

CHRISTMAS WITH THE COCKERS

Cocker Brothers Book 26



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FALEENA
HOPKINS
love stories

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This Cocker Brothers Story is On Pause

I polled my readers on my Facebook Page and in my Facebook Group “Cocker Brothers Family Members” to see if they wanted the first several chapters I’d completed, and most said yes.

This story was put on pause due to my catching Covid, and no longer being able to string sentences together. But I redid the first few chapters (these are raw and unproofed — you’re seeing the nitty gritty for the fun of it, excuse typos for this very reason).

I beat the virus, tested negative, but had run out of time to get this to my fans before Christmas. Also, I have an audio publishing deal contract for the next two books in the Tuck Yes series that must be honored, as contracts due. I’m usually my own boss but this time, people are waiting for me.

THIS COCKER BROTHERS STORY IS ON PAUSE

Christmas With The Cockers will have to wait.

But here's a li'l taste of life after the first six books, right after Jeremy and Meagan are married... enjoy the visit back in time and look out for the next Tuck Yes books coming soon!

May 2021 be a year of healing love for you.

X,

Faleena Hopkins

JAKE COCKER

THE ROOMMATE TURNED FAMILY MAN



MID DECEMBER

Pleased with what I did, I ask our five-year-old her opinion, “What d’ya think, Emma?” while her younger brother, Ethan, picks at pine needles on a low-hanging branch, dropping them one at a time onto hardwood floors recently vacuumed.

We’re in pajamas with a new log on the fire warming our special night — Emma’s red like her mom’s, mine and Ethan’s forest-green plaid. My wife bought us matching pj’s.

It’s almost too cute.

Almost.

Who am I kidding?

I’m so happy to be a dad I’ll probably end up

matching clothes with Ethan until he's old enough to hate it, and that's a long ways off. Eric, too, now that I think about it. He made us a family of five this year.

Emma's chestnut waves fall to the middle of her back as she cranes her cherub head to admire a Christmas tree slathered in a rainbow of twinkle lights. "Daddy, it's so pretty!" Twisting, she shouts upstairs, "Mommy, come see what Daddy did!"

"Yeah Drew! Come see what I did!" My gaze darts to Ethan's chubby fingers hungry for a strong yank of that branch. "Buddy, don't topple the thing. I mean it."

Disappointed arms flop to Ethan's sides, bottom lip pouting, chestnut eyes bummed, unruly mop of lighter brown hair bouncing with his exasperated "Grrrrr!"

Three years old and so damn willful already. That's my boy!

Our attention shifts to the welcome sound of Drew's footsteps on the stairs.

Emma whispers, "Ooooooh, I can't wait!"

I grin back, "Me too, Baby Love, me too. *Ethan*, I mean it!"

More flopping arms as he drops to the floor so hard it probably stings his backside a little, elbows

stabbing his knees, heavy head on palms, fingers digging into pouting cheeks.

In a nightgown red like Emma's, but rather than long sleeves, she's got straps to pull down for nursing Eric, Drew enters the living room distracted, gaze fixated on our new baby. "Eric, really? Hungry again?" She looks up, blue eyes widening as slippered feet freeze. "Oh Jake! There are more lights on that Christmas tree than in all of Atlanta!"

"Do you love it?!" shouts Emma, bouncing in place like she can hardly stand how fun this is.

"It's beautiful."

Turning back to me with hopeful eyes, Emma pleads, "Can we hang the ornaments now, Daddy?!"

I squat next to a large cardboard box just carried down from an attic sure to become crowded over the coming years. "Remember the drill? I unwrap them. You guys hang 'em."

"Yay!"

Ethan springs up. "Me too!"

"Yes, buddy, you too."

With tiny hazel-eyed, speed-eater Eric wriggling in her arms, Drew gets comfy, "Mmmm, that fire feels wonderful, Jake," on a grey sofa that's been with us since before our checking accounts had any clue they'd combine.

“Chopped the wood myself.”

She smiles, “No, you didn’t.”

“Would it make you hot if I did?”

“Yes.”

I chuckle, “Oh I’ve got a fire for you,” pulling back cardboard to reveal a modest collection that expands every season, especially with Drew buying ones on clearance after the holiday. I work in construction for my Uncle Don — Drew, too, in an administrative capacity — so we’re very frugal in order to give our children quality clothes and healthy food. I don’t have, or need, the latest phone like my twin brothers, Justin and Jason, always get.

Family.

Funny how we come out so different.

So far I’m the only one to name his kids with the traditional matching letters — all E’s for Emma, Ethan and Eric, respectively.

Grams named her kids Micheal — our father — and Marie, our Aunt who didn’t have kids of her own, both M’s.

Dad married our mother and she loved the idea. They named the six of us all J’s.

Jaxson came first, our quiet ranch-life-loving rock who now lives an hour north of Atlanta with his wife and son, milking cows, gathering eggs from their

chickens, and operating The Sunflower Retreat they built on their acres.

Second came Jerald — who changed his name to *Jett*, soon as he was able, a fact that still has our dad pissed off. A loyal member of a motorcycle club unlike most, *The Ciphers*, Jett fights battles for the innocent, taking down their abusers based on private tips. While he operates outside of the law, he's a hero in my book. In our Congressman father's? Not so much.

The middle children came into this world as an inseparable pair — as alike as they are unlike — our brother twins Justin and Jason. Justin very recently won the Senate race after surprising the world with his speech and dedication to family. Jason produces hit records for musical artists, an artist with a heart of gold and fingers known for stealing your food if you're not looking. Mom's fresh ginger-ale is never safe when Jason's around.

Second to youngest, fifth in line, is me — a construction worker specializing in water reclamation who assumed I wouldn't settle down for many, many years, but then posted an ad for a roommate and found the love of my life, the woman sitting right over there pulling down her red strap to nurse our third child. Guess being raised by Dad and Mom,

living under the protection of the strong marriage they have, rubbed off on me more than a little.

Finally, and in my eyes the best of the bunch, came Jeremy, my best friend since he was born. He and I even moved in together right out of high school, but then he enlisted in the Marines and scared us all when returned home from his service a changed man, hard to reach. But earlier this year he married a sarcastic beauty whose talents as a chef are eclipsed by her ability to make my kid brother smile again. I would kiss her for that if he wouldn't punch me. Haha.

Our parents are together to this day, loyal to each other and us, still living in the house we grew up in the Buckhead neighborhood of Atlanta, Georgia. It's where we usually have Christmas, but not this year.

This is the first year all six Cocker Brothers are married, all but Jeremy with families started of our own.

I glance to Drew unfastening the hatch — or whatever you call it — of her nursing bra, about to offer Eric what used to be mine all mine. Noticing my interest she smiles and rolls her eyes.

Sighing to myself, I begin the entertaining task of peeling back wrinkled, recycled paper to reveal the first ornament, one from Mom — a stained-glass

teddy bear with a bright red bow tie. Every Christmas since I married Drew she's given us a flashy, high-end ornament we'd probably never splurge on. Wonder what it'll be this year.

"Here ya go, Baby Love."

Five-year-old fingers carefully grasp its silver hook before Emma tiptoes over to our glowing tree so she won't break her treasure.

Next I unwrap a shiny green ball, a basic ornament, the type every tree has, but I think nothing of it as I hand it off. "Here ya go, Ethan."

Disappointed fingers push into the mop he never wants combed as he backs away. "That one's boring!"

Emma looks over her red shoulder and says, "That's okay. I'll hang it after this one, Ethan," again and again as every 'boring' ornament I pull out is turned down by her picky brother.

I get his disappointment, but I don't like the judgement. "All of these make up the whole tree, Ethan. Look at how cool they are when they're together!"

He twists to survey seven ornaments glittering a path along our tree's lower branches, each carefully hung solely by Emma.

"What d'ya think, Buddy?"

He frowns, "Pretty!"

The next ornament I unwrap is much more impressive — a stained-glass train, another gift from Ma. Excitement ignites Ethan's socked feet, chubby fingers reaching for a grab.

But I reach past him. "*This* is for Emma."

His eyebrows fly up. "Serious?!"

"Totally serious."

"But...*why*?!!!"

"All those ornaments you keep turning down?"

"Uh huh."

"They're ours. They belong to our family. When you turn your nose up to them, it's not very nice. Go ahead and hang the train, Emma."

The frown on this kid as he flops to the floor, same posture as before, sighing dramatically, "But I took it back, Daddy!"

Reaching for another ornament to unwrap I ask a confused, "You took it back?"

"I said they were pretty! Just now! I took it all back!"

Drew and I exchange a look, because yeah, he did. So what am I doing? The guy's only three. Lessons need to be gentler. Maybe I could've waited to see if he turned down a 'boring' ornament again and given that train to him to see what he'd do next.

Emma hangs the choo-choo, her fingers slower

than before. They pause then drift to her prized teddy bear, the first ornament she hung. She lifts it from the branch and walks it over to him. "Here, Ethan. You can put *this* one wherever you want to."

"I'm trying to teach your brother a lesson."

Emma looks me square in the eyes. "I am, too."

They're both looking at me, so cute it's ridiculous. But I've gotta be the dad. They need me strong. In my gruffest voice I demand, "Oh yeah? What's that?"

"I've always got his back!"

Thunderstruck, I look over to Drew's tender, "That was very sweet, Emma."

"I'm not sweet, Mommy! I'm like *Daddy!*"

My eyebrows shoot up.

That was a compliment.

And...maybe an insult?

"What d'ya mean? How are you like me?"

She throws her arm toward Ethan. "You worry about Uncle Jeremy 'cause he's *your* baby brother! And you said *you always have his back!*"

I grumble, "Okay, that's it," reaching to kiss the top of her head. "I love you so much, you know that?"

Ethan shuffles his weight.

I snatch him up. “How about you hang that bow-tied teddy bear at the very tippie-top, Ethan.”

His arm flies out with the ornament swinging, “Yeah!” twinkle-glow brightening with my every step. He fastens it directly below the straight top branch meant for the star that’s always my honor to hang.

“Good job, Ethan, that’s a great spot!” I kiss the top of his unruly mop. “I love you so much, too, you know that, right, Buddy?” He nods like kids do, and hugs me like he won’t someday.

With no more refusals, arguments or lessons, Emma and Ethan Cocker decorate our tree bottom heavy with color, no ornaments in the middle or even the top, save for that teddy bear. It’s exactly how it will remain until after New Year’s in order to build their confidence.

Later they’ll reach higher.

Later they’ll understand balance.

Later I’ll miss trees like this one.

Unwrapping the tall star, our final ornament, I smile, “Okay you two, fold up these papers. Put them back in the box,” and walk it to my wife. “This one’s for you, Beautiful.”

Her blue eyes widen with surprise, then glow

with love, grin sealed by my kiss. “Seems someone taught you a lesson.”

I frown and mimic Ethan’s “Grrrr,” as I sit down beside her on the old sofa, our gazes fastened on a baby who fell asleep at the wheel. “Was it that obvious I was worried about Jeremy?”

Over the sound of crinkly paper folded by children’s hasty hands, Drew whispers, “Of course it was, honey.”

“I know it was to you, but was it obvious to the kids, too?”

“He’s your baby brother.”

“So?”

“You were freaking out.”

“Sugar coat it for me.”

She moves Eric to her other arm, “You were,” and fastens the nursing bra shut.

In her ear I whisper, “You really gotta put that beauty away?”

Sliding the red strap into place, she smirks, “You’re making me want something I can’t have.”

“Me.”

“Yes, Jake, you.”

“Whenever you’re ready again,” I give her a soft kiss, “I’ll be there.”

“You haven’t worried lately.”

“Huh?”

“About Jeremy.”

“Ah.” I kick a socked foot onto our coffee table, notice again a hole in the toe and wiggle it, satisfied with my life and feeling pretty damn good. “There’s no reason to worry anymore. He’s been doing great.”

Drew smiles, “I like Meagan,” eyes turning dreamy as she asks, “Remember when that was us? Newlyweds. Our first Christmas”

“How long can you call them that?”

“Six months I guess? They qualify.”

Sliding my arm around shoulders, together we watch two of our kids chattering about who’s folding the recycled paper better, each giving the other unsolicited tips for improvement.

“When I was little, we fought over decorating the tree. Jett was the worst!”

Drew smiles, “I’d love to have seen that.”

“We guessed what Santa would bring. What kind of cookies he liked. Why he wouldn’t eat them all, just take a bite out of the each one and leave it. And oh man! Mom’s hot chocolate made with her homemade melted fudge.”

Having experienced that for herself the last few years, Drew closes her eyes with longing. “So good!”

“Mmmhmm! Jeremy and I sucking it down so we could get second-helpings before Jason drank it all.”

“Aren’t they wonderful? He was so cute when he gave her that train.”

“We’re in separate homes now.”

“Time changes things.”

“Yeah,” I sigh. “You wanna hang that star?”

Drew hands over our sleeping boy, a rustle of red fabric rising to happily announce, “Look at what Daddy gave me to hang for the first time! You guys inspired him!”

“We did?!” They jump up and run over to be with their Mommy as she positions the glittering star up top.

My dad used to hang it every year.

Up until today, I held the honor.

But I’d do anything to make her smile like she’s doing now.

“That good, Jake?”

“It’s perfect.” I nod once, and add, “You’re perfect.”

JEREMY COCKER

THE MARINE, TIME PROUDLY SERVED



THE NEXT DAY

Hiding surprise I answer my phone, “Hey Mom.”

She rarely calls me.

Usually goes through Jake.

“Jeremy, hi! How’s Meagan?”

Wondering what’s up I frown, “She’s great.”

“Oh that’s good. Um...I was just talking to your father about *Christmas* and wondered if you two would like to join us, rather than be alone? You can bring the dogs! They’re part of your family, too, of course. Can’t leave the dogs home all alone on the holiday while we’re enjoying my special fudge hot

chocolate by our beautiful tree, your stockings filled to the brim! That wouldn't be nice."

She's rambling.

Why is she rambling?

And she's *selling* me on it.

Stocking bribery?

I begin, "Uh..." and stop there. Speechless for more.

Just Meagan and I — and the dogs — alone with my parents for Christmas morning would feel a little weird. Ever since I returned to Atlanta after my service ended, Mom and Dad haven't known what to do with me.

Especially Mom.

So worried.

Dad's quiet, watchful gaze is bad enough. But she over-compensates.

I've finally acclimated to civilian life, and what I focus on now is having as much fun as possible. Fun is what healed me. That, and love.

Tugging on my tight black tank top, black jeans just belted, I switch the phone to my other shoulder, muscles rippling. "I think we're keeping Crash open for Christmas, Ma."

"Oh no! Really?"

“It’s our first year in business. Restaurants are hard to get off the ground.”

“I know, it’s just I..” She sighs, tempering her tone to quickly add a gentle, “I understand. You should do what’s best for Crash. You both put every dime into it, and I’m so proud of you. I am! But it would be nice — so nice! — to have you both here for Christmas.”

My new wife walks into our bedroom buck naked, hair newly clean and perfect, makeup fresh and minimal, muttering to herself, “I don’t know why I bother with my hair when I’m just going to pull it into a ponytail as soon as I get behind the line.” She notices I’m on the phone and mouths, “Who’s that?”

At normal volume I explain, “Just telling Mom we might keep Crash open for Christmas so we probably can’t join them at their house.”

Meagan snatches her robe from a hook in the closet, quickly putting it on. “Hi Mrs. Cocker!”

As I hold the phone out Mom calls back, “Hi Meagan dear!” but the second I put it back to my ear she’s awkward and painful again. “Well Jeremy, I’ve got some planning to do for my women’s group that I really must get back to—”

“Ma—”

“—Please tell Meagan I am so looking forward to

dining at your restaurant for the first time this Wednesday at seven o'clock."

"I remember you're coming, Ma, you don't have to say all those details."

She gives a strained laugh. "I know you're busy."

"Not *that* busy."

"I just...miss you all. This holiday won't be the same. They never will again, I guess."

"Ma!"

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't be saying this to you. That's not a mother's job. I'm fine. I'll be fine. I'll let you go. Goodbye. I love you, Jeremy."

I say, "Bye Ma, I love you too," but not in time, the phone dead in my fist as I turn to Meagan.

Mom is a Congressman's wife who raised six boys and no girls — and who did it well, in my opinion. The dignified, and very kind, Nancy Cocker has never confided in me, her youngest. Maybe she has to my brothers, but I always got the rock, the teacher, the nurse, the worrier when I was in danger, the guide, and above all...the cheerleader.

It was always about me.

About us.

The six of us.

Seven when you count Dad.

Never her.

“Mom just told me she misses all of us. And she sounded sad. Really sad.”

Meagan frowns, “I’ve never heard your mother sound that way,” and lifts Noosh into her arms, the tan and white fluff of a wedding present I got her. Aslan, my Rottweiler, used to make Meagan nervous because of his size and appearance, so I bought Noosh as a companion to them both. Show what a softie he is. Aslan is nuts about his tiny girlfriend, and right now that nubby tail of his wags like crazy as he wonders how she got to be so tall all of a sudden. As Meagan strokes the soft fur cuddled up close, her head tilts on the realization, “Oh, you know what it is? An empty nest! The last two of her sons got married this year — you and Justin — boom! So that was it! All of her boys, officially starting their own families!”

“Wait,” I hold out my hand. “Are you trying to tell me something?”

Meagan smiles, “No, silly, I’m not pregnant,” as she sets Noosh on our bed so she can get dressed in black jeans and t-shirt for work. “But don’t you see? Is she inviting everyone?” I shake my head. “We’re the only ones without kids.”

My gaze drops. “I’m sure Grams’ll come over. She’s always there.”

“It would be nice to see Grams.”

My eyes close, “And awkward with just us there!” head thrown back on a groan. “Come on. If we’re going to succeed—”

“—What do you mean IF?” Meagan throws me a look while digging for socks in a dresser moved in from her old condo.

“That’s exactly my point, Boss! We’re *in it to win it.*”

“Jeremy,” she laughs, “You really have to stop calling me *Boss* now that we’re equal partners.”

But income or debt, they’re the least of why we need this business to succeed.

Crash is Meagan’s first chance to be a chef, and she’s not just a line-chef. She’s Head Chef since we own the place! Her talents finally get their recognition, and our menu is a testament. The way she glows behind the line is everything to her, and to me.

It’s not a job for my wife.

It’s her dream.

And Crash is equally as important to me, but for a very different reason. Bartending the way I do — engaging with actual people every night, entertaining them with the unique way I make drinks, and most of all, being around Meagan, spending this

much time with her, how she makes me feel — all of these things give me a sense of purpose.

A reason to smile.

To show up.

To be me.

They healed me.

But I know every time the darkness threatens to return that I've gotta maintain them in order to stay healed. To give myself, my wife, and hopefully, if we're lucky, our future kids the adventures we all want while we're here in this rough world.

But even with these *undeniable* reasons for our business's importance, Meagan still asks, "Are you sure we should stay *open* for Christmas?"

Blinking at her a minute, I drop my gaze and mutter, "I'm only sure of one thing," hitting Mom's number to text:

Mom, you didn't hear me when I said I love you, too.

Immediate is her reply:

You just made my day, Jeremy. Thank you. I love you more than you'll ever know.

JASON COCKER

THE MUSIC PRODUCER TWIN



I'm mixing a client's future hit single — one hopes — at my soundboard as I mutter a distracted, “Just need a *few* more minutes on this track,” to Sarah.

But the short-stack, short-tempered, redheaded spitfire love of my life announces, “I'm not falling for that one!” while tucking our one-year-old into the two-seater stroller we're still getting used to. We had our first born, Max, then immediately got pregnant with our newborn, Caden, so while they're not officially twins like Justin and I are, they're *Irish* twins. Which might be derogatory except that we're partly Irish and fuck like crazy just as the saying infers. So... truth or libel? “I know you, Jason! A few more minutes become perfectionistic hours every single

fucking time.” She lowers to a maternal coo. “There you go, Max, honey. Comfy?”

I glance to see green, old-soul eyes watching his mother from the calm silence our one-year-old is known for.

Caden, not so much, except when he’s sleeping like right now. This baby can holler!

Bless unconsciousness and *all* of its parental gifts.

Caden is swaddled atop a ridiculously soft pillow on my lap while I stretch to reach the soundboard to work over him.

My mom told us that the trick to getting babies to sleep is don’t be quiet when they’re sleeping. They’ll *need* silence if you do that and wake at the slightest peep. We peep a lot. But speak at normal volume — or play music back on a loop until you’ve got the tracks balanced just right like I’m doing at this very moment now — and snore snore snore! Solves so many problems! Maybe it doesn’t work for everyone but fuck yes it does for us. Thanks Mom!

“Jason, are you going to stop working or do I have to throw your soundboard across the room?”

I love this about Sarah — her fire — maybe a little *too* much.

“Try it.”

She sighs, “You want me to?”

“No...but yes?”

A twinkle sparks in the almond eyes I fell in love with, one that gives me hope she won't really throw my most prized equipment, at least the one that's not attached to my torso.

“Jason, seriously, you can come back to your studio and finish mixing that when I take the boys home for a nap.”

Hitting pause on an unfinished chorus, my defeated chest caves in. “Can't believe I agreed to Christmas shop.”

“As if you had a choice,” she scoffs, twisting to our eldest. “Don't you think it's better to shop for presents while Atlanta is working, Max? Hmmm? Weekdays are so much better than weekends! You don't know this yet, but you will. Take it from Mommy. I'm very good at shopping.” Under her breath she adds, “Since I had to do it for Simone.”

This gives the distraction I need to add more reverb, eyebrows raised and lips pursed in suspense at getting yelled at as I push levers and listen one more time to how this version feels in my bones when mixed. Everything is instinctual when you're an artist. Logic like shopping on weekends makes no sense to someone like me. All I want is to move my

audience with music they will love. It's illusively ever-changing and that's what drives me to get up so early and long to stay up late...before I had a family.

Sarah straightens up. "Jason! No. Stop right now or you'll be fine-tuning that damn song to smithereens."

"*Smithereens?*" I side-eyeball her. "What are you, a cartoon?"

Walking to lift Caden from my lap, she reminds me, "I'm trying not to swear as much."

"What were you going to say instead of smithereens?" "Fiddlesticks?"

"Jason Cocker, Save your work and your behind or I'll tame your tongue next."

My hands drop to my lap, chair swiveling as I check her out. "You want another kid *already?*"

Chuckling to herself, my pipsqueak sex-in-sneakers hikes her thumb. "Come on, Cocker! Christmas shopping. You. Me. Now!"

Snatching my black pea coat from the back of my chair, I shake out charcoal grey slacks under a white sweater, adjusting myself without the use of my hands. "Looks like I'm ready to go."

Sarah's dry glance drops to a package you won't find in the stores. "Looks almost promising."

"Oh it's all the way. You just tell me when you're

ready and I'll keep this promise about a gazillion more scream-inducing times."

She turns her chin up for a kiss. "Another month or so. Caden has a big head."

"Runs in the family."

She smacks my arm, grin widening with a shocked, "Don't talk about our son like that! He's just a baby!"

Laughing, "I meant this head," I point to my tow-blond hair, and a face that's identical to my brother Justin's. "*This* head, woman, this head!!!" Sighing I cut a look to the stroller, asking my sons, one unconscious, one always quietly alert. "You guys ready for the most boring thing a man can do?"

Sarah volleys, "Fish?"

I maneuver the stroller to head out. "No, not fish! Not that I ever make any time for that other than when we visit Jaxson, but shop! Shop! The most boring thing ever invented!"

Sarah walks to open the exit for me and our enormous contraption of safety on wheels. "Says the man with more designers adorning his hangers than I've got."

"Clients give me gifts. And I have to go to record release parties and award shows."

"Which I'm always at *with* you, always feeling

somehow you're prettier than I am." She pauses and mutters, "Oh wait. You are prettier than I am."

She screams as I lunge for her, laughter filling the studio that is my second home. I kiss every inch of her much-prettier-than-she-thinks head, face, and shoulders.

Setting her down on my carpeted floor like a punctuation mark, I take Sarah's chin in hand. "Don't ever talk about my wife like that again. You're beautiful."

Max shouts, "Now me!" turning our heads sideways, jaws dropped at his volume. And at the fact that though he's just recently learned to talk, his timing is always demanding.

I unstrap our old-soul from his seatbelt and toss him in the air as carefully as you've got to with a baby this fucking tiny. To him he's reaching the moon. To me, my heart. Never knew what it would be like to be a dad until I was one. I always wanted this title — much more than my twin ever did. It's an honor. A privilege I learned from watching our dad. For being the recipient of his love, his support. His strength. Courage. Reliability.

Sure I love my job. I'm an artist and an artist has to create or die. But seeing this li'l guy laughing his

onesy off at catching flight, man! There isn't anything better in the whole world.

I hug him close, and catch Sarah's loving gaze as she shrugs one shoulder, looking vulnerable for a change. "Okay, we'll have at least one more."

Carrying him back to the comfort of his fuzzy seatbelt, tucked next to his brother who will give us all a run for our money later today, no doubt, I frown, "I thought we were aiming for ten kids, hun?"

She gasps, "Ten?!"

"Six. We're aiming for six."

"Jason, seriously, come on! How do people have six kids?"

Straightening up, I dig for my ringing phone and hold it out to Sarah. "Ask my mom."

JUSTIN COCKER

THE HONEST SENATOR TWIN



NEXT AFTERNOON

I'm on a call with another Senator, one from Massachusetts who I've been cooperating with since back when I met my wife in Boston's airport after dinner with him. "Afraid I don't agree with you, Trent. This is the time to push increased funding for shelters. I believe we'll get support the homeless now more than at any other time in the year."

He dryly replies, "And why's that?"

I lean back in my large, expensive leather desk chair, an investment worth making since I spend so much damn time in it carving out a better future for the people who rely on me. You've got to look out for

your health if you're going to offer anything to your world. "Because it's Christmas, Trent. Remember? The holiday of open hearts and giving?"

He laughs, "Cocker, are you implying a sentimental holiday — even this one, no especially this one since it's rife with religious battles and imbalances — has any impact on the hearts of Washington? Wait, no — are you implying there *are* hearts in Washington?!"

I rub my face. Don't want to admit it, but he's right. "Let's appeal to their business-minds then."

"How'd I get roped into this, may I ask?"

"Because you *have* a heart. I've met your wife. Your girls. Imagine if it were *them* on the streets."

"That would never happen."

"Oh yeah? Let me paint a picture for you."

"Please don't."

"—You die."

"—God, Justin!"

"And all of those fancy toys you own that *aren't* paid for are turned over to your creditors. The debt must be paid by your wife only not enough liquid cash to do it. She sells the house. She's never worked, yet suddenly must and without any resume or experience. Reaches out to friends. You know how that'll

go. They're embarrassed for her. They shy away. This increases the shame."

"Man, Cocker," he groans. "Just stop."

"—The house is gone. The friends? Vanished. Won't take her calls. Tons of excuses. Nobody's hiring. No one gives a shit because they'd see her as entitled and deserving of the fall. Your wife is stuck. Your girls need shelter. Food. A bath."

"We've got our parents."

"You're right. You do. But you know what, Trent? Many people don't. What if you didn't? What if your girls didn't have grandparents who could bail them out of famine?"

Silence.

Then, "You practiced that, didn't you, for your speech at the The House?"

"Didn't need to practice it. I know it well."

Trent mutters, "I forgot you spent time in shelters."

During my campaign it came out on social media that I'd gone under cover in order to see what it was really like to stand in line and ask for mercy in the form of a bed.

A meal.

My mission is to give them dignity, too.

That's the first step to recovery of the path they were on before life got hard. It's easy to fall but with helping hands, you'll get up. If you want to. Those are the citizens I have in my sights. And who knows? Maybe their stories will inspire more to reach high again, too.

I glance to white clouds outside my window moving at a fast clip, reminded of how cold it is outside, how lucky I am to be in a heated home, my wife in her office next door, now that she works with me for the people of Georgia.

"I'll add what I just told you, Trent, when I talk to The House. *Then* I'll appeal to their ambition. Remind them that if they push this through before Christmas it'll earn approval points with their constituency."

I can hear a smile in Trent's tone. "Remind them of Scrooge and the chains he almost wore."

I chuckle and turn my head at the sound of footsteps so quiet they can only belong to my six-year old daughter. "Hannah just walked in so it must be lunch time. Do I have your backing?"

Trent sighs, "How could I turn you down?"

My finger hovers over the speaker button as I stand and say, "Hoping many'll respond in kind when I'm done."

“Enjoy your lunch, Cocker. Good talking to you.”

“You too, Trent.” The line goes dead before I even hit the button, and Hannah runs over knowing work has been put on pause. It’s good to see her. I was sucked in as I always am when working. Anytime I’m in Washington I’ll go a whole day without remembering to eat. If Jaimie wasn’t working with me, I’d probably forget to call. Hannah is small enough that she can come with sometimes, but most of my trips it’s them at home and me on a plane into a world much darker than this one.

She looks so excited as she cries out, “Will Aslan be at the restaurant, Daddy? Will he be there?!!”

Lifting her up, I smile into eyes the same ice-green as mine, hair just as blonde and fine. My little life-changer, this girl. Love her more than I can say. “Well, no, they can’t have dogs in restaurants, and besides, Uncle Jeremy is working so Aslan had to stay home or he’d be bored.”

“With Noosh!?”

“Yes, he’s not bored *or* alone.”

In walks my wife, Jaimie, elegant as anyone who’s grown up under politics judgmental eyes, in a navy blue dress under an unbuttoned, matching trench coat, jewelry understated. “What about

having lunch at Crash today, Justin?” she smiles over the sound of ticking navy blue heels.

I smirk, “*Someone* beat you to the punch in suggesting that’s our destination.” I set Hannah down and tell her, “Grab a coat. It’s cold out there.” She runs off while I kiss my wife on the good news, “Trent’s on board.”

Smokey eyes glitter with excitement. “Hard to convince him?”

“Everyone wants to take the holidays off, but I told him it’s the perfect time to hit hard.”

Glancing behind her to make sure Hannah hasn’t returned or isn’t hovering in the doorway, Jaimie grabs my crotch and whispers, “We just said hard twice.”

My smirk says *I wish I were and we had time to do something about it*, arm sliding to pull our bodies as close as they can get with clothes still on. “You’re on my naughty list, you know that?”

She leans to lick my ear, “Are you telling me I get to fuck Santa?”

This earns a loud laugh from me, but we separate at the appearance of little Hannah running in on the announcement, “I think Aslan *should* be there, Daddy! He *wants* to be with Uncle Jeremy. I know he does.” She halts and spreads her arms wide, eyes

imploing yet convinced. “Aslan loves Noosh, and prolly wouldn’t wanna leave her home alone. But why can’t they both go?” Hannah stomps her foot.

Snatching a wool trench coat from my office sofa where I ditched it late last night, I patiently explain as we all exit my home-office, “There’s a formidable entity called The Health Department and they decide what is safe for us humans in regards to restaurants and anywhere where food is served. Like grocery stores, for example. Or delis. They do this because we humans must then ingest the food that must be clean.

Jaimie smirks, “Ingest?” cutting me a look.

I lock eyes with my daughter. “Do you know what ingest means?”

“No.”

“It means *eat*.”

“I *ingest*?”

“Every day.”

Hannah frowns, small hand reaching for mine. “Huh. I’m gonna ingest fries today!”

Jaimie lifts both eyebrows, laughter in her eyes as we walk outside and up to my — *our* — Audi. I give her a stern look.

Hannah asks in earnest, “Can I ingest french fries today, Daddy?”

Okay, now I'm having trouble keeping a straight face. Can't laugh after I'm the cause of her hilarious vocabulary education. "Yes, you *may* ingest french fries, but you also have to eat, er, *ingest* something more healthy, too."

Satisfied, "Okay!" she clamors into the backseat while I hold the door open for her and Jaimie to get in. "I'll ingest chicken tenders, too. You said there's protein in chicken! And chocolate cake, Grandma Nance said there's eggs and milk in cake! Very healthy!"

Whistling my way to the driver's side helps to release amusement's steam. Climbing in, I turn on the ignition and glance into my rear view, pausing before pulling out of our driveway. "Did Jaimie paint your fingernails?"

"Uh huh!" Hannah holds up all ten. "Yellow like my dress!"

"Very pretty." I glance to my wife, smirking, "Little young for painted nails, don't ya think?"

She shakes her head, "No, I *don't* think," smokey eyes filled with mirth.

As I pull onto our quiet residential street, Hannah rattles on, "I love them. And Lou loves them, too. I showed him when they were drying 'cause he *wanted* me to pick him up and I said I

couldn't yet because Jaimie told me to be very careful not to smudge them. But as soon as they were dried I held him for a long time to make up for it."

With her stuffed alien, Lou, on my mind, I wonder for the millionth time if she'll ever feel comfortable enough living with me to give him up. I'll never push it, no matter how dingy Lou gets, and the pink little fucker is a mess. But Hannah doesn't see that. He's her friend and a symbol of a life she can't let go of. Nor should. I just want her to make enough room for me and Jaimie that she doesn't need her imaginary conversations.

Jaimie suggested to me that we might 'bathe' him in the washing machine. She and I decided it too risky. Could be catastrophic.

Whatever makes my daughter feel safe, I'll do.

Even if it means Lou disgusts me every single time I see him.

"Jeremy know we're coming?"

Jaimie lays her hand on my thigh. "Wanted to ask you first."

I look both ways, "Good. I like to watch him squirm," ready to merge into Atlanta's lunch-hour chaos.

She taps my thigh with manicured fingertips. "I've never seen Jeremy squirm."

“*You* don’t know him like *I* do. He’ll show off. That’s him squirming. He over-compensates.” Giving her a sideways-look I mutter, “Don’t say it.”

She smiles, “I wasn’t going to.”

When you’re raised with a last name like *Cocker* you either own it or bend. Not one of my brothers are the bending type, unless the occasion calls for it as a matter of self-respect or respect to those we love.

But give us a challenge and we’ll rise to meet it every single time.

Even as I smile at this, it falters as my memory drifts to the days when my twin wasn’t so brave — a certain addicted blonde had him wrapped.

But that was unusual.

Wish I never thought about it again, and I try not to. But the brain is a funny mechanism, and it holds onto what scares us so we’re prepared next time. It scared me what happened to Jason. But that was then. This is now. He’s come a long way and if he hadn’t been there for me with the whole Hannah thing, don’t know what I would’ve done.

On my thigh, Jaimie’s hand tightens. “You want me to see who it is for you?”

“Sure.” I lean a little so she can reach into my pocket for the phone, gaze flicking to all off mirrors to

turn safely left onto Piedmont Street. “Work or family?”

“Jason.”

“Huh. I was just thinking about him.” Glancing to read my wife’s expression, I ask, “Everything okay?”

“It’s about Christmas,” she frowns, holding it up with a head-tilt. “Says to give him a call.”

About the Author



Faleena Hopkins writes soulmate love stories about good people with strong family bonds, in both books and movies.

