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AND THEN THERE'S *MY* FAMILY

MY MEETING WITH Grey's family at the Standtall estate went far better than I had any right to expect. Only after I got home did it occur to me that turning my back on my Freemansland roots and becoming a Standtall might mean cutting myself off from my brother.

About a week after we returned, I had a video call with Jeriah. Grey and I sat side by side on the sofa in my apartment. When Jeriah's face came into view, his blue eyes lit on the pigeonhead beside me, and his expression hardened.

I spoke brightly. "Riah, hello! It's time you met my betrothed, Ashgrey Standtall."

All three of us were in uniform, and Jeriah stood, lifting the phone with him so we could see, and saluted. "Commander."

Grey had no choice but to return the salute, after which Riah sat back down. Then, as if as an afterthought, stood again and repeated the gesture. "My apologies, Information Officer Freeman. I should salute you, too."

I snapped, "Stop it, Riah. Don't be like this."

"Like what? Respectful of my superiors? Forgive me, please."

How could someone I loved so much infuriate me so? "We're family, you stu—" Oops. A Standtall would never call a person *stupid*, let alone the rest of what almost slipped from my lips. "And off duty. And six hundred kilometers apart. You don't have to salute your sister in these circumstances. What the glish."

Though Grey tensed as if sensing danger, his speech was civil, if a bit too formal. "Your sister speaks of you often, Jeriah. You are very important to her, and I am anxious to meet you personally. Until that can be arranged, however, I suppose a video call will have to do."

Riah eyed him warily. "Yes, sir, it will do."

I had to get a real conversation going, and soon. But what did these two have in common? Me. That was about it. "You love me, Riah, don't you?"

He pursed his lips and looked down briefly before turning his blues back up to mine. "More than anything."

"I know you do." I wrapped my arm around Grey's. "And so does he. He'll never hurt me, because he loves me. But if you reject the man I love, *you'll* hurt me. Don't do that, Ri."

Grey let out a pent-up breath. "She's a wise woman, your sister. Look, I know how you feel about us pigeonheads—"

Riah gave a little start at hearing the word.

"Yes, she told me about Dr. Pigeon and the name you call people with—" he ran a finger along his brow "—certain cranial characteristics. But I'm not Dr. Pigeon. I hope—and your sister is confident—that you'll come to accept me for who I am, as she does."

Riah's gaze went back and forth between Grey and me as Grey continued, "And who I am is someone who happens to love your sister more than life itself."

When Riah looked dubious, I spoke up. "What? You think no one could love me?"

I knew what he was thinking, because our thoughts often connected. *Mayne loves you*. But what he said was, "No, I don't think that."

"You just never figured I'd fall for someone who's City." The rest of the term, *slime*, went unsaid.

Riah nodded. "Yeah, well, I can see this is the way it's going to be. So, okay, I'll try to live with it." He glanced at Grey. "No offense, Commander."

Grey nodded. "None taken. But we're family now, and my family calls me by my first name."

Riah leaned back in his chair. "Right. So, Jem, you went to meet this new family of yours a couple weeks ago. Tell me about them." No one

could call his manner gracious, but at least he wasn't hanging up on me as I'd feared.

I launched into a discussion of the people I'd met when visiting Sentinel Pines. I made it a point to bring Grey into the conversation as much as possible, asking him to fill in some of the details.

Riah listened with little comment for several minutes, but his expression and body language said he wasn't impressed.

"Oh, you might find this interesting." I grasped for something to melt his icy stare. "The kids loved it when I told them stories. They couldn't get enough of them."

His brows lifted. "Do tell."

"Yeah, it surprised me, too. At first, the kids terrified me, honestly, 'cause you know I'm not comfortable with kids. They're like alien creatures. But the first night, when their parents told them it was time to get ready for bed, Grey's oldest niece, Willow, asked me if I could tell them a bedtime story. And Grey, here, comes out with, 'Aunt Jem's a good storyteller.' I don't know where that came from, but—"

Grey graced me with a smile of adoration. "Because you are. You have a way with words."

"Well, I never thought I did." I shrugged. "But they persuaded me to come up with something, so I told them that old story about the baby dragon wandering on the sharpfall who came upon some swamp bears."

Jeriah nodded. "Little Goldenscale."

"Yeah. Except I changed the story so it wasn't a dragon, it was a little girl. And I made the swamp bears out to be bumbling idiots. I guess it wasn't really the Little Goldenscale story, but that was the inspiration."

Grey broke in. "She did a brilliant job. I can't believe it was off the cuff, because it sounded well rehearsed. Not just the kids, but all the adults were drawn into the tale. Unfortunately, the kids weren't sleepy afterward. They clamored for more."

I chuckled. "I'm glad their parents said no, because I don't know what I'd have told them next."

“But she was ready the next night when they asked her again.” Gray put his arm around me. “She’s now the official storyteller of the family. Everybody loves to hear her Freemansland tales.”

Jeriah grunted. “So you tell bedtime stories to *his* nieces and nephews, but you’ve never even met your own?”

Grey turned to me, his face asking wordless questions.

I flushed. “You know I love your kids, Riah. I’ve just never had the opportunity to—”

“That’s a steaming pile of honey.”

I know that doesn’t sound vile, but on Freemansland, it’s a term almost as foul as Cityslime. *Honeypot* was what we called the hole where you relieved yourself, so you can guess what *honey* referred to.

Jeriah glared. “Your namesake is three years old, and you’ve never made an effort to meet her. Or her brother. You’ve never even talked about it.”

I was about to object, but he plowed on. “Have you called Seena lately?”

My mind grappled with what sounded like a change in subject. “What?”

“Have you bothered to call her, see how she’s doing, talk to the kids?”

“Well, no, but—”

“Slime, you never even ask me about them. Every time we talk anymore, it’s always about you, you, you. You and your beloved Grey, your wedding plans, your this and your that. Sounds to me like—”

Grey raised his hand. “Hold on a minute, Jeriah.” He turned to me. “What is he saying, Freeman? Is it true? You’ve never met your own niece and nephew?”

I felt short of breath. “I haven’t, but like I said—”

“That’s going to change.” Grey addressed Jeriah. “I’m sorry, I had no idea. I’ll see what I can do to get you all together just as soon as—”

Jeriah interrupted. "Thank you, Commander, but don't bother. It seems she has a new family now and doesn't need mine. It was nice meeting you, sir."

The screen went blank.

I wanted to grab the device and throw it across the room, but that's not the sort of thing a Standtall would do.

Instead, I huffed with indignation. "Well, that was rude. I can't believe he hung up on us."

I had every intention of getting up and putting some distance between myself and Grey, who radiated disapproval in waves that threatened to overwhelm me. But he grabbed my hand and pulled me back when I tried to rise.

"Hold on a minute."

I tried to pull away, but he held firm. "What was he talking about? Why have you never visited them?"

His grip was more pushy than painful, but I didn't like his tone. Even worse, I disliked the way he thought he could tell me how to run my life. What business was it of his that I'd never found the courage to see Jeriah's kids? I was good to Grey's family, wasn't I? Wasn't that all that mattered?

I looked down at his hand holding mine. "You're hurting me," I lied.

He let go. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to."

I hopped up and fled to the bedroom.

He rose too, but I was quicker. His call of "Freeman!" vied for last-word status with the slam of my door.

I didn't answer him. How could I explain what I didn't understand myself?

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ABOUT THAT "YOU'RE hurting me" lie? Greater import lay behind those words than you might think.

Shortly before we left Sentinel Pines, Grey's mother had one final meeting with me. His father was away on business, so it was "just us two

girls,” as she put it. It was an intimacy I never thought I’d share with someone of her class, but her warmth put me completely at ease.

She started off talking about the wedding, probing considerably to avoid stepping on the toes of anyone in my family who expected to help with the arrangements.

“I’ve never been to a wedding,” I confessed, much to her astonishment. Once I managed to convince her that was true, I told her, “I have no idea what a wedding should be like. The thought of planning something like that is almost enough to make me break out in a rash.”

She laughed. Apparently that phrase wasn’t such a well-worn cliché in her world as it was in mine. “Oh, Jemma dear, we cannot have you itching on your wedding day. Are you sure you don’t have someone in the family to help you? Your aunt? One of your cousins is about your age, I believe?”

I shook my head. “People get married on Freemansland, but they don’t make a big deal about it. You should be the one to help me, since you know how these things work.”

She took a little convincing, but eventually I got it across to her that I truly wanted her to take charge.

“It is such a shame you’ll be so far away. But, no matter. I shall meet with Zeffa. She is the wedding planner Silver used, and she does a marvelous job. We will get some ideas together, and then I shall run them by you to see what you think.”

I wanted to say, *I’d rather you kept me out of it. Just tell me what to do.* But I was afraid she’d have a stroke. “That sounds perfect. Thank you so much for taking care of it for me. I can’t tell you what a relief it is to know it’s in such good hands.”

Every breath of that was true, believe me.

After a little more chatter on that subject, she turned to a topic that caught me completely off guard. “We have not discussed this before, Jemma dear, but before we go any farther with the wedding plans, I should

tell you about the agreement Mr. Standtall and I will require that you sign.”

My heart seized up and my stomach turned a somersault. “Ma’am?” It had something to do with having children, didn’t it? I just knew something like this would happen. I’d already agreed to have their doctors look into my fertility issues. What more could they ask?

She must have noticed my stricken look, because she reached out and took my hand. “You have nothing to fear. The matter is serious, but the agreement will be for your protection.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I can see that you do not. And why would you?” She patted my hand. “It is an unusual request.”

She scooted closer so she could put her arm around me. “I already love you like a daughter. You are safe here. I hope you know that.”

I nodded and swallowed again. “You’ve made me feel very welcome.”

She hugged me. “I am so glad you feel that way. Mr. Standtall and I are so pleased that Ashgrey has chosen you. We could have found no better match for him had we searched the world for one.” She gave a chuckle. “Truth be told, we did just that. Or at least, we tried, until he asked us to kindly cease and desist.”

I could imagine that conversation and smiled at the thought.

“He is a man of discerning tastes, to be sure.” She removed her arm from my shoulders but held my hand. “He is, however, an exacting man, as are all the Standtalls. Though he controls his temper well, he does have one. That, too, is typical. Traditionally, the men in our family—not just our family, but many of the City Fathers—have been known to be, shall we say, hard on their wives.”

Where in the world was she going with this? Weren’t all men like that?

“In the past, they often took pride in the extent to which they kept their wives under subjection. Even today, some men in our class think nothing of mistreating their women.”

I failed to see how that separated them from anyone else. She seemed to expect a response from me, though, so for lack of anything else to say, I nodded. "I see."

"Ashgrey's great-grandfather and his brothers decided it was time to put a stop to that, and they vowed formally to never strike their wives. Since that time, anyone marrying into the family is required to sign a solemn agreement that neither husband nor wife will strike the other. The woman must promise that if her husband breaks his vow, she will leave him. Immediately. She must never let it happen again. If her own family cannot or will not take her in and she has no means to fend for herself, the Standtalls will protect and support her. We will not allow any woman in our family to go through what so many have endured, and continue to be put through even today. It simply will not happen in a Standtall household."

I found my tongue. "I have never heard of such a thing."

"Oh, yes, I regret that it is true. The things some men do to their women should not be spoken of."

"No, that's not what I mean. I'm aware domestic violence is widespread. What I've never heard of is a family providing protection like this. I'm— I'm floored, quite frankly."

She patted my hand. "We have raised both our boys properly. I cannot believe you would be in any danger even without the agreement. But we are committed to this."

"Though I can't imagine Ashgrey ever striking me, I'll certainly sign the pledge, if you require it."

The contract would be signed on the wedding day, so it wasn't yet in effect. But when I accused Grey of hurting me, he took the charge seriously. In fact, he dropped my hand as if it burned him.

Once I was safe in my room, I reflected on how a woman might manipulate a man with that mindset.

Then my conscience, recently sensitized by my association with the virtuous Standtalls, reared an angry head and glared at my heart. How could I think such a thing?

He tapped on the door. "Freeman?"

I couldn't endure his goodness. His righteousness was an assault to my shriveled, warped character. "I think you should go home. I'm not feeling well."

"Well, of course not." I heard no trace of sympathy in his tone. "You should be sick over this. Why have you never made an effort to see your brother's family?"

What business was that of his? I'd visit Jeriah's kids when I was good and ready.

"Freeman." It was a command, not a question. Maybe he wouldn't be so easy to manipulate.

But did I really want a man who was? "Go away."

"I know you're not sick. You just don't want to talk about it." He sounded almost perturbed enough to barge in without an invitation.

"Go away." I watched the door, poised for action should I see the slightest movement—though I had no idea what action I would take.

Nothing happened for a long, tense half-minute. When he spoke, it was not reassuring. "I'm going. But don't think for a minute you're getting out of this. We will straighten this out, and soon."

I stared at the door, listening to the retreat of his heavy footsteps, the opening and closing of my apartment's entrance. Only after I could hear him no more did I let out my breath.

The image of Jeriah's furrowed brow danced across my vision, and his words taunted me. *Your namesake is three years old, and you've never made an effort to meet her.*

Grey's face took the place of Jeriah's. *What is he saying, Jemma. Is that true?* And then his stern, *We will straighten this out, and soon.*

Jeriah was right. I had been deliberately avoiding Seena and the kids. But it wasn't my fault it hurt so much to see them.

And Grey was right too. I should be ashamed. The fact that I wasn't sick over it was itself a condemnation.

Both Jeriah and Grey were so much better than me. But they both loved me. How could they?

What would a Standtall do?

To begin with, if I were a Standtall, I wouldn't hide like this. When a Standtall committed a wrong, he confessed it. He made it right.

My legs turned to gel eels, and I collapsed onto the bed. I hadn't the first idea how to apologize, mostly because I'd always convinced myself I never had anything to apologize for.

But I was wrong now, and sooner or later, I'd have to admit it. I couldn't hide in the bedroom forever.

I tried to envision facing Grey and confessing the truth. It *was* my choice to not see my niece and nephew. I'd had ample opportunity, but always found an excuse not to. What would he do when I told him?

Make me admit it to Jeriah, for starters. And make me remedy the situation.

Confound those Standtalls and their slithering, slotting nobility.