

*They say blood is thicker than water. Maybe that's why we battle our own with more energy and gusto than we would ever expend on strangers.*

—David Assael

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*Eighteen years later*

June was in the kitchen, her arms crossed. “What do you mean I’m hard to live with?” June said to her mother. On many weekends, June and Maggie would go spend the night at June’s parents’ house in Carefree for an early morning trail ride on the family horses.

Emma Morgan, June’s mother, was washing a batch of strawberries sitting in a colander in the large farmer’s sink anchoring the polished concrete counter in front of the kitchen window, a window looking out over the mountains to the north of their home and horses in the stables. She was in her sixties, looking like she was in her fifties, wearing her jeans and boots and a red and white plaid shirt in preparation for the morning ride, but she wanted to wash the berries first, maybe have some for breakfast. “I didn’t say that, dear. I just said you can be a little *tense* sometimes, especially to those around you.”

“Same thing,” June said, finding herself irritated easily by the topic that had come up numerous times in the last few months.

Emma looked over her shoulder at her daughter. It had been eighteen years since Ted’s death. June stayed with Phoenix and was now one of two women homicide detectives. She had been doing it for the last five years.

Maggie was sitting at the table across the kitchen from her grandmother. “Mom, Grandma didn’t say that,” Maggie said. “Although sometimes—”

“‘Sometimes’ what?”

“See?” Both Emma and Maggie replied in unison.

“‘See’ what?” June said. “I’m being accused of something, of not being a good parent or daughter or something. Can’t I ask why?”

Maggie and her grandmother just looked at each other and shook their heads. “June, honey, could you be having the menopause?” her mother asked.

“Yeah, or maybe your PMS’s are just much much closer together,” Maggie added.

Heavy footsteps came down the hall. “Morning Junebug,” Henry Morgan, June’s father, said walking into the kitchen and kissing his daughter and Maggie on the head and patting his wife’s bottom and smiling at her. Henry was a little under six feet tall, in his mid-sixties, with silver, close-cropped hair and mustache, wearing a pair of well-worn jeans, a green Carhart long-sleeve shirt, and a matching pair of well-worn Durango boots. He put his patina-stained Resistol hat on the side table as he came in the room. He asked in June’s direction but to no one in particular. “We eating before our ride or after?”

“I don’t know,” June started. “According to Mom and my daughter, whom I have worked so hard to put through college and give her a wonderful life, I am crappy to live with.” She took a sip of her coffee and then put it down and crossed her arms again. Emma and Maggie just looked at each other again and then back to Henry.

Father looked at his wife. “You didn’t ask her about her cycle did you? Tell me you didn’t do that,” he said.

Emma just kept washing the fruit. “Well, it very well could be an issue. Your sister—

“Sussy?” Henry asked.

“Yes, Sussy,” Emma said.

“What about Sussy?” Maggie asked.

“Oh don’t ask,” Henry said. “Never ask your mother—”

“Well, she had that same issue your mother appears to have. The mood, first it’s in the sky, then it’s in the basement. Remember how she would swear at the newspaper guy when he missed the driveway?”

“She didn’t really swear,” Henry shook his head.

“Well, it sounded like swearing. She would yell ‘hey, dumb ass, hit the drive way once in a while.’”

“Aunt Sussy said that?” Maggie said with a short laugh.

“Come to find out it was some kind of endometriosis issue. They thought it was a cyst but once they cleaned her out—”

“Jeezus, Mary and Joseph,” Henry said looking in to his as yet empty cup of coffee.

“She was fine as a button. Maybe you got the endometriosis like Sussy.”

“Don’t forget the PMS stuff,” Maggie reminded them.

June’s father walked over near June with his cup and poured himself some coffee. “You think you’re sweet and kind and a joy to be around all the time, Junebug?”

“Well—,” she hesitated, analyzing her father’s tone. “I have some moments in which I can be.”

He nodded. “You do. But you think you don’t have any tension issues, no stress, and none of that affects your disposition? How about that menapausy thing your mom mentioned?” He continued talking as he finished fixing his coffee and turned back to her, leaning against the counter.

“Well, Dad, I do have a pretty difficult career field and I haven’t been to the doctor about the other two, but I don’t—”

“And you’re sitting in that chair with your arms crossed right now—because? And you didn’t wake this morning with a frowny face? When you and Maggie spend the night out here, and believe me when I say your mother and I truly love it, you always wake up with a frowny face, like the one you have right now. I hate to tell you this, Junebug, but your frowny face has been there for a while. I think the menza and the PMS stuff is just adding high octane to a long running forest fire.” He finished the sentence as he turned around to put some more cream in his coffee. “Didn’t you always tell us non-verbal communication makes up about two-thirds of what we say? What are you telling us right now, baby?”

She quickly unwrapped her arms.

The side door to the house, just down the hall from the kitchen, could be heard opening with gusto. “Good morning everyone,” Aunt Eleanor said as she blew in to the room. She was June’s aunt, Emma’s sister. As a real estate agent in neighboring Cave Creek, and a successful one at that, she had finally convinced Emma and Henry, just before the bottom dropped out of the housing market, to sell their home and attached horse stables in Gilbert, which sold on the same day they listed it for ten thousand more than they were asking. She wanted them to move to either Cave Creek or Carefree on the north side of Phoenix, but as the market was tanking, Emma and Henry decided to wait and see after first closing the sale of their Gilbert home and leasing the stable space for the animals back

from the buyer. A move Eleanor didn't agree with but after three years and the market continuing to fall, they still had their funds and now they bought property almost three times the size and about one-third the original price, making Eleanor a very happy real estate agent.

June grew up on the horse ranch in Gilbert and helped her mom and dad train horses. Emma and Henry operated a working shelter for maverick horses from the Bureau of Land Management before it was cool to be a rescue center. Later, when her parents "retired" from their Gilbert home and operation and moved to their place in Carefree, they still had horses they trained, mostly to get ready for saddle and rider. The benefits of waiting to buy land and then buying more than they ever owned before, offset the benefits of retirement. The two were not made to sit and watch the world go by.

Henry did much of what he did in Gilbert, help break some of the BLM horses' people in town bought or adopted. June's mom helped him while working at Joe's Tack and Feed, on Cave Creek Road, three mornings a week. The other times, she worked around the house and painted, desert landscapes mostly.

Aunt Eleanor was the gregarious one between herself and Emma. She had been married three times, having just gotten rid of number three, a Cuban 'iron artist' she met while on a trip in Austria. After a while with him, she discovered his 'art' consisted mostly of old hubcaps, old tricycle frames, and old barbed wire soldered to both and then welded to pieces of rusted iron. It had to be rusted, according to Number Three. That was part of the 'art.' People, mostly from New Hampshire and Vermont, bought his work on line. The same people who bought 'authentic' Kachina dolls and Navajo blankets, not knowing they were from a warehouse in Benghazi.

Eleanor liked the good life. Things not soiled by dirt and horse hair. She liked leather and chrome, dark woods and things that shined in the sunlight. She wore tailored clothes and when she could, she liked to wear designer items people could tell were designer items from ten feet away. But almost every week, she liked to go to Emma's house and sit and drink coffee while they rode. Her jeans and boots were worth almost as much as the horse, but only she knew that.

The sisters complimented each other, one of the earth and the other from some other solar system. Eleanor also spoke what she thought, even if no one asked or didn't want to know. "You guys going riding this morning?"

June moved over to the table and found a seat next to her daughter. "Aunt Eleanor." June wouldn't let it go.

"Oh honey, don't start with Aunt Eleanor too?" Henry said.

"Do you think I'm a bitch to live—"

"Screaming," Aunt Eleanor said, interrupting June's beginning rant as she walked over to the coffee pot.

Henry simply shook his head a few times and moved over so Eleanor could pour herself a cup. "I told you not to start with her."

June was stopped in her verbal tracks. "Wha—what?"

Eleanor went to the refrigerator and pulled out a container of peppermint mocha creamer and splashed some in her coffee. "Oh, honey, you don't mean to be, but yeah, you are sometimes." Another of her former lovers taught her to love this combination of coffee and creamer. He was a chef in Barcelona. His specialty was chocolate filled croissants and

Angolan egg nog around the holidays. Eleanor dumped him after she could not get over his back hair.

"I told you mom," Maggie said as she sat next to her mother.

"No you didn't. You just said I was a little hard to—"

"Junebug, sometimes—"

"Geez, Dad." The kitchen filled with conversations, all happening at once.

Eleanor symptomatically clutched her chest in false embarrassment. "Did I say something—again, I shouldn't have? Honey, they have pills for people like us. It helps with the hormones, makes us, well, nicer. The doctor put me on it about six months ago. People around me really, appreciated it," Aunt Eleanor said, taking another sip of coffee. "One of the side effects is I emit some kind of pheromone which attracts the younger stallions, if you get my—"

Mother sighed. "Yes, sister, maybe a little bit."

There was a quick pause. Then June spoke. "Mom—I think I am kind—"

"Sure," Mother said.

"and loving—"

"Always," Maggie nodded.

"and caring—"

"Absolutely, Junebug," Henry said having to turn his back to the conversation.

"And sweet."

"Ha!" Aunt Eleanor snorted as she almost spilled her coffee. She quickly recovered. "No, sorry, I just—the coffee was a little hot."

"Liar," June said crossing her arms again next to her daughter.

"Honey, we just think you are wound a little, well—tight," Emma said as she reached across the table and touched her daughter's arm.

"Yeah, like Grover Cleveland's bowels," Aunt Eleanor said stirring her colored coffee.

"What? Who?" June asked with a frown.

"Grover Cleveland, *President* Grover Cleveland? Everyone knew he had colitis—it's a bowel issue," Eleanor said punctuated with a sip.

"Ellie, you're not helping," Henry said. "As a matter of fact, this train might have made it around the bend had you not come by for coffee—again."

Eleanor didn't stop. "You're like a Slinky, ready to *explode* down the stair case, careening end over end until you crash at the bottom of the long flight of stairs!" Aunt Eleanor said as she took another sip and reached for some more creamer in the refrigerator, ignoring her brother-in-law. "Let me ask you, how's the man issue?" Eleanor asked June. "Dating anyone?"

"You really aren't helping," Henry said again, leaning against the sink his wife was just working at.

"Oh, how about women?"

"Sister," Emma tried to intervene.

Maggie leaned back in her chair. "Mom, we love you. We just think you could use a vacation, you know, get away for a while." Maggie looked a lot like her aunt when Eleanor was Maggie's age. Cute, with chocolate brown eyes, her hair a little lighter in color, lying on her shoulders and under her eyes was just a dusting of freckles.

Eleanor added. "Yeah, like spend a year in the Congo's rainforest, darting monkeys, making soup out of their paws, and eating roots."

"Sister!"

"What? I'm just trying to help. Spending some time alone might be good for the girl. I've seen those rain forest trips. Breath-taking! And she gets to kills things, a positive tension reliever for a homicide detective if you ask me, as long as she eats what she kills, that's the rule there. Oh, or make some form of clothing out of its hide. Some of those animals are poisonous and you don't want to eat them, but they would make a pleasant scarf, or a hat. Maybe even a belt."

Henry said—again. "You're really not helping,"

"I'm not?" She said with overly large doe eyes. The collective shook their heads.

June said "I can't leave even if I wanted to, leaning against the back of one of the kitchen table chairs.

"Why the hell not?" Aunt Eleanor asked.

June paused for a moment, thinking of what to say. "Who's going to take care of Maggie?"

"Mom, I'm almost twenty-two. I think I can manage for a week or—ten." She mumbled the last word to herself.

"Wait," Mother had a light bulb look of an idea. "Eleanor, you have your time share still don't you?"

"Oh, now you want my help," Eleanor said.

"Don't you?"

"Which one?"

"The pretty one. The one down in the Caribbean."

"Windsong?" Eleanor answered with a questioning look.

"Sure," Emma said along with a shoulder shrug. "I don't know the name of it, but if that's the one, yeah, the one you went to last year. Could you let your niece use it?"

"That's my favorite," Aunt Eleanor said with a frown. "I might want to go again."

Emma sat back in her own chair, still holding her coffee. "You told me you can't go back there, at least not for a while. You said something happened the last time with a couple of local men you were dancing with."

Eleanor frowned. "I told you about that?" Her frown grew deeper. "I need to learn not to tell the whole story." She stopped for a moment and the look on her face indicated she was pondering something. "Did I say we were—*dancing*?"

Emma nodded. "You came over with a bottle of Malbec and a red solo cup and you and I sat on the couch and you told me about two men. Along about the second glass, you began to share a little too much and I stopped you, but there was a story you were trying to share—about two men and the police," she said trying to pry the memory from her sister.

"Well they were not both from there. Gosh, that was good wine," Eleanor said with a look of memory on her face. She took her finger and rolled it around the brim of the coffee mug as if she was wiping it off. "One man was from the island, the other was from England—Cheshire, I think. He thought he was defending my honor from the other or maybe it was vice-versa. It was all a big mistake, a misunderstanding. Something just got lost in the translation.

"The police were called?" Maggie piped in.

"But then they went away," Eleanor said, bushing the air and the story away with the back of her hand.

Maggie smiled. "Aunt Eleanor, is that the trip and story you told me about you doing your white Tina Turner impression *on* the bar?"

"Yes, dear. You remembered." Eleanor said with a sense of pride.

"How many do you have?" June's mother asked.

"What? Stories? Many I'm afraid. There were only those two men. There was a third but he was a no—"

"No! Time shares, focus with me, sister. We're talking about getting June to a timeshare and unwind so she isn't, how did you put it, 'like Grover Cleveland's bowels'."

"Well that trip would have done it for her," Eleanor said while looking at Maggie and they both laughed.

"Again. Focus dear," Emma said directly. Eleanor had a tendency to wander off topic. Aunt Eleanor thought then looked down at her cup. "You mean total?"

"You just answered the question," Dad said.

June spoke up "Does anyone want to ask me if I want to go? Going to some god-forsaken island is not necessarily my idea of relaxation. There's probably bugs and snakes and stuff. What do you have in Paris?" I might have something to say about this."

Eleanor said with a touch of sarcasm. "Windsong is special. That's my favorite place. See? She doesn't want to go there. She wants to go to Paris," "Everyone wants to go see Paris. Frankly, I don't have anything in Paris. But the Caribbean, that's different. There are snakes and bugs. Actually, there's boas and the third most poisonous snake on the planet. She wouldn't like it," Eleanor said trying to dissuade the audience.

"See?" June said. "I don't want to go where there are boas. I don't want to Glock a boa."

"It's for June, your niece, whom you love. She needs to get away," Dad said as he ignored Eleanor and June's responses.

"We *need* her to get away," Maggie said.

"What if she doesn't want to go?" Aunt Eleanor asked.

"We can convince her," Henry said.

"Hello! I'm still in the room!"

"That's nice dear. Now, just hold on another minute while we work out the details with your aunt here."

"Geez."

After another couple minutes of discussion in the kitchen and no clear decision about breakfast before or after the ride had been made, Aunt Eleanor took a deep breath and shook her head in loss. She didn't want to give up her week on the island. She didn't tell them she owned two weeks there, so giving up one still left her the other. There was something about the place she didn't want to share, out of the four she owned around the world, Castries, St. Lucia; Edinburg, Scotland; Whistler, Canada; and her real favorite in Cabo San Lucas, she didn't want to allow anyone else in on what she knew. But after some convincing by all parties, with the exception of June, she relented and turned to her very large designer purse to find her cell phone and call the time share company.

She found an open week available in three weeks at the Windsong Resort, which sat on Labrelotte Bay on the island of Saint Lucia. It would be the middle of June, their off season, just before the beginning of the hurricane season and warm, not a lot of clients there so Aunt Eleanor was able to arrange the booking on the phone while they all finished their morning coffee.

"Junebug, why don't you try calling your sergeant and see if you can get it off while your aunt works this call," her father said. June, with a heavy labored sigh, "I don't think he will clear it on such short notice," she said as she dialed her own cell phone and waited while it rang.

Everyone in the room could hear the sergeant answer his phone. They could also hear how he responded when she asked him for the time. "Are you kidding me, Hersher? Christ, Christmas just came early—Genius of an idea! Tell me you're not teasing me!" the sergeant said, his voice bleeding out into the room. The only one who couldn't hear was Eleanor, still on the phone with the timeshare company.

June looked around to see if anyone was listening in and heard the sergeant's response. Emma and Henry made good use of themselves and turned as if they were distracted. Aunt Eleanor hung up her phone and was now fully focused getting up to pour some more coffee, oblivious to the workings of others in the room.

June tried to turn a bit in her seat so she wasn't fully exposed to everyone hearing. "Well, I was just wanting to know if—"

The sergeant could be clearly heard. "Yes, yes! When—three weeks from now? How about next week? God there's hope!" The faceless, happy voice said with a little giddy laugh as if he just got an early parole for a crime he had actually committed.

Emma and Henry averted their eyes when June looked around again quickly to see if they could hear. If they were standing outside the kitchen window, they could have heard her sergeant's response.

June turned to Maggie who was watching her. "Well, that's good—good. I'm glad you are going to try to clear some time for me," she said into the phone, trying to deflect the voice coming through the small speaker.

The sergeant spoke again. "Clear some time? Hersher, you on vacation means the suicide watch will drop on most of us around here. Do you need some time to pack? I can cut you some time off to pack. How about a ride to the airport? I think there is a motor unit you pissed off somewhere who would gladly escort you to the gate. We can bypass TSA if it will help. Dear Baby Jesus! There is sunlight again!"

She looked around again at her family. She saw her mother lean over to Eleanor and whisper "What did he say?"

Aunt Eleanor just mumbled out of the side of her mouth half stuffed with berries that were still sitting in the colander in the sink, "I'll tell you later."

June thanked the sergeant and then hung up. When she did, Maggie just gave her mother a tender smile.

Eleanor asked after she took another sip "All set on my end. How about you?" Still looking at her niece and giving her a smile as June hung up her phone. "So, is your sergeant single?"