Discipline

Ellie’s arms began to shake as pain shot up to her left shoulder. She fell back onto her left hip, wincing against the ache that plagued her daily.

“Dammit!”

She laid back on her mat, covering her eyes with her arm. It had been nearly two years since the accident. Ellie scoffed. Accident. Could you really call it an accident when your mother hired someone to run you off the road and try to kill you?

“Not you, the woman you love,” Ellie whispered harshly. This bad attitude is not what Hunter built this room for. Ellie thought back to the day Hunter revealed the “in-home yoga studio” to her and smiled warmly at the memory. After months of surgeries, physical therapy, and arduous recovery, having a place to go to relax her mind was exactly what Ellie needed. Knowing that Hunter spent much of her free time — of which she didn’t have a lot — building the room with her own hands made it even more special.

Hunter stood silently at the door and watched her wife. An array of emotions crossed Ellie’s face in the couple of minutes since Hunter had been there. Of course, Hunter had heard the whisper and knew precisely what Ellie was thinking about. Hunter had been worried about what this room would bring out for Ellie. She knew from personal experience that things could get pretty dark when you spent too much time listening to your head. However, Hunter trusted Ellie to come to her if things got too bad. Watching Ellie now, though, confused Hunter. Was Ellie mad? Sad? Happy? Exhausted?

“Baby?”

Ellie gasped. Her heartbeat spiked, and she sat up abruptly. She hissed at the sharp stab of pain that greeted her. “Ow.”

Hunter was immediately by Ellie’s side. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“You didn’t. Just startled.” Ellie swatted at Hunter’s probing hands. “Stop, honey. I’m fine. How long have you been standing there?”

Hunter stopped with the “doctor hands,” as Ellie had begun to call them. How fast her mind had switched from watching Ellie in her yoga pants and wanting to touch her in all kinds of ways to being a worrywart.

“Um, long enough to see a few different emotions on your face. Frustration, anger, and happiness, I think. Wanna talk about it?”

Ellie patted the mat next to her, inviting Hunter to relax next to her. Once Hunter was situated, Ellie laid down with her head on Hunter’s thigh.

“You’re pretty good at reading me,” Ellie confessed. “The frustration was not being able to do a pose that I’ve done countless times before, which made me think of why I can’t. Then I got angry at my mother for trying to kill the woman I love. And that made me think of how you built this room for me as a place of calmness and relaxation. The happiness you saw was me thinking of you and that toolbelt of yours.”

Hunter chuckled. “You really did like that thing, didn’t you?” She recalled how Ellie asked Hunter to wear the toolbelt — and only the toolbelt — to bed one night. Of course, Hunter filled it with different kinds of “screwdrivers.” That was a fun night.

“I did. Very much so,” Ellie winked.

“Ahem. Okay, let’s talk this out before I’m incapable of forming coherent sentences.”

“Rendering you speechless sounds more fun.”

“Baby!” Hunter dug her into the mat to prevent herself from doing the touching she was fantasizing about earlier. After a moment of internal debate, Hunter addressed Ellie’s first emotion. “This yoga position, is it easy?”

Ellie knew her wife very well, and Hunter would always put Ellie’s needs before her own. And intimacy for Ellie included communication.

“Well, no. But. . .”

“But?” Hunter prompted.

“It’s been nearly two years since. . .” Ellie couldn’t call it an accident. Every time she tried, she remembered being in the courtroom, testifying against her mother. She remembered how they sentenced her and took her away, and all Ellie could think at that moment was, That’s it? That’s all my life is worth? “Since this happened to me. It’s aggravating that I’m not stronger yet.”

“El, you say two years like that’s a long time, and it’s not. We’ve been married for

almost as long, and I would dare say we haven't had anywhere near enough time together."

"That's different, honey."

Hunter shrugged. "I suppose. Would you like to hear it from my perspective?"

Ellie looked up at her wife. There was a far-off look in Hunter's eyes. "Yes."

"When I realized it was you on that gurney, I lost it. And I'm not just talking about emotionally. My entire career counted on me making fast, tough decisions. I saw your face, I saw the. . ." Hunter shook her head. "I forgot all my training. I forgot everything, Ellie, except you and how much I loved you. From the time they took you into surgery to the moment you woke up from your coma, those were the longest days of my life. It felt as though each minute that ticked by was an eternity, and I was holding my breath the entire time. When you opened your eyes and said my and Jessie's names, I finally had air again. So I get it when you say it feels like it's taking a long time. Believe me. If I could take your place, I would. God, baby, I would have taken your place that day in a heartbeat."

"Don't say that, Hunter. I wouldn't have been strong enough to see you like that. And to know my mother did it to you?" Ellie shivered. "I know I'm being a baby about this. . ."

"You're not." Hunter twirled her finger in Ellie's ponytail and tugged on it. "How about this? I will do yoga with you, and you can teach me from the very beginning how to do this pose."

"You hate yoga!" Ellie laughed.

"I don't hate it. It's just. . .look, I can pick up some weights, do my sets, and feel good about it. But yoga? It's really hard! I end up feeling like a failure or a total noob."

Ellie sat up, crossed her legs into the lotus position, and smiled at Hunter. "You pick up weights and do short bursts of strength training. Yoga is more mental, baby. It tests your inner strength while challenging you to hold positions for longer."

"My inner strength is weak as hell," Hunter confessed with a chuckle. "But I think I'm ready to learn more than pradayama breathing."

Ellie snorted.

"What?"

“Pranayama,” Ellie corrected.

“What is Pradayama, then?”

Ellie bit her cheek. God, she loved this woman. “Prada is a high-end fashion brand, honey, and Pradayama is. . . well, nothing.”

“Oh. Well, what fashion brand is this position you’re going to be teaching me?” Hunter asked without a hint of sarcasm.

Ellie shook her head. Oh boy, that goofy, lopsided grin Hunter was giving her right now did things to her body. She couldn’t adore Hunter more for offering to do something she didn’t enjoy just to help Ellie with her struggles. That’s what love and marriage were all about.

“It’s called Bakasana, or Crane Pose.” Ellie reached past Hunter to get her phone, laughing at Hunter’s mutterings about why the names had to be complicated. “Saying Bakasana isn’t as hard as doing it, honey. And really? How many medical terms do you use a day?”

“That’s different. I went to school to learn all those weird terms.”

“It’s always different from someone else’s perspective,” Ellie winked. After a quick search, she turned her phone toward Hunter. “This is Bakasana.”

Hunter’s eyes nearly popped out of her head. “You’re kidding, right?” Ellie shook her head. “You can do this?!”

“Well, not at the moment, but yes.”

“Why?”

Ellie’s eyebrows shot up. “Why can I do it?”

“No, why do you? To me, that looks like the pose of defeat cuz I don’t think I can do that!”

Ellie rubbed Hunter’s thigh. “You can. It just takes some practice. Once you do, you’ll feel strong and balanced. It has a lot of benefits in different areas of the body. But the reason I was trying again is because it helps with the hip flexors.”

Hunter glanced down at Ellie’s left hip. Even after physical therapy, it gave Ellie problems. However, Hunter couldn’t help but be grateful for the pain because the alternative — Ellie being paralyzed — was worse in her mind. She hoped Ellie felt the

same way.

Hunter clapped her hands and rubbed them together. “Okay, let’s do this!”

“W-what? Now? You have jeans on, honey, and that’s not going to be comfortable for you.”

Hunter hopped up from her seated position and shimmied out of her jeans. Then, she proceeded to strip her shirt off. By the time she was done, Ellie was slack-jawed, and Hunter was in a pair of tight black ‘stud’ boxers and a matching sports bra.

“Now what?” Hunter asked as though she hadn’t just performed a striptease in front of her stunned wife.

“Um.” Don’t say make love! Oh, but Ellie wanted to. Badly. Wait. We’re home alone, and Jessie isn’t due until tomorrow. Why shouldn’t we take advantage of it before Jessie comes home for the holidays? Ellie laid back on the yoga mat and beckoned her wife.

“Now we see how long you can hold a plank.” Ellie guided Hunter until she was straddling Ellie. “Put your hands by my shoulders.” Hunter complied, and Ellie continued. “Get into plank position, but spread your legs wider than hip-width. That helps with your balance.” And it helps me.

“Wait, you want me to do this over you?” Hunter asked, and Ellie nodded. Whatever you do, don’t fall on top of Ellie. That was the first thought Hunter had. Then the devil on her shoulder asked her what would be so bad about being on top of Ellie. Hunter took a deep breath and lifted herself into a straight-arm plank.

“Good,” Ellie praised. “Nice and steady. Keep your breathing even. In through the nose, out through the mouth.” She watched as Hunter’s nostrils flared and chest rose as she breathed in. Then, she felt the tickle of Hunter’s breath, the fading scent of toothpaste from Hunter’s morning routine, on her face. That’s all it took for Ellie to let herself take advantage of her concentrating wife. She reached up and palmed Hunter’s full breasts.

Hunter’s arms buckled, but she managed to keep herself erect. Don’t think of words like erect! Concentrate on balancing, not your wife’s hand cupping your tits. Her arms buckled again. “El, baby, you’re distracting me.”

“Yoga is a discipline of the mind and body, Hunter. It’s finding the strength within to power through what’s happening around you. Or to you,” Ellie added as she squeezed slightly.

“I’m a beginner, babe. I have no discipline. Especially when it comes to you.”

“Try.” Ellie dragged her nails down Hunter’s trembling torso, dipping a fingertip inside the waistband of Hunter’s boxers. “If you can keep this up while I do this to you,” Ellie slipped her hand inside the boxers. “You’ll be ready for the next step.”

Of course, that was a total lie. Bakasana took a lot of practice beyond holding a plank. But it was a damn good first step.

“Jesus, El!” Hunter credited hours in the gym for her ability to stay elevated despite Ellie’s probing fingers. Her hips, however, had a mind of their own and began moving in rhythm with Ellie’s delicious invasion.

“No moving, honey.” Arousal caused Ellie’s breathing to accelerate. Need built up inside her as Hunter’s wetness increased with each thrust of Ellie’s fingers.

“Sorry, baby, but I have no control over my body when you’re touching me like this. How much longer before I can touch you?” Hunter’s arms were shaking, though she knew it was more from passion than exhaustion.

Ellie felt Hunter tighten around her fingers. “Not much longer,” she promised on a soft moan. Reaching down with her free hand, Ellie began pushing Hunter’s boxers down. Ellie was going to need full naked body contact very soon.

“Oh my God!”

Ellie’s eyes widened. Hunter somehow had enough strength and wherewithal to keep her full weight off Ellie when she fell and bring the yoga mat around them for cover.

Ellie peered over Hunter’s shoulder. “Jessie! You’re not supposed to be here until tomorrow!”

Jessie held her hand firmly over her eyes. “Yeah, well, I thought my mom — who’s usually knee-deep in Thanksgiving preparations now — would need some help getting ready for the big day. Obviously, I was wrong. Now, I must go and wash my eyes out with soap.”

Walking blind, Jessie ran into the wall, cursed, then found her way out of the situation she walked in on.

“That did not just happen, did it?” Hunter had a death grip on the yoga mat, her eyes wide with shock and embarrassment.

Ellie did the only thing she could do. She burst out laughing. She laughed so hard her

stomach cramped. “Ow!”

“That’s what you get for laughing!” Hunter’s lips twitched, but she was too mortified to let the laughter out. “Do you think Aunt Wills will give us a holiday discount?”

Preparation

“Did you wash your hands?”

Ellie looked up from peeling potatoes and raised a brow at her daughter. “Did you wash your eyes out with soap?”

“Yes,” Jessie answered with a straight face, then pouted. “It burns.”

Ellie shook her head and tossed a potato to Jessie. “Start peeling, daughter of mine, since you’re here to help me. I’m glad you’re home.”

Jessie reached over the counter to grab a peeler. “Me, too. I think.” She grinned at her mom. “Are you feeling okay?” She pointed the peeler at Ellie with aggression. “And don’t you dare make a nasty comment about how you were feeling better fifteen minutes ago, or I’ll have to peel my ears off.”

Ellie scoffed. Blaise would have been proud of the answer Ellie had on her tongue before Jessie ruined it with the threat. “I’m good.” Ellie stuck her tongue out at Jessie. “My family and friends are apparently worried that I’m overdoing it. So, everyone is bringing a dish.”

Jessie remembered the last holidays. Her mom powered through it, but at the end of it all, she was exhausted and in pain. Even Hunter was uncharacteristically upset with Ellie for overworking herself. However, Jessie found it hard to believe that her mom would just hand over the reins without some sort of backup plan. Hazel eyes, reminiscent of Ellie’s, narrowed. “And you trust everyone to make an edible dish?”

“We both know Blaise is almost as good as I am. But if you tell her that, I will deny it and tell Blaise what happened today.”

Jessie closed her mouth and mimed locking it with a key.

“If Eve or Lainey can’t cook, they’ll pay someone who can,” Ellie continued. “As for the others. . .” Ellie pulled a colander of green beans toward her. “I’ll be ready.”

Jessie laughed. “So, you’re still making a full-course meal but pretending for Hunter’s sake that you’re taking it easy.”

“She’s not pretending.” Hunter sauntered into the kitchen and kissed Jessie quickly on the top of the head before joining Ellie. She was still feeling the effects of embarrassment, but Ellie had promised to make up for Jessie’s bad timing later. So, Hunter would suck it up and help her wife like she promised she would. “She’s giving me as much work as she can trust me with.”

“Ah. So, you’ll be pouring the wine and opening the beers,” Jessie teased.

Hunter shot Jessie a look. “You are as rotten as your mom.”

“Which one?” Jessie lifted her peeler and did an obnoxious “mic drop,” as well as a little booty shake on her barstool.

“Do you see this?” Hunter asked Ellie, who merely shrugged as she attempted to hide a sly grin. “I am a surgeon, you know. I have skills.”

“Yeah, you do.” Ellie’s hand flew to her mouth. She hadn’t meant to say that out loud. She cleared her throat. “I mean, you’re very good at carving the turkey.”

“Riiiight. I’m sure that’s what you meant, Mom.”

“No one asked the peanut gallery. Keep peeling.”

Jessie saluted Ellie, snickering at the blush that was creeping up her mom’s neck.

“Okay! Since the turkey isn’t cooked yet, what can I help with?” For everyone’s sake, Hunter thought it was best to get back on track.

Ellie slid the green beans over. “These.”

Hunter stared at the bowl in front of her. “Okay! Green beans. I got this.” She rubbed her hands together. “I will just. . .um. . .”

Mother and daughter exchanged a look and began laughing. Ellie grabbed a bean out of the bowl and snapped off one end, pulling the string with it, then snapped off the other end. She tossed that one into an empty bowl and discarded the ends.

Hunter looked on with interest. “Huh. Who knew?”

“A lot of people,” Jessie muttered and was rewarded with a green bean thrown at her face. “Come on! I already had to wash my eyeballs with soap. Now you’re trying to poke them out with legumes!”

Hysterical laughter filled the air. Jessie dried her eyes and watched her moms interact

with each other. She had seen the love between them since the beginning. That love seemed to grow every day, and Jessie couldn't be more thankful for Hunter coming into their lives. Ellie was never sad or lonely before, but Jessie had to admit she had never seen her mom happier than she was now.

"I'm happy you're happy," Jessie said suddenly.

Ellie stopped throwing green bean ends at Hunter and looked over at her daughter. "Thank you, sweetie. And you? Are you happy?"

"Yeah, sure."

"That sounded believable, Miss Harvard legume." Hunter studied Jessie for a moment. Something was up. Ellie must have seen it, too. Of course, Ellie was the master at reading people.

"No, it's true. I'm good." Jessie sighed when her moms just stared at her. "I would have talked to you about this after Thanksgiving since I'm going to be here until the new year. But since you two are so impatient. . ."

"Are you rethinking being a doctor, sweetie?"

"No! Yes. No."

"Anyone else get whiplash?" Hunter went back to snapping her green beans when she got a look from Jessie.

"I want to help people. I just don't want to be around people." Another sigh. "I'm not like you, mom. You're so sweet and personable, and everyone loves you. And I'm not like you, Mom," she addressed Hunter. "Surgery and bedside manners are not my forte. So, I'm in limbo with what I want for the future."

"What about research?" Hunter suggested as she concentrated on making sure she was doing her job with the green beans correctly.

"What?"

Hunter looked up. "Research. Coming up with cures for diseases? Vaccines? Medical innovations? I remember your science project with stem cells." Hunter shrugged. "I think you'd excel at that. Especially if you aren't keen on a lot of interaction with people."

"Honey, that's brilliant. Sweetie?"

Jessie tapped the peeler on the potato. “Research,” she repeated with interest. She had enjoyed doing the project with Piper, and the no-people aspect really appealed to Jessie as well. “Yeah. I can see that. Maybe I’ll look into it. Thanks, Mom.”

Hunter gave Jessie a lopsided grin. “Happy to help!”

“Speaking of helping, could you help me get my suitcases out of my rental?”

“Rental? Jessie, why didn’t you ask me to come pick you up?” Ellie uncovered a large bowl of bread dough that had been rising for more than an hour.

“Because I wanted to surprise you, Mom. Little did I know that I would be the one surprised.” Jessie overexaggerated a full-body shiver for good measure.

Ellie pointed toward the front door. “Go before Hunter and I start making out. With tongue.”

“Ooo! That sounds way more fun than lugging in luggage.” Hunter started pawing at Ellie while making kissing noises.

“Stoooop!” Jessie covered her ears, closed her eyes, and started la la la-ing loudly. “I’ll be outside waiting for you, Mom.” She jumped off her stool and ran out of the kitchen as though her ass was on fire.

“Okay, honey, you can stop grabbing my ass now,” Ellie said half-heartedly. “Our daughter needs your help.”

“Eh, Jessie’s a strong girl.” Hunter kissed Ellie’s neck. “She’s got this.”

Ellie turned her head and kissed Hunter’s full lips. “Later, love. You’ve been recruited.”

“Did you hear how she calls me mom?” Hunter grinned proudly. “Pretty cool, huh?”

“The coolest.” Ellie patted Hunter’s arm that rested around her waist. “Do you want to finish the green beans when you’re done?” Ellie could easily do them herself, but she had come to realize that when she involved Hunter, it made them both feel better.

“Yes, ma’am. Be right back, ‘kay?”

Ellie smiled at Hunter’s sweetness. “Okay.”

Revelation

“This is it? One suitcase?” Hunter hefted said suitcase out of the trunk of Jessie’s rental and plunked it down. It was only one suitcase, but it was huge.

“No, I have a couple of duffle bags in the back seat.”

Hunter squinted at Jessie. “You’re just here until after the holidays, right?”

“What? You don’t want me to move back in and cramp your ‘love in the yoga room’ vibe?”

Hunter blushed. “That’s just mean.” She bumped Jessie’s shoulder with hers. “You know you’re welcome to move back if you need to.”

“I appreciate it. Really. I know I’ve been a little wishy-washy lately, and I’m sorry. I think it’s just the stress getting to me, you know?”

“Hey, I get it. My first year at Harvard nearly did me in, too.”

“Yeah? Ms. Trauma Surgeon was rattled?”

Again, the image of Ellie on a gurney came to Hunter’s mind. “It happens. And I wasn’t a trauma surgeon then. I was a very green med student who constantly wondered what the hell I thought I was doing. Or if it was the right thing for me.”

“How did you get through the doubt?”

“My mom helped by telling me I could do anything I put my heart into. So, that’s what I did. I found the area I wanted to be in, and I put my heart into it. It takes time, Jess. But if you really think this isn’t for you, don’t waste your life doing something that won’t make you happy.”

“I thought you’d be happy with me following in your footsteps.”

Hunter slung her arm around Jessie’s shoulders. “What makes me happy is seeing you and your mom happy. It doesn’t matter what you’re doing as long as you love doing it.”

“Thanks, ma. Mother. Momma.” Jessie made a face and stuck out her tongue. “I thought I’d try out other names for you, but they sound weird.”

“I kinda like mom. Unless you don’t want to call me that because that’s what you call El.”

“Nah, it’s all good. Mom seems to be okay with it. Though, I just think it might get a little confusing.”

“We’ll work it out. Just don’t call me daddy.”

“Ew.” Jessie shook her entire body to get rid of that thought. “Anyway, listen, I asked you to come out here and help me for a reason.”

“Because your suitcase is the size of a tiny house?”

Jessie laughed. “No. Well, maybe. But something else.”

“Something you don’t want your mom to know even though she knows there’s something?”

Jessies blew out a breath. “She really does have a knack for knowing all things, doesn’t she?”

“Yep. What’s up, kiddo?”

“I, um. . .I got a call the other day.”

“Okay,” Hunter prompted when Jessie didn’t continue.

“From Grandmother.”

“Oh, shit.” Hunter’s hands curled into fists involuntarily.

“Exactly. I had the same reaction you just did. Like, why the f—frick is she calling me?”

“Did you accept?”

“I had to, right? I regretted it almost immediately. She acted like the frickin’ victim complaining how no one visited her and how terribly she was treated there. I’m like, you’re in jail, lady. What did she expect? And why would anyone visit? She frickin’ tried to kill her daughter!”

Jessie was talking fast, her hands flying about as she paced. Her agitation was palpable, and Hunter understood all too well.

“You don’t want to tell your mom, do you?” Not that I blame you. I wouldn’t want to either.

“No, but that’s not it. Grandmother — and I hate calling her that — wants me to convince Mom to go and see her. She says Mom owes her that much. And get this, she

said it wasn't her fault mom was in the truck instead of you." Jessie's eyes widened. She just heard what she said to Hunter and felt terrible. "I'm sorry, mom. I wasn't thinking."

"Hey, don't apologize. I told your mom just today that I would have taken her place if I could have." Hunter ran a hand through her hair. "That woman is. . ."

"A bitch?"

Hunter glanced towards the house. "I won't tell El you said that."

"Thanks. Blaise still hasn't told Mom about the first time I said that," Jessie laughed. "She uses it as blackmail."

Hunter's eyes lit up. "Smart! Thanks for the tip, kiddo."

Jessie rolled her eyes. "I've had to deal with Blaise my entire life. Now you." She winked at Hunter to let her know she was just kidding. "Do you think we should tell mom?"

"Absolutely. As much as I want to shield you and your mom from pain, I can't keep something like this from her. First, we've been out here way longer than it takes to get a suitcase or two. And second, she already knows something is up, and I don't want her worrying about it. El needs to know what's going on and make the decision about what to do about it herself." Hunter hugged Jessie, who was becoming more agitated by the minute. "Listen, kiddo, your mom's parents made decisions for her, and it took El a long time to get over that."

"Ugh! You're right. Okay, well," Jessie patted Hunter on the back, then pulled away. "Good luck! Let me know how it goes!"

"W-what?"

Jessie doubled over with laughter. "I'm kidding! I'll be right there with you." She grabbed her duffle bags and ran to the house.

"What just happened?" It took Hunter's brain a minute to catch up, though she still wasn't sure if Jessie had seriously tasked Hunter with telling Ellie about the request.

Consolation

"You've been quiet since Jessie told you about Grace." Hunter watched as Ellie performed her nightly routine of brushing her teeth and hair, washing her face, and applying lotion.

“Have I?” Ellie rarely heard her mother’s name these days. When she did, it made her wonder how someone so awful could be named Grace.

“Come on, baby, talk to me.”

Ellie sighed. She put her lotion back in the drawer and made her way to the bed. Once Ellie was under the covers, she immediately snuggled up against Hunter’s side. This was her safe place. Nothing bad could happen to her when she was here in Hunter’s arms.

“I don’t know what to say or do, honey. I think I’m just trying to process it all.” Ellie looked up at Hunter. “I wish she hadn’t contacted Jessie. That kid is under so much pressure as it is. She doesn’t need to deal with Grace.”

“Jessie wanted to shield you from it,” Hunter revealed.

Ellie shook her head. “That’s exactly what I don’t want. She shouldn’t have to carry that burden. Neither of you should.”

“Hey now. I’ll carry whatever I need to carry for you, baby.” Hunter tightened her embrace. “That’s what love is.”

Ellie broke free from Hunter’s arms and moved to straddle her wife. “You’ve shown me you love me many times today, honey. You agreed to do yoga with me. You helped me with preparations.” She touched Hunter’s cheek. “You helped Jessie consider a different route with med school. And you talked to Jessie about what was bothering her when she didn’t feel she could come to me. That alone means the world to me. All I need now is to stop thinking for a little while.”

Hunter’s hands drifted up Ellie’s thighs, coming to a rest on Ellie’s hips. “I would be honored to help you with that.”

A little while turned out to be most of the night.

Salutation

Blaise, Greyson, and Ezra

“Hey, sweets.”

“Happy Thanksgiving, babe.” Blaise situated Ezra on her hip and leaned in to kiss Ellie on the cheek.

“Happy Thanksgiving.” Ellie pinched Ezra’s cheeks. “There’s my little cutie.”

“Ahem, I have the food.”

Ellie looked up and laughed. “Happy Thanksgiving, Greyson.”

“Back at ya. How long before I get a nickname?”

“You have one. . .Stud,” Ellie winked. “Come on in.” She took the dish Greyson was holding. “Oh, I was hoping you’d bring your famous stuffing!”

“What? You didn’t make any?” Blaise knew Ellie well enough to know that even though Ellie left the task of some dishes up to the guests, she would still have plenty of food if those dishes turned out to be inedible.

“I didn’t want to jinx you not bringing yours.”

Blaise smiled proudly before handing Ezra over to Greyson. “Can you give us a minute, stud?” She waited until Greyson was out of earshot before turning back to Ellie. “What’s going on behind those hazel eyes?”

Ellie rolled said eyes. “It’s nothing, Kelly Clarkson.” Of course, Blaise didn’t believe that. So, Ellie told Blaise the CliffsNotes version of Grace’s requests.

“That bitch has some balls. What are you going to do?”

“Not sure yet. Part of me wants to forget she exists, and the other part wants to go just for the satisfaction of seeing what prison life has done to her. No salons, no country clubs.”

Blaise nodded her approval. That’s precisely what she would do. Bask in the misery of those who wronged her. But Ellie had a much softer soul. “Well, I support whatever decision you make, El. And I’ll be right there with you and tall, dark, and goofy if you go.”

Ellie chuckled. “I know you will. Now go on. Hunter is pouring the wine.”

“Way to bury the lede. I take it my daughter made it in one piece?”

“Yep. She and Jessie have been chatting all day. All day.”

“What I hear you saying is ‘save a bottle of red for me.’”

“I’m thankful you’re my best friend.”

Eve, Lainey, Bella, Kevin, and Darren

“Happy Thanksgiving!” Ellie held the door open for the beautiful family. “It’s great to see you again, Kevin. You, too, Darren.”

“Happy Thanksgiving, Mrs. Vale.”

Ellie placed a hand over her heart. “As much as I love hearing that, please call me Ellie. All my friends do.” She gave each of them a smile and ushered them inside. When she felt a tug on her pants, she bent down. “Hi, sweet Bella. How are you?”

“I’s well, fank you. Do you have pie?”

Ellie bit her cheek. This little girl was too cute! Bella reminded Ellie of Jessie when Jessie was younger. Eve and Lainey were in for a treat when Bella got older.

“I sure do! I’ll save you a huge piece, deal?”

“Deal!” Bella ran past Ellie, yelling at Kevin and Darren that there would be pie and she was getting the biggest piece.

“You’re raising her right!” Ellie smiled. “And whatever that is you have in your hands smells divine.”

Eve held it out. “It’s not a traditional side dish.”

“But it’s to die for,” Lainey chimed in.

“May I?” Ellie asked, her fingers poised over the lid of the dish. Eve nodded, and Ellie wasted no time opening the aromatic container. “Oh my. Is that risotto?”

Eve nodded. “It’s farro risotto with prosciutto, parmesan, and Brussels sprout.”

“That sounds incredible. Did you make this yourself?”

“Eve did,” Lainey answered, knowing Eve didn’t take praise very well.

Impressed, Ellie’s eyebrows raised. “Is there anything you can’t do, Eve?”

“Plenty.”

Lainey shook her head. “I’ll let you know if I ever find something she’s bad at.”

Eve cleared her throat. “We’re thankful for the invitation tonight, Ellie.”

“It’s our pleasure having all our friends here. Please join in on the festivities and enjoy yourselves.”

Patty and Mo

“Happy Thanksgiving!” Ellie hugged Patty and then turned her attention to Mo. “Thank you for coming. You brought a pie!”

It was the first pie of the night. Lauren, Kiara, Dani, and Claire showed up moments before Patty and Mo with three tubs of different flavored ice cream. Each of them claimed to ‘suck’ at cooking only to confess that they had been too intimidated to cook for Ellie. Ellie was surprised that it was Mo who was brave enough to bring a pie.

“Yeah, everyone was like, ‘I ain’t bakin’ no pie!’ but I wasn’t scared.”

“Good, I’m happy to hear that.” Ellie sniffed. There was something familiar about this pie. “Pumpkin?”

“Yep.”

“I can’t wait to try it. If the scent is anything to go by, I’m sure it’ll be delicious.”

Mo heard Patty tsk beside her and sighed. “I totally made a pie, but, uh. . .it tasted like crap and looked like it, too. So, um, I bought one. From your diner.”

Patty hid her face behind her hands, Mo blushed, and Ellie couldn’t help but laugh. “Well, I appreciate the business. And I’m thankful for you both being here to celebrate the holiday with us.”

Rebecca, Cass, and Aunt Wills

“Happy Thanksgiving!”

Ellie accepted hugs from each woman before turning her attention to the dish Cass was holding. “That smells really good. Cornbread?”

“Yes’m,” Cass answered with a dash of pride in her voice. “I’m no chef, but I do make a mean batch of cornbread. Plus, it was the only thing Becca would let me cook.”

Rebecca tilted her head and raised a brow at her wife. “Why is that, Cassidy?”

Cass dipped her head with chagrin. “Because I nearly burnt down the place making

oatmeal.”

Aunt Wills patted Cass on the shoulder. “Don’t worry about it, Cass. Cooking isn’t my strong suit either.”

God, Ellie loved her friends. There was never a dull moment to be had with this group around. “Well, I’m thankful no one was hurt in the great oatmeal fire of 2021.”

Proclamations

Hunter stood at the head of the table — a large, perfectly roasted turkey in front of her — and held up her glass.

“First, I would like to say that I’m thankful for everyone bringing a side or dessert and taking some of the burdens off Ellie. Mom and Dad, I’m glad you could make it to celebrate with the rest of our friends who have become more like family. The fuller this house gets, the more blessed we are. I know I speak for Ellie and Jessie when I tell you all that our lives are richer with the addition of each and every one of you. We’ve been through some rough times these past couple of years, and I’m not sure we — especially me — would have stayed sane without your love and unselfishness. Cheers to you!” The group raised their glasses, toasting Hunter and Ellie. “Now, let’s dig in before I start drooling like Mo.”