



BONUS
Content

Avenging Angels: *Back in the Saddle*

Bonus Content

Just Right

Jessie

I left it too long.

I should have said something days ago.

Or while we were packing.

Or on the way to the airport, on the plane, on the way to the rental car place.

You get me.

I didn't say anything.

I mean, I had an excuse.

These were his people.

You kinda didn't protest when it was your man's people.

Kinda.

In other words, this meant I put it off so long, we were in a neighborhood, likely close to our destination, when I decided to bring it up.

And this was how I brought it up.

"Um...Turner."

I gasped when he suddenly swung our rented SUV to the side of the road.

He put the car in park, undid his seatbelt and turned to me.

Like, *turned to me*, leaning in and resting his arm on my chair.

Usually, I liked Eric in my space (so much *liked it*), but this was spooking me.

"Okay, you've met Daisy," he began.

"Yup," I confirmed.

"You got sweet Daisy."

Hmm.

"And sweet Daisy is a lot of who Daisy is. She's loyal, generous, kind, all to a fault," he kept going.

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"Just Right"

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I knew that already.

“Okay,” I said slowly.

“You don’t want to meet not-sweet Daisy,” he warned.

Hmm again.

“I take it not-sweet Daisy refuses to allow any of her people to visit Denver without them staying at her house,” I guessed.

“She doesn’t have a house,” he stated. “She has a castle. Like I already told you, we’ll have our own room and bathroom. Total privacy and the walls are thick.”

The walls were thick.

He hadn’t mentioned that yet.

Hmm times three!

“But...correct,” he finished.

“A castle?”

“A castle.”

“Eric, baby, I don’t know her very well,” I said carefully. “I know you do, but it feels weird to stay at the house of someone I don’t know all that well.”

My man didn’t address that.

He got into scarier territory.

“I should get into the ground rules.”

Holy crap.

“There are ground rules?” I asked.

He didn’t confirm.

He said, “She’s going to cook. Let her cook. Do not suggest going out for donuts. Do not suggest DoorDash. You can offer to help, but she won’t let you, so when she doesn’t, don’t be offended. If she does, or asks for help, feel honored.”

That didn’t sound so bad.

“She cooks southern,” Eric continued.

That sounded awesome.

“Daisy powerwalks...to McDonald’s,” Eric carried on.

I started laughing.

I knew I totally loved that broad.

“For the next three days, you will not eat a thing that’s healthy,” he cautioned.

“As you know, this doesn’t bother me.”

“Right.”

“What are the other ground rules?” I asked.

“The others aren’t Daisy’s, they’re mine.”

Eric had rules?

This I had to hear.

And this was why I lifted my brows.

“If something comes up, it might seem harmless, but pass anything by me before you agree to it,” he demanded.

“Like what?”

“Say, the women want to go out to a restaurant, or for a drink, just the girls.”

I was confused.

Eric was so totally not that guy. In fact, if he was that guy, he wouldn’t be my guy.

“You want me to pass that by you?”

“Indy and Ally, with Lee’s mom, and Tex, and other friends of hers, got into a food fight at a Chinese restaurant. The cops were called.”

I stared.

“Jet jumped a really bad guy’s soldier in an Einstein’s Bagels. They rolled around on the floor, fighting.”

I kept staring.

“Roxie, Jet, Ally, Indy and Daisy shut down a haunted house when Roxie’s stalker showed up and things got physical.”

Yep.

Still staring.

“Smithie has a roped off VIP table for the girls that he keeps open pretty much all the time should they decide to pitch up. It’s because Smithie’s family and he considers us the same. It’s also because there has been occasion for shit to go down at his joint when the Rock Chicks are

there. Cat fights, fistfights, property damage, Sadie getting roofied. He likes them to have a buffer so they can't start anything with anyone, and vice versa."

"Holy shit."

"Yeah."

"Who's Smithie?"

"He owns a strip club."

Oo, that sounded like fun.

"Don't," Eric growled.

I stopped thinking about how fun it would be to go with the girls to a strip club (or at least I hoped it'd be a lot more fun than the last one we went to) and refocused on him due to his tone.

I then focused more considering how intense his focus was on me.

"Like I said, it sounds harmless, all in fun, then someone's been kidnapped, and it isn't so fun anymore," he said.

"Well, the roofied part sucks but—"

"Really, Jess, I mean, *really*," he stressed.

I sensed I really, I mean *really* needed to read those Rock Chick books.

I also sensed this was important to him.

Then again, I knew about Stella's apartment being blown up so maybe I shouldn't fight him on it.

As such, I leaned into him and gave him a quick kiss before I said, "Okay, I'll run anything by you."

I watched the relief wash over him, so I was glad I gave in, though it did make me a little concerned how much relief there was.

Then again, Stella's apartment got blown up.

So there was that.

He moved away and turned back to the wheel, put his seatbelt on, the SUV in drive and set us on our way.

"I mean, how much trouble can they get into in three days?" I said in an undertone.

"All the Angels are here, and the Rock Chicks, plus Tex, the men are not thinking this is a good combination."

“You poor baby,” I cooed, going for sweet rather than laughing my ass off because it was clear “the men” were disgruntled about this mashup, and I found that hilarious. Even so, I loved this guy, so I went on to assure, “It’s going to be okay. We’re not here for very long.”

He made a noise deep in his throat that was kind of a grunt of dissension, but it did things to my girl parts.

Then he made a turn, we drove down a lane and then...

“Cripes!” I exclaimed loudly as the castle came into view.

And it was *a castle*, massive, complete with turrets and even a freaking moat!

I thought it’d be a castle-esque kind of house.

But...

Nope.

“Indication I do not lie about any of this shit,” Eric grumbled.

It was then, I turned to him to see he truly was uneasy about our New Year’s visit to Denver and the mingling of families.

Which was why I reached out to him, wrapped my fingers around his thigh and said, “It’s going to be cool. Fun. Family. Southern food. An excuse to dress up. That last part might not be exciting to you, but you’re gonna dig my New Year’s Eve dress. Promise.”

Surprisingly, the promise of the dress (my man was super visual) had zero effect.

Instead, he sucked in a breath through his nose, blew it out like a bull, parked next to a line of other SUVs (some of which might have been rented, we were the last ones to arrive) and turned to me.

“I just don’t want anything to happen to you,” he said.

“We staked out a gang who was kidnapping homeless people to work in their drug dens not too long ago,” I reminded him.

“I know you. I know you have a head on your shoulders. I know you’ll be honest with me in all things. I know you’ll keep me in the loop. But the Rock Chicks are...” he seemed to struggle for a word then decided, “renegades.”

I didn’t want to tell him, but that just made them sound cooler.

“Again, baby, it’s gonna be all right,” I soothed.

He nodded, not seeming very soothed, turned from me and got out.

I followed.

We grabbed our bags, rolled them down the walk, across the bridge over the moat (I mean...), and right into the house where we were confronted with a long, wide, hall with stone walls, suits of armor, shields and crossed swords on the wall, the whole shebang.

“This...is...*rad!*” I whispered in awe as we wandered down the thick carpet runner.

A redhead appeared at the end of the hall before she shouted, “They’re here!”

And then I got a taste of what Eric was talking about.

We were rushed by what could only be described as a mob.

Some I knew, some I hadn’t met yet.

I’ll give you the lowdown.

Indy (the redhead, her man was Lee).

Jet (a blonde, her man was Eddie).

Roxie (another blonde, her man was Hank).

Jules (black hair, her man was Vance).

Ava (again a blonde, her man was Luke).

Stella (brunette, her man was Mace—they lived down in Phoenix, where we lived).

Sadie (strawberry blonde, her man was Hector).

Ally (brunette, her man was Ren).

Shirleen (Black lady with huge, fabulous afro, she lived in Phoenix now too, her man was Moses).

Malia (Black lady, younger than Shirleen, gorgeous, her man was Darius).

Then there was my tribe, Raye, Luna and Harlow.

Along with the Hottie Squad from Phoenix: Cap, Roam, Knox, Brady, Gabe, Liam, and Javi (my brother Jeff, as well as Cody were still down in the Valley of the Sun, looking after things at the Nightingale Investigations and Security offices).

There was also Tex and his wife Nancy, and Nancy’s other daughter, Lottie and her man Mo (Jet was also Nancy’s girl).

Oh, and a gaggle of kids of all ages, but after the mob (otherwise known as introductions), they didn’t join the clutch. They went to a room adjacent, and it looked like they were watching a

movie. Or the younger kids were. The older kids were looking after the younger ones, and they immediately got on their phones.

Not all of them rushed us (say, none of the men), but many of them did.

And then Eric and I were divested of our suitcases, my purse was pulled away, my jacket tugged off and it disappeared to God knew where, and we were in a huge room the Windsors wouldn't blink at kicking back and having tea in.

That was when I saw Tito sitting in a chair, calm as you please, like he'd sat there hundreds of times before. He was sipping what looked like eggnog in a pretty glass cup.

I didn't know he was coming.

Thank goodness he closed down the Surf Club for this.

"Tito!" I cried.

He said not a word (so very Tito), though he lifted his eggnog to me.

That was all I got out before a man was in my space. He was tall, slim, handsome, had brown hair in a crewcut, and he'd been introduced to me moments before as Tod.

He was also carrying a humongous scrapbook cradled in his arm.

Then he called out loudly to no one and everyone. "I see column. Or if it's right, sheath."

"Tod!" Daisy shouted in apparent protest, to what, I had no idea since I had no idea what was going on.

He ignored her, tapping his index finger on his lips, studying me while murmuring (loudly), "Dried flowers? No, wildflowers. No, monochrome." He then turned to the congregation and announced, "I do not know this girlie! I cannot *work like this!*"

"Tod, we agreed I'd go through the agenda before you horned in with wedding planning," Daisy huffed.

The agenda?

Wedding planning?

"Fuck," Eric muttered under his breath.

"What?" I breathed out, my eyes flying to Raye, who was the only other one of us in a relationship and not currently married.

She looked pale.

She also had a scrapbook on her lap.

Okay, I was seeing we should have come up on the earlier flight like all the rest of them did.

I just didn't want to leave Henny behind for that long. He was staying with Uncle Titus (and this had been a thing, since Jeff got ticked at me because I picked Titus because Jeff would be away from home a lot), so I knew my cat was good, but still, he was my new baby, so I was protective.

I turned to Eric. "What's happening?"

"Which is why I'm doing the agenda first!" Daisy yelled at Tod before Eric could answer. "You have to have the chance to get to know them."

"Jessie is wearing a black wedding dress," Luna called out.

Tod whirled to her, his brows arched high and curious. "*Really?*"

"Think Lestat," Luna advised.

Oh my God.

Tod was already planning my wedding.

"Luna!" I snapped.

"Am I wrong?" she asked.

She wasn't. Not at all.

"This is...this is...*this is magnificent!*" Tod shrieked. He whirled again, to me, and panted, "I've never done a black wedding dress."

"Well—" I tried.

I stopped trying when Tod started reeling, hand to his forehead, crying, "I see it. I see it. I see it. Black tablecloths. Black candles. Fat ones and really skinny ones that spike high. Black candlestick holders. Black chairs. Black napkins. Black plates. Minimal silver accents. And nothing but loads and loads of baby's breath. Of course, in black vases."

It seemed this guy was planning my wedding, and I wasn't mad about it because, actually, that sounded insanely awesome.

"You can't do blood red," he decreed. "Ally did black and red. So your flowers will be all white."

"I think I kind of love that," I told him.

He beamed.

"Can I ask her to marry me first?" Eric requested.

Tod did an exaggerated eyeroll, turned away and went to a table where he plopped the scrapbook down, opened it, produced a Sharpie like he had magic, and he started writing in it.

“Is it okay if I do my agenda now?” Daisy asked impatiently.

Tod didn’t stop scribbling even as he waved behind his back at her.

Daisy took that as her go ahead, and she clapped her hands. “Attention everyone! Attention!”

It was then, I saw there was a massive whiteboard set up.

She went to it and flipped it over.

That was when I saw a bunch of writing in pink dry-erase marker on the massive whiteboard. It had a lot of daisies and diamonds drawn around. There were also a few smiley faces, some hearts and some stars.

Oh, and tons of fireworks (those were multi-colored).

There was a loud *zip* noise, which was Daisy unfurling a long pointer, and then she tapped it aggressively on the top of the board where there was a curlicue written I. WELCOME surrounded by daisies, diamonds, hearts and fireworks.

“As you’ll see, we’re in the welcome phase of the weekend,” she began.

“Okay,” I said low, leaning into Eric. “Now what’s happening?”

“I’d probably be quiet if I were you,” Eric returned, also talking low.

“Do you have something you want to share with the class?” Daisy bit out in our direction.

I was totally seeing the not-sweet Daisy thing.

“No, ma’am,” I replied.

Eric chuckled.

Well, at least he’d relaxed enough to laugh.

Though, now I was freaking out.

She went back to her board. “Cookies. Eggnog. Ringing out the dregs of Christmas so we can focus on the New Year.”

No one said anything, so she moved down to the next item, this said II. UNWIND, and she rapped her pointer on it.

“Unpacking, unwinding, relaxing, getting-to-know you.” Another rap of the pointer (III. DINNER AND COCKTAILS). “Dinner in. Jet’s chili. *By request*,” she spat.

Eek!

Eric was so right. She really didn't like anyone horning in on the cooking.

"Beer. Wine," she continued. "The signature cocktail is a paloma."

I silently agreed with her cocktail selection.

She spun and snapped, "*Not* my idea. *I* wanted to eat Cajun food at Lincoln's Road House and then head to Smithie's after, but *Lee* forbade it. So if you have complaints, direct them to Lee."

Everyone looked to Lee.

He was standing behind the chair Indy was in with his arms crossed on his wide chest, scowling at Daisy and looking scary.

I decided not to direct a complaint at Lee.

I heard another violent tap of pointer to whiteboard and looked back at Daisy.

She'd made it down to IV. BREAKFAST BUFFET.

"Breakfast buffet in the morning. Come down whenever. No set time," she stated. She moved the pointer to another area of the board that had a short list. "Acceptable outside additions to the breakfast buffet. Tex bringing us lattes. Unacceptable outside additions to the buffet, *everything else*."

Oh shit.

I was going to start laughing.

An additional move and strike of the pointer. "Tomorrow mid-day, the women are going to the mall."

"We talked about this. You're not going to the mall," Lee said.

Uh-oh.

"Yes we did. And we're going to the mall," Daisy shot back.

"You're not going to the mall," Eddie reiterated.

"The end of year sales are on. We are *going to the mall*," Daisy returned.

"You're not fuckin' goin' to the fuckin' mall," Luke declared.

"*We're going to the mall!*" Daisy screeched.

"You're banned from Nordstrom, have you forgotten?" Hector put in.

"Tod, Roxie and I are going incognito," Daisy sniffed.

Oh my God, I needed this Nordstrom story.

I also needed to see Daisy, Roxie and Tod incognito.

“You’re also banned from Neiman Marcus,” Hank added.

“Hence the incognito,” Daisy snapped.

“I really can’t be banned from any more stores, Daisy,” Roxie chimed in.

“Yes, she can,” Hank muttered, and Roxie slapped his arm.

Daisy threw up her hands. “Then what are we gonna do tomorrow?”

“We’re not leaving the castle except those of us who live in Denver going home and then coming back to the castle,” Lee stated.

“That’s boring!” Daisy cried.

“You bitches are never boring,” Tod said.

“You got that right, brother,” Jet mumbled.

“How about this? The girls who aren’t banned can go into the stores where the others are banned, and we can take pictures of stuff they might like, and buy it if they want it,” Luna suggested. “They can be in other stores where they aren’t banned, doing the same for us. It’d be like, double-team shopping.”

“This idea holds merit,” Jules said.

“How have we not thought of this before?” Roxie asked.

“Which part of ‘you’re not going to the mall’ didn’t you understand?” Knox asked Luna.

Oh boy.

Knox and Luna could butt heads. I didn’t know why. Luna wasn’t sharing. But it was escalating.

Personally, I thought it was hot, though it’d be hotter if those two would pull their fingers out and get down to the business of working out why they were butting heads all the time and instead butt other things (ahem).

“Did anyone ask you?” Luna retorted.

“I’ve read the fucking books,” Knox fired back.

“So?” she asked him.

“So, read the fucking books, then get back to me,” Knox stated.

Luna opened her mouth.

“We’ll go to Fortnum’s,” Tex declared. “No one has blown up Fortnum’s.”

“Yet,” Sadie whispered.

There was a loud clatter, and everyone turned back to Daisy to see she'd thrown her pointer onto a table and was looking at a handsome man (Marcus, her husband).

"They're completely messing up my mojo, sugar bunches of love," she announced huffily.

He opened his mouth, but got nothing out because there was a shouted, "This is sofa-king *phat!* A white board and more scrapbooks!"

I turned to see an ash blonde woman with pretty green eyes arriving with two dudes, all new additions to our brood.

One dude was good-looking, put together, and seemed normal.

The other was scruffy, shuffling and appeared not to fit in with the crowd until his eyes hit me, they moved to Luna, Harlow and Raye, and then his entire face lit up, and he yelled, "Holy shit! Next Gen Rock Chicks! This is *awesome.*"

"We're not Rock Chicks," Raye educated him. "We're Avenging Angels."

"Even more awesome!" the guy shouted.

"There's no avenging happening in Denver," Vance noted (rather firmly, I'd add).

The new dude's face fell.

"Who's that?" I whispered to Eric.

"Kevin, aka The Kevster," Eric replied.

"What's his link to the group?" I asked.

"No clue. I know he's a stoner. I know he works at Annette's head shop, that's the woman who just walked in. And I know you don't mention *The Big Lebowski* around him, or if he mentions it to you, you figure out how to get away or you'll be talking to him for two hours about that movie and anything else the Coen Brothers made."

I loved *The Big Lebowski*, and I could totally see this dude would be into The Dude.

"Can we shop at Annette's head shop?" I requested to the room.

Annette lit up.

"No." Lee.

"Hell no." Hank.

"Fuck no." Luke.

"Christ, no." Eddie.

"Why not?" Annette asked.

“Your shop is on the Rock Chick Tour,” Ren answered.

Another lean into Eric and a whispered, “Rock Chick Tour?”

“Later,” he whispered back.

“So?” Annette demanded.

“So, every time one of the women go there, she’s asked for an autograph,” Hector answered.

“So?” Annette snapped.

“The last time, someone tried to snip a lock of Sadie’s hair,” Hector clipped.

“Overzealous fans come with the territory,” Annette said on a shrug.

“Actually, I have to admit, that wasn’t fun,” Sadie shared.

“The men can come with. No one is going to be cutting any hair if you badasses are hanging around,” Annette noted.

This caused some tittering among the Rock Chicks.

“We’re asked for autographs too,” Hank said.

“So?” Annette went back to her earlier refrain.

“And other shit,” Luke added.

Yep, more leaning with Eric and me. “What other shit?”

“Most of the Rock Chick fans are women,” Eric explained.

I leaned back, grinning and saying, “Ah.”

“What’s the point of the Angels being up here if we can’t *do anything*?” Daisy demanded.

“Personally, I’d like Raye to make it back to Phoenix without waiting for her to complete her hospital stay,” Cap said.

“Not you too!” Daisy cried.

Cap scowled at her.

I was surprised by this. Cap was a pretty easy-going guy.

It seemed Eric really didn’t make this shit up. All the men were on edge.

“Oh, right,” Daisy mumbled and gave big eyes to Shirleen.

I did the leaning thing again, but Eric didn’t make me ask for it.

“Cap is tight with Jules. Jules got shot.”

“Oh yeah, I remember that.”

Tito stood and lifted his mostly empty eggnog cup.

“This is exceptional eggnog,” he decreed.

Daisy shot him a sparkling smile.

“I for one, could use a Daisy facial before I drink my way through the New Year,” a shortish, attractive Latino man said (he’d been introduced earlier as Stevie, he was Tod’s husband).

Daisy sent her sparkling smile his way.

“And I need a parade of what the girls are wearing to the big bash. I’m still on the fence of whether to come as Tod or Burgundy,” Tod said.

“Burgandy!” all the Rock Chicks yelled.

Again, before I had to ask, Eric muttered, “Tod’s a drag queen.”

“Oh my God,” I called. “Please come as Burgundy.”

“Burgundy needs a new dress and the mall is verboten,” Tod remarked.

Indy stood. “Whip out your laptop, Daisy. We’re ordering Burgundy a new gown for pickup. Lee can do the picking up.”

Lee opened his mouth but closed it when Indy threw a look at him over her shoulder. His eyes flared (hot!). I couldn’t see what she did next, but his face went soft (hotter!), and he gently jerked up his chin to her.

Damn.

If my guy wasn’t the hottest guy around (who did stuff to make me hot all the time), that would be one of the hottest things I’d ever seen.

Sadie jumped up and requested excitedly, “Can I go get the facial stuff, Daisy?”

Suddenly, I didn’t know how it happened, I felt and saw movement, but all of it went so fast, I couldn’t focus on it, and in a flash, there were no men in the room but Tod, Stevie, Tito and The Kevster.

“I’ll help you, sugar,” Daisy said. “And I’ll bring the laptop.”

They took off.

The Kevster shuffled up to me. “I’ve never had a facial.”

“You’re in for a treat,” I told him.

He caught my eyes. “You seen *The Big Lebowski*?”

Wading in cautiously, I said, “One of the best movies ever.”

“Thank you,” he replied.

That was a weird response.

“For what?” I asked.

“For bringing it back.”

“Bringing what back?”

He didn’t answer.

He shuffled in saying, “Dude, I think Burgundy should wear burgundy.”

“Burgundy *never* wears burgundy,” Tod sniffed.

“It’s a rule,” Stevie added.

“Then champagne. It’s the New Year,” The Kevster amended.

“That’s actually a good idea,” Tod mused.

“All my braincells aren’t dead,” The Kevster stated. Then he put a vape to his mouth, sucked hard on it, let out a massive plume of smoke, and finished, “But I’m working on it.”

* * * * *

Things were going well.

They really were.

And it wasn’t our fault they took a turn.

(Okay, maybe it was a little bit Luna’s fault. But just a little bit.)

The facials were divine.

The chili was awesome.

Daisy requested I take over on the cocktail front, so those were awesome too (if I did say so myself, but I was just honored I was called to service).

Eric and my bedroom was amazing. He was right. It was quiet, private, and I was pretty sure no one heard the too-many-palomas-induced, hot-as-hell hanky panky we got up to.

The breakfast buffet was gut busting.

So now, we were all lazed in a seating section in front of the huge window in Fortnum’s Used Books (Indy’s bookstore—something that was also awesome) nursing food comas (three words: biscuits and gravy).

In fact, Tito was sitting up in an armchair, but behind his ever-present sunglasses, I sensed his eyes were closed and he was sleeping.

Tito tended not to be an active guy, but he'd turn a page on a book or something to let us know he was still alive.

He hadn't moved for at least thirty minutes.

Testament to a fantastic breakfast buffet.

Tex, even though he bought into the Surf Club, was manning the espresso machine so we all had lattes (mine was raspberry truffle, this being Tex's New Year's concoction, it was orgasmic).

Word had clearly gotten around that Tex was back for a guest appearance at Fortnum's because the line was out the door (not a surprise, he hadn't been at the Surf Club for very long, but we were getting the same thing down in the Valley of the Sun).

This was when it happened.

We were all chill, chatting and sipping and caffeinating and digesting.

And then a woman came in. She was a helmet-headed blonde, and she didn't look happy.

Like *really* not happy.

The Rock Chicks didn't seem to notice, but the Angels did.

We all straightened and cast glances at each other, but mostly we watched her belly right up to the espresso counter, right across from Tex, who was wringing a New Year's special out of the machine with his usual brute force.

She opened her mouth.

And another patron snapped irately, "No cutting!"

Helmet Blonde turned to the patron. "I'm not cutting."

"You walked right up to the counter," another patron further back noted.

She turned on him. "I'm not cutting! I have something to say to Tex."

"Not anything I wanna hear," Tex boomed. "Back of the line."

She swiveled toward Tex and accused, "You deserted us."

"Yup," Tex agreed and yanked the portafilter loose, then, no clue how it didn't break in half with the way he pounded the grounds out of it, he pounded the grounds out of it.

"You didn't even train anyone for when you'd leave," Helmet Blonde stated.

"Jet's been watchin' me do this for over a decade," Tex retorted.

“Not closely enough,” Helmet Blonde returned. “Her coffees are like...regular coffee.”

She stated this like she’d say, “Her coffees are like...absolute shit on a stick.”

Even though Jet mumbled, “She’s right. I never learned *the touch*,” this was probably why Luna clipped, “Hey!”

Helmet Blonde turned to Luna. “You butt out of this.”

This was enough to make Knox and Gabe start edging toward the seating area from where they (and all the other guys from the Hottie Squad—the Hot Bunch were either working or on watching-kids duty) were hanging with a dude named Duke at the book counter.

“She can’t butt out of it,” Tex shared. “She’s one of the reasons I moved to Phoenix.”

Oh shit.

Helmet Blonde’s eyes, still on Luna, went squinty.

“So it’s *you*!” she shouted, pointing in our direction.

Oh shit again.

Eric was one of the guys hanging with Duke, and he wasn’t a fan of anyone pointing at me, or, apparently, in my general direction, because I watched through the line of people as his face got hard.

Damn.

“The man deserves to retire,” Raye put in.

“There’s rumors he’s making coffee down there,” someone else in line said.

We all clammed up.

I mean, how did they hear those rumors?

“He is!” another someone cried. “He’s forsaken us to make coffee in Phoenix!”

Now everyone in line had turned our way and Cap, Roam, Brady and Liam began to fan out. For some reason, Roam was looking to a corner up by the ceiling and making hand signals.

“It’s just coffee,” Tex said.

“*It’s not just coffee!*” a female squealed.

Harlow stood. “Everyone needs to calm down.”

When she did, Javi pounded right to us to stand by the seating area.

But this crowd wasn’t even deterred by the mountain of man that was Javi. They were passing what was happening down the line, and people were shoving into the store, filling up the space.

Roam was making more urgent hand gestures to the ceiling corner.

In what appeared to be a burgeoning situation, I chanced a glance up there and couldn't see anything.

Now Indy stood. "If I'm not upset about it, then none of you can be upset about it."

"You're rich and famous!" another person shouted. "You can go down and get his coffees whenever you want. You probably have your own plane."

"I'm not rich and famous," Indy retorted. "And I don't have my own plane."

"There are books written about you," someone said.

"I didn't write them," Indy returned.

"You're wearing two-thousand-dollar Tom Ford booties," someone else accused.

We all looked down at Indy's two-thousand-dollar Tom Ford booties.

They were, by the by, kick-freaking-ass.

"You're *rich* and *famous*," that person finished.

"Everyone, chill out," Brady ordered.

"Do you live in Phoenix?" another someone asked him.

"It doesn't—" Brady started.

"You do!" yet another someone declared. "So don't *you* tell us to chill out when you can get his coffee anytime you want!"

"Yeah!" came a shout from someone else.

"Yeah!" came more shouts.

Okay, this was about coffee, and Tex's coffees were outrageously good, but it was just about coffee, and it felt like things were getting seriously iffy.

Then again, I worked with Tex. He was my boss. I could get his creations anytime I wanted.

I'll repeat, it seemed Eric was right.

Maybe it was something in the Denver air.

Harlow jumped on the coffee table in front of the couch by the window.

"Get the fuck down," Javi ground out.

"Make me," Harlow bit back.

Ooo...

Interesting.

Javi's face turned to stone.

Ooo...

Hawt.

Harlow turned to the milling, hostile crowd.

"Okay, we fight crime," she announced.

Well...

Damn.

Nothing like putting it out there.

Guess the Angels weren't going incognito.

"Fuck me," Knox muttered.

Javi blew out a breath so huge, it was a wonder it didn't knock everybody down.

Oh, and he got closer to Harlow.

"We saved some women who were being trafficked and some homeless people who were kidnapped and forced to labor in drug cooking places," Harlow went on.

She didn't even know what "drug cooking places" were called. So freaking Harlow.

I shot a smile at Raye.

Raye smiled back.

"And *obviously* we need Tex, because criminals keep committing crimes," she carried on. "I mean, I'd be happy if they didn't, but they do. Now, it goes without saying, I love coffee too, of course, especially Tex's coffees. But, if he's not down there, who's going to find me a pink Army knife and help us plan stakeouts?"

This was met with silence.

"Well...*who*?" Harlow demanded.

"You've got like, seven ridiculously fit hot guys hanging around you," someone said. "How about them?"

"Well, they help, obviously," Harlow admitted.

"So why do you need Tex?" another patron asked.

"Because he's...Tex," Harlow explained.

"He's an old guy," a shout came from the back. "What's he going to do?"

“Now hang on a ding dang second,” Daisy snapped, coming to her diamante-encrusted, platform, lace-up bootied feet.

In fact, all of the Rock Chicks now engaged.

“Careful what you say about my uncle,” Roxie shouted.

“You’re wearing Louboutin croc-embossed Chelsea boots,” a yell rang out, and darn, these Denverites knew their shoes. “You’re rich and famous too.”

“I work hard for my Louboutins,” Roxie shot back. “But my husband’s a cop. We’re hardly *rich*.”

Even the mention of her husband being a cop and the presence of seven fit hot guys (plus Tex and Duke) didn’t calm this crowd.

“We should have had warning,” another shout came out. “One day he was here, the next day he was gone. How is that fair?”

“Life, on the whole, isn’t fair, honky,” Tex boomed. “Deal with it.”

“Come back to Denver!” someone demanded.

“You scrape my windshields. You shovel my snow. You pay my gas bills, motherfuckers,” Tex returned. “Not a palm tree in this fuckin’ place.”

“Tex, how about we try de-escalation?” Cap suggested.

Tex swung a fortunately empty portafilter toward the crowd. “They can’t tell me where to live.”

“I’ve supported you for a decade and a half!” Helmet Blonde cried.

“You paid for coffee I made. That’s the only social contract I entered into with you,” Tex bellowed. “Now, those are my girls.” The portafilter swung in our direction. “The ones here are married and raisin’ babies. The ones down there, though, they need me. I look out for my girls. You can throw tantrums or furniture, I don’t give a shit.”

“I really hope they don’t throw furniture,” Indy whispered.

“The decision is made,” Tex kept bellowing. “Though, the frequent times I come back to visit my girls and my grandbabies, the decision is *not* made if I’ll come in here to make coffee. So? What’s it gonna be? You all gonna be cry-babies and make me steer clear of Fortum’s? Or are you all gonna shut the fuck up, take your fuckin’ coffee, and give me some peace?”

There was some shuffling of feet and eye-contact avoidance.

“You get what you get, or you don’t get nothin’,” Tex decreed. “So what’s it gonna be?”

Silence from the throng.

He put the portafilter down like he was going to exit the espresso area.

“We’ll take what we can get!” someone yelled.

“Yeah!” someone else cried.

“Stand down!” another person shouted to the crowd. “I want my coffee!”

“Reform the line, reform the line.” Yet someone else was organizing the line.

Tex looked to Helmet Blonde. “You done instigating?”

“I just miss you,” she said quietly.

“Maybe next time, just say that,” Tex returned. Then boomed, “*Next!*”

Helmet Blonde hung her head and walked to the back of the line.

Harlow jumped down from the table.

The boys headed back to the book counter.

We all settled.

I caught Eric’s eyes and mouthed, “See? All okay.”

He just shook his head at me then turned a vigilant eye on the line.

“Am I the only one disappointed no one threw furniture?” Ally asked.

“Yes.” Indy.

“Yes.” Jet.

“Yes.” Roxie.

“No.” Jules.

“No.” Ava.

“Yes.” Stella.

“Yes.” Sadie.

“No.” Shirleen.

“No.” Daisy.

“Yes.” Malia.

“Yes.” Harlow.

“No.” Luna.

“No.” Raye.

“No.” Me.

We all sipped our coffees.

And Tex boomed, “*Next!*”

* * * * *

“No pressure,” I called from the bathroom, “but Tod’s pretty far along in our wedding planner book, and so far, he’s nailing it.”

Yes, we’d only been there about two days.

Yes, what I spoke was truth.

Just to say, I approved swatches.

I came out of the bathroom, inserting my last earring.

“I mean, it isn’t like we haven’t...*whoa.*”

I found myself against the wall, my man up against me, his hands on my hips, his eyes cast down to my dress.

“Eric,” I whispered.

Those eyes came to mine.

Mm...

“I take it you like the dress,” I remarked, trying not to do it smugly, and failing.

“How much foreplay do you need right now?” he asked.

I was ready for him to enter me at the wall cage. I was more ready at the look in his eyes. And seriously ready at the rough tone of his deep voice when he asked that question.

So I said, “Does none work for you?”

His hands went to his fly.

My hands went to my skirt.

He caught my wrists. “Unh-unh.”

Oh, goodie.

He was going to do all the work.

He kissed me.

Oh yeah, totally doing all the work.

My very short skirt was yanked up, my barely-there panties were yanked down, then I was lifted up, and when he brought me down, he was inside me.

Taking him, being connected to him, I whimpered into his mouth.

Eric started thrusting.

I wound my arms and legs around him.

He thrust harder, testing the soundproofing of the stone walls, since he was fucking me against one.

“God, baby,” I gasped against his lips.

“So wet,” he grunted against mine.

I held his gaze. “Love you.”

At my words, his bedroom eyes mixed the sweet with the spice. “Love you too, sweetheart.”

That got me wetter.

This time, I kissed Eric.

The deep V of my black dress with silver sequins gave him the opportunity to put my tits into play, and he did, to astonishingly good results.

As always, I came first.

It didn’t take long for Eric to join me.

His face was in my neck as he recovered, and when I felt it leave him, I said, “So that’s an affirmative on liking the dress.”

He pulled his face back and grinned at me.

God, yes.

I loved that grin. I loved this man. To the marrow of my bones.

“What there is of it, yes, very much,” he finally answered verbally.

I held out an arm. “It has long sleeves.”

That was the only thing remotely long on it.

He laughed (which was good) and pulled me off his cock and put me on my feet (which was bad, but biologically necessary).

Though, he didn’t move away.

He rested his nose against mine and whispered, “You always look gorgeous, Jess. But tonight, you’re stunning, and I feel no pressure about the wedding planner, as you absolutely know.”

I absolutely did. We were totally on the same page with that.

I smiled brightly at him.

He kissed it.

After that kiss, he bent and kissed the pendant he gave me for Christmas that I was wearing (a very nice added touch).

Then he let me go so I could clean up.

He was holding my panties and the earring I dropped when I returned.

I did the earring first, smirking at him.

He smirked back (he did it better) as he watched me put it in and smirked more when he watched me tug up my panties.

We were never going to get to the party if he kept smirking at me, so I asked, “During the Fortnum’s brouhaha, do you know what Roam was doing?”

He jutted his chin. “Fortnum’s is on video surveillance. He was communicating to one of the cameras, telling the guys downtown shit was getting real, and they might need to come in.”

I saw no camera. “Fortnum’s is on video surveillance?”

He nodded, reaching a hand to me and asking, “Ready?”

I returned his nod, took his hand and queried, “Is that just for security?”

I mean, thieves gonna thief, but the place was full of old books and coffee, I didn’t know what they’d take.

“Read the books,” he said as we strolled, holding hands, out the door. “I mean it.”

I wasn’t sure I ever wanted to read those books.

“The Surf Club is surveilled too,” he went on.

I stopped dead. “It is?”

He looked down at me. “Yes.”

“Does Tito know that?”

“Yes.”

Well then.

“The other girls?” I kept at him.

“No clue.” He started us walking again.

“So you guys are watching us?”

“Yep. And listening.”

I repeated our dead stop.

“Listening?” I asked.

“Yep,” he answered

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

He seemed baffled. “Is it an issue?”

I tried to think about the things that were done and said at The Surf Club.

Then I tipped my head and inquired, “How sensitive are the microphones?”

He again set us to moving. “When you all are huddled behind the bar, we can’t hear it.”

I was watching him as we moved, this being why I asked, “Should I believe that?”

“Okay, we can’t hear all of it.” He smiled at me. “You need to talk louder.”

I gave him the side eye.

He laughed out loud, let my hand go, wrapped an arm around my shoulders and tucked me to his side.

“We just want you women safe, honey,” he said softly when he quit laughing.

I couldn’t argue that, since I wanted us safe too.

And since I liked his laugh, and his arm around my shoulders (which meant I could put mine around his waist), I decided to change the subject.

“Do you know what happened at Nordstrom and Neimans? The girls aren’t spilling.”

“The first incident was about shoes,” he said. “Don’t ask for specifics. I let it filter out after it filtered in, so I don’t remember. I tuned out the Neimans thing entirely.”

Again, stymied. Me and my girls had been trying to ferret this out from the Rock Chicks all weekend.

“You having a good time?”

We were on the elaborate castle stairs when his question came.

And I heard in his tone how much he wanted me to be doing that.

So, yeah.

I again stopped us.

Eric was one step down, he turned to me when I stopped, so we were semi-eye-to-eye (I was a bit taller because I was in stilettos, it was a sweet change).

“I feel like family,” I said by way of answer.

His beautiful face warmed. He tugged me until I fell into him. And we made out.

“Oh my God!” Ally yelled from below. “You already have sex hair, both of you. Give it up, at least until midnight.”

We broke our kiss, and it was then I noticed Eric did have sex hair.

It was fabulous.

His eyes were sultry and happy.

I expected mine were the same.

Good way to start partying.

Eric must have felt the same because he gave my hand a gentle yank, we walked down the stairs and joined the party.

* * * * *

I was videoing Harlow and Burgundy Rose (Tod found a champagne gown for Burgundy and it was *perfection*) lip syncing to “You’re the One That I Want” (and Harlow was singing the boy part).

This was after Daisy and Raye did “Islands in the Stream” (yes, Daisy did the Dolly part).

The window came down at the top of my phone screen telling me I had a photo text from Titus.

I waited until the song was over before I pulled up the photo of Henny lying on a broad chest, his eyes closed, his front paws tucked in, giving his kitty happy face.

The text said, *Proof of life. Happy New Year.*

I was sending a *Happy New Year* back, when I got a text from Jeff.

Felicitations, sis. We had a good end to this year, thanks to you. Here’s to more good to come. Love you.

God, my brother was the shit.

I sent him a bunch of hearts and fireworks and a *Love you too!*

“Bitch, get up here. We’re doing ‘Single Ladies!’” Burgandy shouted.

I looked up, and saw I was the bitch she was shouting at.

I'd already broken the seal with Paula Abdul's "Straight Up," which was so totally worth it with the way Eric was grinning and laughing and watching me like I could turn water into vodka, so I didn't hesitate to haul ass up there.

The only (straight) dude to get into the lip sync action was The Kevster, who did a weird and wonderful version of "MacArthur Park," but one could say the men didn't mind their women acting like huge dorks (and this was good, since it happened a lot).

One could say they loved it, because we were having fun, so they were all for it, and they let it show.

The night was fabulous.

The fashion was fantastic.

The food and drink phenomenal.

Yes, we were family.

So maybe that was why, after a ludicrously good version of "Meeting in the Ladies Room" done by Malia, her sister Lena and bestie Toni, and then Burgundy brought down the house with "Supermodel," Shirleen cued up "We Are Family" and that was an all-in of Rock Chicks, Avenging Angels, gay dudes (and The Kevster).

This happened right before the five-four-three-two...

Which was when I started to walk to Eric.

His arms opened.

His eyes said everything I needed to hear for eternity.

I stepped into his hold and his arms closed around me as I curled mine around him.

ONE!

And I knew I started the year just right.

Because I did it in my man's arms...

And I got my first kiss of the year from my guy.

Both of us among love and laughter and family.

Oh yeah.

It was just right.

The perfect Happy New Year.

The End