skills of his two favorite bass players, Taylor Jameson and Mark Drummond. Garrett had been hugely excited to meet Taylor when they'd come out to the Jameson brothers' California studio on the day of Meghan and Aidan's wedding, but since he and Spencer had gone back to the motel rather than stay for the ceremony and reception, he'd missed the chance to meet Mark.

"Um… they were at the wedding, actually," she said, her grin widening. "They were sitting at my table with their wives. Brett and Mark are both good friends of the Jameson brothers, and they live pretty close by, I think."

"Holy fucking shit, Beth," Garrett said, his tone pure awe. "I would've pissed myself. Was Taylor at your table, too?"

"Yep, he was," she said. "I've gotten to know him and his wife pretty well, staying at their house and all. They're both incredibly nice and very real. The whole family has been so unbelievably welcoming to me. And Marcus and I went to Taser's last show and hung out with them afterwards. Mark is hilarious."

"You sure you ever want to leave?" Garrett said with a chuckle.

"No, but I don't want to lose myself, either, you know?" she said wistfully. "I refuse to give up on my dreams for a man, no matter how much I love him."

"Dreams can change, Beth," Garrett pointed out.

"You sound like you're trying to talk me out of going back on the road," she said, a sudden anxious edge creeping into her voice. "What's going on?"

"I'm not trying to talk you out of anything, Beth. It's just…" Garrett began, then paused, and a nervous knot tightened in her stomach.

"It's just what, Gare?" she asked, unsure whether she wanted an honest answer.

"Well… you're not the only one in love, Beth."

"Holy crap," she exclaimed. "Oh, you need to spill the tea, Garrett."

"I met someone the last time I was home, and since I've been back this time… well, things have been heating up," Garrett confessed.

"And you're thinking you don't want to leave and run the risk of Ms. Right moving on without you?" she asked, her stomach instantly relaxing.

"Uh… well… it's actually Mr. Right, Beth," Garrett said so quietly she almost didn't hear him.

"Get the fuck out," she said, smiling as she said it. "I've always wondered when you were gonna realize you're gay, Garrett."

"You knew I was gay? How, Beth? I didn't even know for sure until I met Zach," he said, sounding stunned.

"I don't know," she said with a giggle. "I've just always had a feeling. You've always been like one of my girlfriends… if I had any, that is. And you've never stared at me the way Spencer and Will do when we've had to change in the same room. I used to think it was because you thought of me like a sister, but after a while, I wondered."

"And you're okay with it? Me being gay, I mean?" Garrett asked.

"I think it's awesome, Garrett. I'm glad you finally figured it out. I love you and I want you to be happy, and if Zach makes you happy, then I can't wait to meet him."

"God, I love you, Beth," Garrett said, relief filling his voice. "I haven't told anyone, and I'm not sure Spence and Will are ready to hear it yet, so let's keep it between us for now, okay? I'm not sure Spence is gonna take it well, especially since we've been sharing a one-bedroom apartment for years. It's gonna weird him out."

"Guess he's gonna have to get over it, and it's not like you've been propositioning him or anything. How have you been seeing Zach without Spencer realizing?"

"I go to his place. Spence assumes I'm hooking up with a chick, and I've just let him think that. I thought maybe I'd break it to him and Will while we're in California. Want to help me?" he asked with a chuckle.

"Of course, I'll help you, if you want me to," she assured him. "You're my family, Gare Bear."

"And you're my little sister, Beth Honey. And the best little sister in the world."

She heard noise coming from the front of the house just then, the heavy front door clicking open. She hurriedly said, "Gare, I think Marcus is home, so I've gotta go. Text me after you tell Spencer and Will my news, okay?"

"Okay, I will. I can't wait to give you a big hug and see your beautiful face tomorrow, Honey Bee. Love you."

"Me too. And I love you, too," she said before she ended the call.

She lowered the phone, only to hear Marcus asking from the doorway, "Who is it ya love, then?"

She looked up to see him standing there, a stunned, almost hurt expression flashing across his handsome face.

"Beffany!" Gabrielle exclaimed, running to the sofa and jumping onto the cushions next to her. Gabrielle's little arms flew around her neck, pulling her into a tight bear hug.

"Welcome home, cutie pie," she said with a big smile at the little girl. "Did you have a good time at school?"

Gabrielle began rambling on excitedly about her day, and Bethany nodded and listened to her very intently, matching her enthusiasm. Marcus joined them on the sofa, sinking into it and slipping his muscular arm around her shoulders, and he grinned at Gabrielle's animated narrative. The second his daughter finally paused for a breath, he leaned in close, his voice dropping into a soft, careful whisper.

"Who were ya on the phone to, Angel?"

"I called Garrett to make sure they were ready for the trip tomorrow, and he's really excited," she replied.

"And you love him, do ya?" he asked tentatively, his thumb tracing a line across her shoulder.

"Garrett's my family, Marcus. Of course, I love him," she said nonchalantly.

"Should I be gettin' jealous, do ya think?" he asked, his eyes searching hers, genuine concern on his face.

"I love him a lot differently than I love you, Fionn," she stressed, leaning in to give him a reassuring kiss.

"Good to know," Marcus murmured, a slow, relieved smile spreading across his face as he gave her shoulder a loving squeeze.

She giggled lightly as she relaxed into his embrace, thinking that based on the conversation she'd just had with Garrett, Marcus had absolutely nothing to worry about.

"What's the joke, then?" Marcus asked.

"I'll tell you later," she said, giving his neck a kiss. She reached into her hoodie pocket and pulled out the little girl doll she'd discovered at the beach house. "Hey, cutie pie, I found this today when your daddy and I went to get your things. I thought she could be the boy doll's wee girl when we play. I've been keeping her safe for you."

Gabrielle beamed at the sight, her eyes lighting up as she hugged her again so hard that her little arms shook.

"Fanks, Beffany," she said, cuddling the doll tight to her chest. "Her name is Gabs."

"It's nice to meet you, Gabs," Bethany said, pinching the doll's tiny hand between her thumb and index finger and pretending to shake it. "I'm sure I'm gonna love you as much as my cutie pie here."

"Do ya want to see your room, baby girl?" Marcus asked.

"Yes, Daddy," Gabrielle said emphatically.

"Right, you two," Marcus said. "Let's get a move on."

Bethany stood up, grabbing her crutches, and Gabrielle and Marcus took very slow steps, waiting for her. Once they'd reached the bottom of the grand staircase, Marcus stopped and looked down at Gabrielle.

"This is never goin' to do, is it, baby girl?" he remarked to his daughter. Before Bethany could protest, he moved her crutches aside, bent over, and slung her smoothly over his shoulder.

"Me, too, Daddy! Me, too!" Gabrielle squealed, hopping up and down.

Marcus chuckled and had her walk up two steps first, then scooped her up over his other shoulder. He carried the two of them up the stairs, with Bethany and Gabrielle dangling upside down, looking at each other and giggling hysterically.

When they reached her room, Gabrielle vaulted out of Marcus's grip the second her feet hit the floor and began flitting from place to place, taking inventory of her things. Marcus set Bethany down gently on one of the two double beds in the room, then sat down right next to her. He looped a strong arm around her waist, and they both watched Gabrielle with pure amusement.

"I think she likes her room, Daddy," she said with a big smile, nudging his shoulder. "You did good."

Gabrielle marched over to a large toy chest, flung its heavy lid open, and peered inside. Without warning, she began tossing stuffed animals out onto the floor in a wild flurry, grabbing some to take over to her bed.

"How about ya pick three or four to take to bed, baby girl, instead of the whole lot," Marcus said with a chuckle. But Gabrielle completely ignored him and pulled more stuffed animals out until there was nothing left inside the toy chest. She sorted through the massive pile, studying each animal closely, but all at once, her little face took on a forlorn expression.

"What's the matter, Gabs?" Bethany asked, noticing the sudden sad droop of Gabrielle's shoulders.

"I can't find Mister Twunks," she said, her bottom lip quivering.

"Her stuffed elephant," Marcus whispered in her ear when she looked at him for an explanation. "One of her absolute favorites."

"Where are you, Mister Twunks?" Gabrielle called, her eyes filling with tears.

"Mister Trunks is probably just mixed in with the other toys, baby girl," Marcus said reassuringly. "Or maybe he's still at the beach house. I'll run over there tomorrow morning and have a proper look for him, but you've plenty of other animals to keep ya company tonight."

"We have to look for him wight now, Daddy," Gabrielle insisted, tears streaming down her face. "He's my best fwiend."

Marcus got off the bed with a sigh, beginning a thorough search through the other toy bins and shifting things in Gabrielle's closet. Gabrielle opened every single drawer in her dresser, then peered under the beds, but their search turned up empty.

"We have to go to the beach house wight now, Daddy," Gabrielle implored. "Mister Twunks is ascawed of being alone in the dark."

"I'll go have a look tomorrow, Gabs. Mister Trunks will be grand tonight. He's a big, brave elephant," Marcus said consolingly.

"No, Daddy! Now!" Gabrielle wailed, stamping a foot. "I'm not a big, bwave girl, and Mister Twunks keeps me safe."

"Daddy and Bethany will make sure you're safe, Gabs," he soothed as he picked Gabrielle up from the floor and held her close. "And I'll bet another of your animals can fill in for your elephant tonight."

"No, Daddy," Gabrielle sobbed into his shoulder as Marcus came back over and sat down next to Bethany. The little girl looked up at her with pleading in her eyes, then crawled into her lap, gripping her tightly around the neck.

"It's okay, cutie pie. We'll find Mister Trunks," Bethany said soothingly as she rubbed her back to comfort her, but she felt almost as terrible as Gabrielle, knowing all too well how much a stuffed animal could mean to a little girl. Her own elephant had been her constant companion and confidant, and her protector from monsters under the bed for countless years and in multiple foster homes. Even now, just seeing his floppy ears and tattered trunk gave her a small measure of repose. And then it hit her.

"Marcus," she said quietly, catching his eye over the little girl's head. "Will you go get Eebo for me?"

"No, Angel," he said softly, shaking his head. "He means too much to ya."

"Please, Fionn," she said, looking deeply into his eyes. "I want to. Please?"

Marcus studied her face for a moment, then reluctantly got up and left the room while she continued to rock Gabrielle and rub her back, whispering soothingly to her. He came back a minute later carrying her worn and beloved stuffed elephant, hesitating before he handed the tattered toy over.

"Gabrielle," she began, pulling back just enough to look at her. "This is my Mister Trunks. His name is Eebo. Will you let him be your friend and protect you until we can find your elephant?"

Gabrielle stopped sobbing, glancing at the stuffed animal Bethany held out for her, and she tentatively wrapped an arm around it, bringing it close to her. "Weally, Beffany?" she asked, her brownish-hazel eyes wide with awe.

"Eebo's been my best friend for years and years, and he might not be as handsome as Mister Trunks, but he's very lovable just the same," she told Gabrielle.

"Gabs, you must promise to take very good care of Eebo while ya have him," Marcus told his daughter, his voice thick with sudden emotion. "He's Bethany's only treasure from when she was a wee girl, and it's very kind of her to lend him to ya."

"I pwomise, Daddy," Gabrielle said, nodding vigorously. "Fank you, Beffany." She threw her arms around Bethany's neck to give her a fierce hug and a wet kiss on the cheek.

"Now, set Eebo safely on your bed and let's put the other animals away, baby girl," Marcus instructed.

Gabrielle slid off Bethany's lap to do as she was told, carefully placing Eebo on her pillow and giving him a tender kiss on his tattered trunk. She scrambled to the pile of toys on the floor and began tossing the other stuffed animals back into the toy chest, her tears now gone.

Marcus hugged Bethany very close, burying his face in her hair as he whispered, "Thank you, Angel. That has to be the kindest gesture I've ever witnessed. You're a marvel, Bethany Grace, and your middle name suits you better than ya think, I'd say."

"All done, Daddy," Gabrielle announced with a triumphant smile as she let the lid of the toy chest drop with a thud.

"Good job, Gabs," Marcus praised, looking up. "Bethany and I have decided we'd like to bring a pizza home and eat here tonight. Maybe a picnic in the family room. What d'ya think, baby girl?"

"Can Eebo come, too?" Gabrielle asked excitedly.

"I don't think pizza does any good for elephants," Marcus said, and Bethany could tell by his voice that he was gearing up for a protest. "And Eebo looks like he's dead on his feet, love. Now, do ya think you can play here in your room for a few minutes while I help Bethany into the shower?"

"Yes, Daddy," Gabrielle said, nodding her head. "I'm a big girl."

"You are a big girl now," Marcus agreed with a proud, loving smile. "Stay here in your room, baby girl, until I come back, yeah?"

Gabrielle nodded again and immediately began going from place to place in her bedroom, surveying the toys and picture books she hadn't seen in three months. Within seconds, she was chattering away to her fairy doll, explaining what each toy was.

"Why don't you pick out a game we can play while your daddy goes to get the pizza, cutie pie," Bethany suggested. "We'll take it down to the family room and get ready for our picnic."

Gabrielle looked overjoyed at the prospect of having her undivided attention, and she raced to her bookshelf, haphazardly stacked several games in her arms, then deposited them onto the bed before she climbed up next to her. "I love you, Beffany," Gabrielle said, wrapping her small arms around her waist. "You're my best fwiend."

"And you're my best wee girl, cutie pie," she said, tears glistening in her eyes as she pulled her close.

CHAPTER 2

Amber

As soon as Amber and Tim got back to their apartment after their shift, she collapsed on the sofa. It had been her first day back on Jameson Mountain since she'd been attacked by Tim's sister and her band of thugs. She'd suffered a fractured rib, and then a few days later, David Nolan had hit her in the very same rib when she'd tried to wrestle him off his sister, Allie. Tim had insisted she recuperate for two weeks despite her protests. He'd won, resulting in her being a lazy sack of shit hanging around the apartment up until today. And now she was worn out.

Tim had put her on light duty, so she'd spent most of her day sitting on her ass in an electric golf cart, driving from Taylor's house, past the studio, through the narrow strip of woods, and around Marcus's place making sure everything was secure. Midway through the day, Frank met her at the studio, which also housed the mountain's Command Center, and heaped a stack of paperwork on her, asking her to try to do a little each day during the week.

Ugh, paperwork. It wasn't her thing, but Frank had always been good to her. She'd readily agreed to help him out when he'd called to ask, thinking it couldn't hurt to have Frank owe her a favor. She'd gotten through more than half of it today and hoped to complete it tomorrow so it would be out of the way for the rest of the week.

"You want a beer or a cocktail, woman?" Tim asked, heading toward the kitchen.

"Sure, Green Eyes," she said, giving him a smile. "I'll have whatever you're having."

"We could have a dirty martini to celebrate your first day back," Tim proposed, shooting her a grin as he opened the cabinet that held the liquor.

"Are you expecting the same outcome as the first time we ever had dirty martinis together?" she asked, her grin matching his.

"Here's hoping," Tim said with a wink. "I've missed the fuck out of seeing you at work every day for the last two weeks, and even now that you're back I'll barely see you."

"You're the one who gave me golf cart duty, Green," she retorted. "By the way, I think we may have a trail camera biting the dust. I noticed it glitching momentarily on the screen at the studio Command Center today."

"I'll send one of the guys out to check it and replace it if need be," Tim said, pouring vodka into a shaker. "I'll text Adam. He's on swing shift. He's probably secured his perimeter and is in the main shack by now."

He grabbed a jar of olives out of the refrigerator and poured some of the juice into the shaker before filling it with ice, capping it, and shaking the hell out of it. Then he strained the chilled liquid into two martini glasses.

"Three olives, woman?" he asked, plucking them from the jar with a toothpick.

"Yeah, that works, thanks. Hey, why don't we get pizza delivered tonight?" she suggested. "It'll save us cooking and cleaning up."

"Are you tired, Amber?" Tim asked as he carried their drinks to the coffee table and sank down into the cushions next to her.

"I hate to admit it, but I am," she said, picking up her drink. "I've been lounging around for too long. Gotta get my stamina back up. Cheers, Green Eyes."

"Cheers," Tim replied, clinking his glass against hers. "And you weren't lounging, Amber. You were healing. Big difference. You

know, if I remember correctly, we started kissing right around our third or fourth sip the first time around."

"Guess we'd better drink fast then, huh?" she retorted, flashing him a devilish grin. "Because I definitely think we should move it past the making out stage pronto. I told you I'm always at my horniest in the afternoon."

Tim downed his glass in one enormous gulp, then urged her with his eyes to do likewise. She took a big sip, then another, and set her glass down on the table, giving him an expectant look. In an instant, Tim picked her up and carried her into the bedroom, frantically removing her clothes the second her feet hit the floor.

"I've been thinking about this all day, woman," he breathed as he ran his lips up her neck, sending a delightful shiver up her spine. "Are you gonna insist on a shower first, or can we just be extra dirty this afternoon? Please say extra dirty."

"Pants off now, Green," Amber ordered, her hands going to his waistband. "Dirty it is."

An hour later, they stepped out of the shower, relaxed and refreshed from their lovemaking, and currently squeaky clean.

"I'll order a pizza so we can eat soon," Tim said, pulling her against his chest. "I'd kind of like an early night in bed so I can enjoy some more of your hospitality before we go to sleep."

"You must be reading my mind, Green Eyes," she said, planting a kiss on his strong jawline. "It's definitely a double-feature kind of night."

"Let me get your robe for you, Amber," he offered, reaching a long, muscular arm out to grab it from the hook on the door.

Once he'd slipped it onto her shoulders, he grabbed his robe and tied it closed, then took her hand to lead her back out into the living room.

"Relax and unwind, woman. I'm gonna call for our pizza and get some wash going. Would you like another drink?"

"I'll just finish this one, Tim," she said, gesturing at her martini glass. "I'm not sure I can handle another one, especially if you want me to be awake later for round two."

"I definitely want you awake," Tim laughed, grabbing her for a kiss before she reclined on the sofa.

Tim strode out of the living room to throw their uniforms and workout clothes into the washer while he called the pizza place, and Amber turned the TV on. As she was flipping through channels with the remote, a thought struck her. She grabbed the file folder lying next to her on the end table and began pulling the pages out of it one by one, spreading them across the coffee table to study them.

The pages were a printout of Bill Nolan's personal banking transactions, and she and Tim were still trying to piece together a puzzle. When they'd first gained access to Bill's account, they'd noticed a deposit for $100,000 from a company called KJA Financial Strategies in December of the previous year. Amber had tried researching the company, but she'd hit a dead end.

They'd also questioned several recurring debits paid to a property management company. Their minds had immediately jumped to the possibility of Bill paying for a love nest for a mistress, but something didn't add up there. Neither of them could see Bill Nolan, CEO of a large university research hospital, being that sloppy. He'd cover his tracks better than that if he was simply having an affair.

Amber scanned those transactions, mentally adding them together, and arrived at a stunning conclusion. Tim reappeared then and, seeing her studying the sheets, asked what she was doing.

"I just realized something, Tim," she said, looking up at him like a sniper round had just gone through her brain. "The payments to that property management company total exactly $50,000. Isn't it a little

coincidental that Bill received a hundred grand in December right when grades were released, and immediately started paying out rent for half that much? Look at the dates."

"The deposit was on December 18th, and the payments started on the 20th. That would have given Kyle Vandemore enough time to see his son's GPA, wouldn't it?" Tim remarked.

"That's what I'm thinking," she agreed. "I can almost guarantee Kyle Vandemore is behind KJA Financial Strategies, even if we can't prove it yet. And if our theory is correct and the transfers to the property management company are installments to somebody for changing Jonathan's grades, do you know what that means?"

"Yeah, it means Bill Nolan didn't just actively commit fraud; he made himself fifty grand richer doing it," Tim said.

"I've checked into that property management company and finally found an address for them. When I plugged it into Google Maps satellite view, it showed a strip mall with a UPS Store. I have a feeling the address is nothing more than a mailbox there. We could drive over there to confirm, but I'm pretty sure I'm right."

"We can head over there tomorrow after work and check it out," Tim proposed. "I wonder if Matt's had any luck finding out anything about KJA."

"Text him on your secure phone and ask him," Amber said with a shrug. "Maybe he has access to more insider info than we do."

"Yeah, I'll update him and find out if he's come across any missing puzzle pieces," Tim said, grabbing his phone. "Have you mentioned anything to Allie yet?"

"Not yet, but I probably should once we have a clearer picture. I just don't want her to get hurt in any of this. Her father's an asshole and probably a corporate criminal, and the poor girl is on bed rest for her pregnancy. I'm not sure now is the best time to clue her in. I'd say we wait until she hits her second trimester."

"Yeah, valid," Tim agreed, just as a knock sounded on the door. "That must be our pizza."

Tim strolled to the front door while Amber got up and went to the kitchen to retrieve plates from a cabinet and set the kitchen table. Her heart stopped when she heard Tim say, "Hi, Matt."

There was no time to hide. Amber was sure Matt suspected that she and Tim were more than just roommates after his last visit to their apartment two weeks ago, and now he was going to catch them both in robes with wet hair. Her mind worked feverishly to spin a story for their employer, but her panic kept her from coming up with anything that sounded legitimate.

"Sorry to disturb you, Tim," she heard Matt say, and she glanced at the door to see him peeking in. "If this isn't a good time…"

"No worries, Matt. I was just about to text you," Tim said casually, but Amber could hear the anxiety in his tone. "Please come in. Amber and I both just cleaned up after a workout and decided to order a pizza. You're welcome to stay for dinner."

Matt stepped in, appraising Tim in his robe, then looked over at her, his eyes going to her wet hair before dropping to the robe she was wearing.

"Must've been quite a workout," Matt said dryly, a smirk playing on his lips.

"Just a little strength training and a quick run," Amber cut in, sure her reddening cheeks would betray the calm demeanor she was trying to pull off. "How are you, Matt? Please forgive the robe. I'm waiting for the dryer to hurry up so I have something to put on. I always forget to do laundry."

"Uh-huh," Matt said, looking away.

This was it. They were busted for sure this time. The worst part was she didn't have any clothes to change into in the second bedroom

that she was supposedly living in. She couldn't go into the master bedroom to get dressed without completely showing her cards.

"Why don't you have a seat, Matt?" Tim suggested, motioning to the sofa. "Amber just had an epiphany with our Bill Nolan quest and we want to tell you about it. Can I get you a cocktail or a beer?"

"I'd love a beer, Tim, thanks," Matt said as he took a spot on the sofa. "I don't want to interrupt your dinner, though," he added, surveying the two martini glasses on the coffee table.

Amber had forgotten about those damned glasses. They were the evidence that the timeline she'd just given him was pure bullshit. Matt had a good idea of the hours they worked and the shifts they covered, and there was no way she and Tim could have driven home from work, launched into a workout and run, taken a shower, and enjoyed a cocktail in that short amount of time. The question was how he was going to react.

She moved over to the sofa to join Matt, sinking into a cushion with a crushing feeling of dread pushing her down. The sofa could swallow her up as far as she was concerned. She might be unemployed in the next few minutes.

Tim carried a beer bottle and a clean glass over to Matt, then sat down in the chair across from the sofa.

"Thanks, mate," Matt said as he poured the golden liquid into his glass. "Am I drinking alone?"

"Uh, right, I'll have a beer with you," Tim said, jumping up. "Amber, do you want a beer?"

"I could be persuaded," she said as she watched Tim scoop up the martini glasses to carry them into the kitchen. "Do I still have a Sammy in the fridge?"

"I think you might," Tim said, hurrying into the kitchen.

While Tim was fetching their beers, Amber caught Matt up on what she'd uncovered before Tim returned. "It hit me while I was in

the shower, and I called to Tim to check my math," she said, trying to plug the holes in her story. "Have you been able to find out anything about KJA Financial Strategies?"

"Not much, but I'm still digging. I did realize that the Vandemore family consists of Kyle, his wife Anna, and their son Jonathan," he said, gazing pointedly at her.

"KJA…" she said, immediately catching on. "Sounds like old Kyle puts his son above his own wife. Normal people would have made it KAJ, right? Husband, wife, and son."

"My thoughts exactly," Matt agreed, giving a nod.

"Our biggest problem is proving Kyle is behind that company and figuring out who Bill might have paid to change Jonathan's grades—if the grades were changed. We have no way of knowing that unless we can access the university system," Tim chimed in.

"I think we should loop Frank into this," Matt proposed. "Frank has contacts unavailable to the rest of us. I'll ensure he understands I asked you to do this. It won't negatively affect your positions."

"Yeah, whatever you think is best, Matt," Tim said, glancing at Amber with a flash of panic on his handsome face.

"Frank will be okay with it," Matt assured them. "He's not opposed to getting his hands dirty when the need arises. The man was bleedin' legendary as a bodyguard. Some of the stories I've heard would blow your fucking minds."

"I'd love to hear them," Amber said, giving a laugh. "Frank definitely gives off a vibe that he's not someone to be fucked with."

"I can guarantee he's not someone to be fucked with," Matt said, chuckling. He paused, his expression turning serious. "So, do you two want to be the ones to tell him about your actual living arrangement, or do ya want me to soften the blow for ya?"

Amber's heart shot into her throat. She cut her eyes to Tim to see his face paling. Totally busted. She'd been right. Matt was sharp and didn't miss a thing.

"How did you know?" she asked in almost a whisper, even though she didn't need him to answer.

"I have eyes," Matt replied, giving another laugh. "You'd have to be a bleedin' eejit not to see it. How long have the two of ye been a couple?"

"Since we snuck Allie into Patrick's first show with Taser," Amber confessed. "We didn't mean for it to happen, Matt, and we promise we won't let our relationship affect our jobs in any way. We've discussed that a million times."

"I genuinely believe that, Amber," Matt said reassuringly. "Does the team know?"

Tim, who seemed to have been temporarily struck dumb, finally opened his mouth. "No one knows, Matt. Well… actually Adam knows. He figured it out, but he and I are tight."

"Adam knows?" Amber exclaimed, her head snapping around to glare at her boyfriend. "When the fuck did that happen? And why didn't you tell me?"

"I was afraid to tell you," Tim admitted sheepishly. "I figured you'd pack up and move back to Boston if you thought anyone knew. I don't want that to happen, Amber. I can handle any consequence but that."

"You have seemed loads happier since Amber arrived, mate," Matt teased, diffusing some of the tension. "And ya know, I actually imagined the two of you as a couple when Amber first joined the team. Maybe I'm a fucking psychic, yeah? Look, I'll clue Frank in. He needs to know. I'll tell him you came to me to discuss the situation and asked for my advice. And I'll swear that you wanted to tell him yourselves, but I insisted I be the one to do it. It'll be grand."

"Thanks, Matt," Amber and Tim chorused, then glanced at each other.

Tim was wearing a relieved smile, but Amber's mind was working overtime. Matt knew. Frank would soon know. She could deal with that. She was probably using up her owed favor before she'd even finished the fucking paperwork. The part that bothered her the most was that Adam knew. Worse, Tim hadn't clued her in. Tim was definitely getting an earful tonight after Matt departed, and round two might just be off the table.

CHAPTER 3

Bethany

Bethany and Gabrielle were into their second game of Hi Ho! Cherry-O after three games of Candy Land, and Marcus still wasn't back. He'd been gone a long time, and Bethany was starting to get worried about him. She grabbed her phone and was just about to call him when he came striding into the family room with a pizza box in one hand and a huge shopping bag in the other. He set the bag down next to a chair and took the pizza out to the kitchen before disappearing again, and a minute later he returned, handing her an enormous bouquet of red roses and Gabrielle a brand-new stuffed elephant.

"What are these for?" she asked in surprise.

"Because I love ya, and you deserve beautiful things," Marcus said matter-of-factly, giving her shoulder a gentle squeeze.

"Thank you, Fionn," she said, burying her nose in the bouquet. "They're so pretty. This was so sweet of you."

"I'll put them in some water after we eat, but let's have our pizza while it's still hot, darlin'," Marcus said, leaning down to give her a lingering kiss.

"This isn't Mister Twunks, Daddy," Gabrielle said, holding the toy up as if Marcus needed clarification.

"Of course not. This elephant is a girl, Gabs. Her name is Mrs. Trunks," Marcus explained, and Gabrielle pondered this for a minute, holding the stuffed animal out to inspect it. "Do ya know what else she told me?" Marcus asked his daughter.

Gabrielle shook her head, her face lit with wonder as she whispered, "She can talk, Daddy?"

"She can, yeah, because she spoke to me very, very quietly when I passed her on the shelf in the shop. She told me her husband, Mister

Trunks, had gone out looking for his wee girl, and that she was terribly lonely without him and needed a little girl to love her. So I told her I happened to have a wee girl who was missing her sweet elephant, and she begged me to bring her home to ya, Gabs."

"Weally, Daddy?" Gabrielle said in astonishment.

"Really, Gabs," Marcus said, his eyes crinkling. "And I'll bet she'll talk to you if ya listen closely enough."

Gabrielle put the elephant's head next to one ear and shut her eyes tightly, then almost immediately declared, "She talked, Daddy!"

"She did?" Marcus asked, feigning amazement. "And what did she tell ya?"

"She says she likes it here," Gabrielle said as she hugged Mrs. Trunks close.

"Ya know, I had a feeling she would," he said, chuckling lightly. "And I'm sure she'd love to sit in your lap while we eat, baby girl."

Bethany took Marcus's hand and squeezed it, completely enamored of this man who was so thoughtful. She looked up at him to smile, and he leaned down to give her a tender kiss before disappearing into the kitchen. He came back with plates, forks, and napkins, along with a sippy cup full of milk for Gabrielle and a glass of wine for her, then brought in the pizza box, serving each of them a slice of hot pizza before returning to the kitchen once more.

Bethany gathered up stray game pieces and stowed them in their boxes, and she was just about to fold the game board when she saw Gabrielle reach out to stick her finger in the bubbling cheese on her slice. She grabbed her little hand to stop her, cautioning, "Blow on it first, cutie pie. It's super hot. I don't want you to burn yourself."

Marcus returned with three bowls of salad and a pint of beer for himself and sat down on the floor at the coffee table next to her. Bethany stacked the game boxes on top of each other and glanced at Gabrielle, who was staring at her salad with a disdainful expression.

"You can eat some salad while your pizza cools off, Gabs," she told the little girl, who looked slightly disgruntled that she couldn't dive into her pizza slice. "Salad will help you grow up big and strong like your daddy."

"And you, Beffany?" Gabrielle asked.

"Yeah, like me, too, I guess," she said, although *strong* would never be a word she used to describe herself if she was being completely honest. "What do you think, cutie pie? Isn't this an awesome picnic?"

"My best picnic ever," Marcus said. "I think it's because I have my two favorite girls in the world to share it with."

Gabrielle speared some lettuce with her fork and put it in her mouth, and once she'd chewed it and swallowed, she said, "I like salad, Beffany. I think I gwowed alweady."

"She never touches her salad," Marcus whispered to her. "You truly are a marvel, Bethany Grace."

"I'm glad you like your salad, Gabs. I do, too," Bethany said enthusiastically as she took a bite. "Veggies are so good for you, and so is fruit. Yum, yum, yummy, I love my veggies and fruit."

"Yum, yum, yummy," Gabrielle repeated, smiling at her while she got more lettuce on her fork and took another mouthful. "Daddy, do we have any fwuit?"

"I'll find ya some for dessert," Marcus said, and Bethany could see the amusement in his eyes. "I picked up some apples to have with our porridge tomorrow while I was out gettin' the pizza, but I'll let ya have one tonight for dessert, yeah?"

"Yay!" Gabrielle exclaimed as she worked on polishing off her salad. "I want to be big and stwong like you and Beffany, Daddy."

The three of them chatted and laughed as they ate, and Bethany recounted stories from picnics with her parents when she was a little girl and told them how they used to go camping and make s'mores

over their campfire. Gabrielle had never tasted a s'more, and Marcus admitted he hadn't either, so she promised them that when the outdoor areas had been furnished, they'd light the fire pit and toast marshmallows for the treat.

After they'd eaten their fill of pizza and salad, they sat together on the sofa and watched Gabrielle's favorite cartoon adaptation of Cinderella. Gabrielle sang along to the movie's songs, and Bethany was impressed that such a small girl could stay in tune as well as she did.

"I think you might have a singer in the making," she said.

"I'm hoping she might choose a normal job with proper hours and a lot less grief," he said, and she chortled in agreement.

"Garrett gave me some surprising news when I talked to him," she whispered while the movie played. "Well, not really surprising, I guess. I suspected all along."

"What news?" Marcus asked, leaning over to press his lips against her neck.

"This is strictly between us, okay? You can't tell anyone… not even your brothers."

"I'll lock it away, Angel," Marcus vowed.

"Garrett came out," she announced.

"As in, he's out of the closet, is it?" Marcus asked with a stunned expression. "I never would've called that one. Mind you, I only spent a couple of hours with your bandmates."

"I kinda saw it coming," she said. "He was surprised when I told him I'd thought he was gay all along."

"How did you know?" Marcus asked.

"There were signs," she said. "He's never tried to peek at me like the other guys when I'm changing, for one."

"Spencer and Will watch ya undress?" Marcus asked more loudly than he should have, his eyes narrowing into a glare.

"Well, it's not like I'm doing a striptease for them," she said firmly. "But there have been times when we've all had to get ready in one room and I noticed their glances in my direction. It's just guys being guys."

"Not lads who have any real respect for their bandmate," Marcus insisted. "Basic manners say they offer ya the bleedin' room to yourself first… no exceptions."

"I've known them for more than six years, Marcus. We've lived together in two motel rooms for that long, and they've never done anything more than glance. They're like my brothers."

"I don't want them even glancing, Bethany," Marcus fumed, his jaw set.

Gabrielle put a little finger to her lips. "Shhh, Daddy," she said, shooting him an annoyed look before her eyes went back to the flatscreen.

Marcus mumbled, "Sorry, Gabs," and lowered his voice to a loud, tense whisper. "I want your naked body for my eyes only, Bethany, and that's the end of it. And please tell me you shared one of those motel rooms with Garrett, and not Spencer, over the last six years."

The only answer she gave him was an eye roll. The fact was, she preferred to room with Garrett because they got along so well. But there had been times when she'd been forced to camp out in one room with two of her bandmates because the third was getting busy with someone in the next room. Whenever this occurred and Spencer wasn't the one getting lucky, he always wanted to share a bed with her rather than Will or Garrett, and because of this, she'd made Garrett promise to either remain celibate or let her stay in his room and watch.

"How many times did ya room with Spencer?" Marcus asked very quietly.

"Marcus," she said, pushing him away. "Have I ever asked you about any of the hundreds of women you've slept with?"

"Well, first of all there haven't been hundreds, and second, I'm not shoving any of them in your face tomorrow, am I?" he argued.

"No, I just got one shoved in my face today," she retorted, since his ex, Arielle, had shown up at the beach house unexpectedly while she and Marcus were there with the movers to get Gabrielle's toys and furniture.

"That was completely out of the blue and ya know it," he shot back. "And third, you're after admitting now that Spencer's done more than just glance at you."

She let out a frustrated sigh. Deciding to tell him just to end the interrogation, she said, "It was a long time ago, Marcus. I was sixteen or seventeen and it was over in like weeks. Maybe even days. And it has absolutely nothing to do with you and me, so can we just drop it now that you know?"

"Is he the one who has you crying and fighting the mattress every morning? Was he the asshole?" Marcus asked, a look of bewilderment and rising anger on his face.

"No," she said sharply.

"Was he your first, Bethany?" Marcus pressed, his voice barely audible.

"No," she whispered, closing her eyes as a suffocating memory crashed down on her. She turned her face away from him and snuggled into Gabrielle, unwilling to say another word.

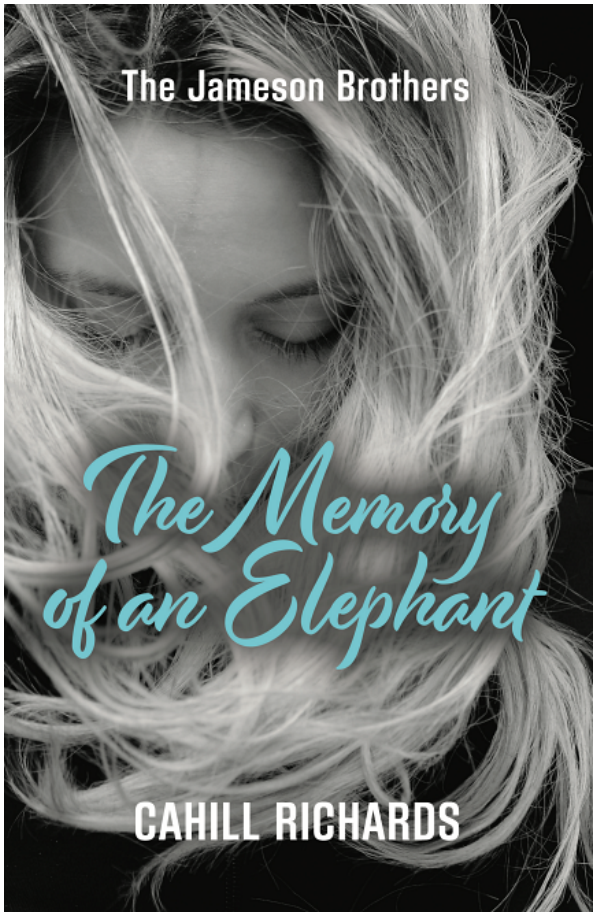
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