

Chapter One

Quinn Baldwyn grabbed three beers out of his fridge, very carefully not looking at the invitation he'd stuck to the front of it. It was a constant reminder of the sword hanging over his neck—one he couldn't avoid indefinitely. His sister's wedding. He hated running the gauntlet that was his family during the monthly dinners required to keep them off his back. Having to face the firing squad with all the bells and whistles on at this wedding was going to be even worse. He didn't have to see the elegant invitation to know that Jenny—and their mother—had pulled out all the stops in the wedding planning—or that he'd be expected to put on his monkey suit and play the doting son.

It made him so fucking exhausted just thinking about it.

He'd stopped playing the political games his father demanded of him over a decade ago, and he wasn't about to be drawn back into that world. Not now. Not ever. If the old man would just take the hint and leave Quinn in peace, it would take a load of stress off both their lives.

“You're taking your sweet time in there, Baldwyn.”

He took a deep breath and tried to let the tension out of his shoulders. If there was anyone who'd pick up on it, it would be Adam and Daniel, and then he'd never hear the end of it. As far as they were concerned, Richard Baldwyn could take a flying leap and be done with it. They didn't understand that it was easier for him to do the bare minimum to keep the pending confrontation at bay. If his old man thought there was a chance he'd come back into the fold, he'd stand back and allow Quinn to work his way home with his tail between his legs in his own time.

The only problem was that the older he got, the more his father started asking probing questions about his plans to settle down and create some more Baldwyns. With Jenny's wedding

right around the corner, there was no one else to focus on pairing off, and as the only son, as far as his father was concerned it was his responsibility to continue the family name.

“Quinn?”

He turned, forcing a smile onto his face. “Hey, pretty lady.”

Jules stood in the doorway, a bright smile on her face. The expression dimmed when she took him in. “Is everything okay?”

Not in the least. But he just held up the beers. “Just getting my barmaid on.”

Instead of being appeased, she just frowned harder. That was the problem with women—they saw too much. Oh, his buddies knew that something was chewing at him, but they were more than happy to let him stew over it until he was ready to talk. If he was never ready to talk? Hell, that was okay, too. But now that Adam was married to Jules, she was around a lot more often, and the woman was incapable of seeing a person in need without wanting to meddle. She meant well, but there was no fixing his situation. “Jules—”

“It’s okay if you don’t want to talk about it. Adam’s not really a sharer, either.” She took two of the beers from him. “I’m used to it.”

She wasn’t trying to guilt him, but guilt rose all the same. Quinn sighed. Telling Jules Rodriguez no was like kicking a puppy—it just wasn’t done. And, damn her, she knew it. “Look, it’s complicated.”

“Okay.” She set the beers aside and hopped onto the kitchen counter, swinging her legs like a little kid. “I can do complicated. Hit me with it.”

What could it hurt to get some of his frustrations off his chest? He leaned over to look out into the living room, but for all intents and purposes, Adam and Daniel seemed engrossed in the Cowboys game going on. *I bet that ass sent her in here on purpose.* He popped the cap off his

beer and took a swig. “If I tell you, you’ll leave it alone.”

“No promises.” She said it cheerfully. Everything about the woman was cheerful. It’d be aggravating as fuck if she wasn’t so genuinely nice. How she’d become such good friend with that vicious little redhead was beyond him.

He took another drink. “My sister is getting married.”

“Oh, how exciting!” She pressed her lips together. “Unless you don’t like her fiancé? Because that’s not exciting at all. That’s horrible.” She brightened. “Are we going to break up their wedding?”

“Hold your horses.” He held up a hand, rocking back on his heels. “That little scheme you had going with Adam last year has gone to your brain and made you power mad. And Brad is just fine. A little on the boring side, but fine.” And as far as he could tell, he loved Jenny and wasn’t scared of their old man. He couldn’t ask for much more.

“Okay, then what’s the problem?”

Here it was. He almost backed out, made his excuses, and took off. But if he’d learned one thing about Jules, it was that she was more than capable of chasing his ass down and pestering him until he told her what she wanted to know. Frankly, he was surprised it had taken this long for her to turn her fixing eye on him and his problems. “My old man has decided he’s a matchmaker, and he’s getting more pointed with the women he’s trotting out in front of me like prize dogs.”

Jules made a face. “Charming.”

“You have no idea.” The last woman had been named Barbie. She was perfectly nice, but her breast size was larger than her IQ and all she’d done through the entire dinner was talk about all the things her new diet wouldn’t allow her to eat. Call him crazy, but if he’d been looking for a

woman—and he most definitely wasn't—it would be with someone he could hold down more than a five minute conversation with.

“Well, there's an easy solution.” She held up her finger and grinned. “Just take a date. She'll run off any prospective women your family is looking to hook you up with, and if you can convince your dad that you're serious about her, maybe that will get him off your back in a more long term way.”

He opened his mouth to tell her that was an insane idea, but closed it without the words escaping. It was crazy—committable, even—but she had a point. The only problem with that plan was that he didn't know a woman he could take to a wedding without her getting it into her head that he was looking for something more serious. He dated casually, and he liked keeping it that way. Hell, he liked his life the way it was. He didn't want or need the oil money his old man kept wafting in front of him, and he definitely didn't need a woman intent on him putting a ring on her finger. “You know of anyone?” He straightened. “Hey, you want to go to a wedding with me?”

“Hands off my woman, Baldwyn.” Adam appeared in the doorway and shot them both a look. “Whatever you're planning, sugar, I'm putting my foot down. One zany scheme a decade is more than enough.”

She propped her hands on her hips. “How can you say that? My zany scheme got me you, didn't it?”

Adam raised his eyebrows. “I didn't say it was a bad plan.”

“Oh, stop. You two are going to give me cavities.” Quinn shook his head. “Forget I asked.” He'd figure something out—and fast. The wedding was two weeks away. *More than enough time to find a woman to attend a wedding and pretend we're serious enough to keep my old man off*

my back without her getting any funny ideas. Right. He drained the rest of his beer. It wasn't going to happen. What he was looking for was a goddamn unicorn. He might as well start getting his head on straight for the gauntlet awaiting him.

Aubry Kaiser glared at her computer while she absently stroked Ninja Kitten where he'd curled up in her lap. No matter how much she focused her not-inconsiderable willpower, the words on the screen didn't change. A few years ago, the email sitting in her inbox would have made her elated enough to dance on the ceiling, but that was a few years ago. Right now it just represented all the things that were wrong with her life. She reread it for the twelfth time.

You've done it! You're cordially invited to beta test the new Deathmatch at our very own convention in San Diego on June 3rd.

She knew for a fact these invites only went out to a handful of people, and part of her was screaming with a sheer and unadulterated joy as a result. Deathmatch took up so much of her life. There wasn't a day shitty enough that a few rounds didn't perk her right up. It was better than alcohol. Hell, it was better than most sex she'd had.

But accepting this invite came with such serious drawbacks, she could barely draw a full breath even thinking about it. She'd have to leave the little town of Devil's Falls, Texas, and drive to California. If that wasn't bad enough, she'd have to actually go to Deathmatch's annual convention, DeathCon. Last year, there'd been five thousand people there, all crammed into one convention center.

Black spots danced across her vision, and she struggled to inhale. So many people, all outside her comfort zone. Even knowing how unbearable it'd be, she wanted to go. Good God, she wanted to go. It was more than getting the opportunity to play the beta version of the newest

Deathmatch. It was for bragging rights and prestige and a public recognition of how freaking amazing she was at this game.

This was the chance of a lifetime.

And she was going to have to turn it down.

Ninja Kittch gave a meow and jumped out of her lap, a sure sign that Jules—and probably Adam—were back from their football watching venture. They'd invited her like they always did, but as much as she disliked organized sports, she disliked Quinn Baldwin more. He was a big brute of a man, and he liked to poke at her just to get a reaction. She *knew* that's what he was doing, but that didn't stop her from practically hissing at him every time she saw him. It was bad enough that she had to share Jules now—though she was legitimately happy for her best friend—but to have to share her time with *him* was nearly unforgivable.

“Honey, I'm home.” Jules sailed through the back door and smiled. “How are things?”

Her cousin, Jamie, shrugged. “The usual, though Loki is in as foul of mood as this one.” She jerked her thumb at Aubry.

“Hey!”

Jules pinned her with a searching look. “It must be the day for it.”

“I can hear you.” Aubry crossed her arms over her chest, doing her damndest not to slouch down and glare harder. She knew she was the cranky one, the snarly one, the one everyone gave wide berth.

Except that ass hat Quinn.

Jamie took off like a little coward, leaving Jules standing there, watching Aubry with a contemplative expression that she did *not* like. “What?”

“Just thinking.”

“No, I know your thinking face. That’s not your thinking face. That’s your hatching plans face. Don’t try to talk to me like I don’t know the difference.”

Jules dropped into the seat across from her. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“What are you planning?” Ninja Kitteh rearranged himself, and she held still so he could get comfortable before she started petting him again. “You might as well just tell me so we can get this over with.”

“What’s got you so upset?”

Aubry hesitated, and then decided to let the subject change go. Jules could be as stubborn as a mule when she wanted to be, and she obviously wasn’t willing to talk about whatever was wheeling around in that head of hers yet. When she was ready, Aubry would hear about it, whether she wanted to or not. She sighed. “I got an invite to DeathCon to play the new Deathmatch.”

“I thought that didn’t come out until next November.”

“It doesn’t.” Even saying it was downright painful.

Jules frowned. “I think I’m confused. Shouldn’t you be dancing around and doing your booty shaking victory wiggle?”

“I don’t have a booty shaking victory wiggle. That’s you.” She normally settled for sitting there and looking smug. But there was no room for smugness in her current situation.

“Right. I forgot. All the same—spill.”

It was like saying it aloud made her even more pathetic. She didn’t want to admit how weak she was, even to Jules, who wouldn’t judge her in the least—though she might give Aubry a well-deserved kick in the ass. “There’s going to be thousands and thousands of people there—people I don’t know—all packed in like people-shaped sardines.” She shuddered. “If I believed

in hell, this would be my version of it.”

“Aubry, of course you believe in hell. You were just talking about how you own a nice little piece of property there when you die.” Jules rolled her eyes. “But I’m getting off topic.”

“Yes, you are, and I don’t like you pointing out how I’m going to burn my way through the afterlife.” Though the bantering *was* making her feel a little bit better.

“The point is that I still don’t see why the glum face and lack of victory lap. This is a big deal, right?”

“The biggest deal.” She clutched Ninja Kiteh closer, earning a warning growl. “It might be a once in a lifetime opportunity.”

Jules sat back. “I know you don’t like people, but shouldn’t you make an exception for this kind of thing? Just this once.”

She wanted to. God, she wanted to so much she could barely stand it. “Would you go with me?” Maybe if she had a shield between her and the crowds, she’d be able to survive the encounter.

“I would…”

Aubry cursed. “Sorry, I forgot. You have that trip planned with Adam and Lenora for his mom. I’m a horrible fucking friend for forgetting that.” Adam’s mom had passed away a month ago, and her dying wish had been to have her ashes scattered in the Gulf where she and Lenora had their honeymoon. They were leaving next week to drive down there and spend a few days doing a memorial of sorts. Right in the middle of when DeathCon was scheduled.

“It’s okay.”

“It’s not. How’s he holding up?”

Jules sighed. “As well as can be expected, but he’s talking to me about it, so we’re working

through it. This kind of loss isn't an easy bounce-back, no matter how long he had to come to terms with it."

She knew. And she even liked Adam enough to be genuinely sorry he was going through this. He was a good man, and he made her best friend so deliriously happy it was a wonder Jules didn't spend her days walking around on little clouds and singing at the top of her lungs. "I'm sorry."

"I know. I am, too." She shook her head. "But we are, once again, getting off topic. Is there any way you could go by yourself?"

Go by herself? She picked up her coffee cup, stared at the dark liquid, and set it back down again. "No. Absolutely not. I can barely think about it without—" She had to stop and taking a shuddering breath. "No. Just no."

"Okay." Just that. Nothing more.

Aubry stopped panicking enough to send her best friend a suspicious look. "You're being awful accommodating."

"Hmm?" Jules looked up from her phone. "Oh, yeah. Well, I do know how you feel about people, especially people in crowds. You kind of hate everyone."

She did, but it didn't stop that comment from stinging, just a little. "I don't hate you."

"That's because we're lady soulmates." Jules glanced at the door, making the small hairs on the back of Aubry's neck stand up. She was *definitely* up to something.

"Maybe we should talk about that plan now."

"In a minute."

She straightened, but was temporarily distracted by the front door of the café opening. Adam walked through, sending Jules a downright devastating smile as soon as he saw her. He always

did that. It didn't matter if he'd gone an hour or a full day away from her, he always looked at Jules like she was the best thing he'd ever seen.

Aubry was not jealous of her best friend for having that kind of relationship. She most definitely *was not*.

Then Adam stepped aside and *he* walked in. Quinn. She froze, almost overwhelmed by the sheer size of him, even across the room. He was well over six feet tall and had a physique that would have been seriously attractive if not attached to his particular personality. She knew the second he noticed her because his brows slanted down for half a second before his face relaxed into a lightly mocking grin. He never snapped at her, never snarled, but he said the most unforgivable crap.

Quinn ambled up. "Hey there, sweet cheeks. Looking good."

Like *that*. Sweet cheeks. What the hell was wrong with him? She hunched down into her seat and stared at her computer, but the screen just served to remind her of the opportunity her issues were forcing her to miss. If she was a normal, well adjusted woman, she'd have no problem shooting back and email accepting the honor that the invitation signaled. For fuck's sake, they were going to comp her a room. That wasn't something they did for just anyone.

Too many people. Not enough space.

The feeling of claustrophobia was only accented by Quinn looming over their table. "Stop hovering."

"Now, don't be mean. I know for a fact I don't stink."

No, he didn't. He smelled of some kind of cologne that made her think *man*. The kind that would have advertising with guys who looked like Quinn up on the back of a horse, cowboy hat firmly in place, probably a lasso in his hands and a determined look on his face.

He dropped into the seat next to her, draping his arm over the back of her chair. He didn't touch her, though. For all the casual intimacy he showed with everyone else, he never touched *her*. *Probably because I threatened to rip off his arm and beat him to death with it last time he did.*

She shut her computer, all too aware of the heat she could feel emanating from his body. He was like a human sized forge. She realized she was staring at his chiseled jaw line and jerked her gaze away... Right to Jules's considering face.

Heat spread across her face and she realized to her horror that she was blushing. *Oh my God, what's wrong with me?*

Jules didn't give her a chance to recover, either. She leaned forward. "I think you two can help each other."

It took a second for her words to penetrate, but Aubry was already shaking her head. "No, absolutely *not*."

While, next to her, Quinn said, "Jules, I think you're swell, but you need to be committed if you think for a second I'm going anywhere with this crazy woman."

She spun to face him, forgetting her rule about touching and poking him in the chest. "No one's crazy enough to go anywhere with *you*."

"Tell that to all my lady friends." He gave her a grin that was just this side of vicious. "Though, if you're looking for that kind of company, I might be willing to make an exception."

He did *not* just offer her a pity fuck. Aubry went ramrod straight. "Over my dead body—but, who knows, you could be into that sort of thing."

"Hardly." He made a face. "I like my women warm and willing. But on that note, you're right. You don't fit either bill."

A gasp of outrage slipped free. “Watch your step, cowboy. I know plenty of places to hide a dead body.”

“Sweet cheeks, in my current mood, I almost hope you try.”

A delicate throat clearing had Aubry ripping her gaze away from the smug look on his face to her best friend. “Jules, I do love you, but you’re out of your godforsaken mind if you think for a second we’d last an hour without killing each other.” No matter how good he smelled.

“Actually, that’s why I think it’ll work perfectly.” She grinned. “Quinn needs a date to his sister’s wedding to keep his family’s matchmaking efforts in check, and you need someone to be a walking barrier between you and everyone else at this convention thing.” She motioned to Quinn. “He’d make a great barrier.”

“Only because he’s abnormally large.” A man his size could block out the entire room, which would be perfect if she could guarantee he wouldn’t open his equally large mouth.

“Aw, sweet cheeks, I didn’t think you noticed.”

Jules snapped her fingers at him like she did at her cats when they misbehaved. “Stop poking at her or she might actually try to bury you in the desert.” She sat forward, practically vibrating. “And Quinn, you have to admit that Aubry is very good at repelling anyone in her vicinity—no offense, Aubry.”

“None taken.” She’d worked hard to perfect her resting bitch face so people would leave her alone in public. Of course, in a town like Devil’s Falls, that was just as likely to draw in people who wanted to help. They meant well, and she managed not to hold it against them. Mostly.

“Plus, if you’re worried about one of your lady friends getting the wrong idea, that’s not something you have to deal with if you take Aubry.”

She looked at him, sure that he was going to shoot Jules down the same way she had, but he

had a strange look on his face—almost like he was actually contemplating it. “No. How many ways can I say it? No. *Net. Non. Nein. No.*” It was tempting to get up and storm out, but her computer was here and Quinn was blocking her exit from the table. She turned to him again. “This is insanity and you’re crazier than I am if you’re even considering it.”

“You don’t know my family, sweet cheeks.”

“*Stop calling me that.*”

“Yeah, yeah.” He rubbed a hand over his mouth. “What’s this convention thing Jules is talking about?”

She didn’t want to even entertain this idea long enough to explain it, but she could see Jules wiggling in her seat across the table, so it was only a matter of time before she shared the information anyways. Aubry sighed. “DeathCon. I have an invite to attend and demo the upcoming Deathmatch.”

“Damn.” He sat back, a look of almost respect flitting across his face before being replaced by his usual mocking smile. “You know, it’s nuts, but I think we might be able to actually help each other.”