

A photograph of a porch with a wooden swing, a wooden table with purple flowers, and a hanging basket of white flowers.

LOVE  
& FRIENDSHIP  
A SIGNAL BEND BYWAY

PART THREE: THE FIRST SUMMER

SUSAN FANETTI

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**by  
Susan Fanetti**



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*Love will enter cloaked in friendship's name.*

~ Ovid

## PART THREE

### The First Summer

#### 7

“Daddy! Daddy, do you see?”

Bart stepped up onto the bottom rail of the corral fence. “I see, baby princess. You look beautiful!”

And she did, too. Her long, blonde ponytail swung and bounced as Cinnamon, a little chestnut mare with any easy gait, cantered around Isaac and Lilli’s corral.

Cantered. And Lexi was keeping her seat. Eleven months since she’d been shot, her limp was significantly improved, and she had grown strong enough to do something she’d desperately wanted to do since her first day in Signal Bend: ride a horse herself, without supervision, take her through the paces, strong and steady in the saddle. She’d be stiff later, and they’d need to work her leg so it didn’t seize up on her, but this was real progress. By the end of the summer, she wanted to be able to ride free range, out on the trails and through the fields, and today, Bart thought she might be ready. Maybe he would be ready to let her do it, too.

Her mother would have been proud. Maybe she was proud. Lexi believed that Riley was watching over them, shining her love down on them every night in the starlight.

Hearing his eleven-year-old daughter’s delighted laughter, Bart grinned and cherished her joy, let it touch him, let it warm him more than even the bright June sun could. His little girl was happy. Truly, exuberantly happy. There was a time, not long ago, when he’d wondered if she ever would be again.

For these moments, he could almost forget what day it was—the day, thirteen years ago, that Riley had walked alone down a long white aisle in a breathtaking white dress and set her perfect hand in his. Today was the first wedding anniversary he’d spend alone.

No. He could never forget what day this was.

Neither of them had ever forgotten the day, but they'd rarely done anything spectacular for it, either. They were happiest at home, and, as they'd gotten married in the summer, the kids were home from school, so they just stayed in. Usually, their anniversary had been just a normal day, with a little extra romance in the morning, lingering in bed, and at night, when they'd exchange gifts and take their time with each other before they went to sleep. Maybe during the day, if they were together, there'd be an extra kiss or cuddle or two.

Bart had missed a couple anniversaries over the years, on runs with the club, and Riley had missed one while she'd been on location for a movie. On those occasions, they'd celebrated with a phone call, and Bart arranged for flowers to be delivered. Absurdly, considering the life Bart had led, they'd taken those days for granted, thinking that they'd have an endless strand of anniversaries to share. They'd talked about doing something big after the kids were grown.

He'd been on a run during what had been their final anniversary. It hadn't even been a crucial run. But Deck had had a bad summer cold, and Riley had been distracted taking care of him, and he'd been happy to escape the house for a few days. He'd done that a lot, he now understood—escaped the chaos of family life and left Riley and Marta to manage things.

Weeks later, he'd been summoned to Nevada, where his wife's body lay on a narrow gurney, and their oldest child and only daughter was in surgery to save her leg.

Ian walked up and stood at Bart's side. Bart pulled his attention outward again and set his hand on his son's shoulder. "What do you think, bud? She looks good, doesn't she?"

"Yeah. She looks happy."

"Yeah, she does. You done helping Isaac and Bo?" Ian had been in the woodshop with them. Deck was in the yard, playing with the dogs, running around in his own little fantasy world. Bart had been splitting his attention between his oldest and his youngest. And his memories.

Ian shrugged in answer to Bart's question. "I guess. Bo was getting weird. Everything has to be his way or he gets weird."

Bo had Asperger's, which Ian knew. He was twelve, but he generally did better with younger kids, who had fewer ideas about how people were 'supposed' to act and were more patient with him.

Bart had talked to Lexi and Ian both about the ways Bo was different. But Ian was eight, and it was probably too much to expect that he'd just deal with Bo's idiosyncrasies. The other kids, who'd grown up in Signal Bend and had known Bo all their lives, didn't think much of it, but Bart's kids had only known this town and this family for about eight months.

“I don’t think they have to be his way, exactly. I think he just needs to understand why they are the way they are.”

Wouldn’t that be nice for everybody, in fact. Just to understand.

Ian shrugged again. “It’s annoying. I wish we were at Uncle Badge and Aunt Adrienne’s.”

“Aunt Adrienne just had a baby, bud.” Their fifth kid and third boy, Austin, had been born a few days ago. “Anyway, Henry’s not there. He and his sisters and John are at Uncle Show and Aunt Shannon’s.”

“Well, can we go there, then?”

“Not today, Ian. Today, we’re here with Uncle Isaac and Aunt Lilli, because they invited us to spend the day. Let’s not be rude. There are lots of things to do here to have a good time. Why don’t you go play with Deck and the dogs?”

Ian turned and considered his baby brother, then nodded and trotted off toward them.

It might be a while before Bart took the kids to Show and Shannon’s again. He couldn’t face Show’s daughter right now. Nolan had run off, chasing down David Vega. He’d left his kutte behind and gone rogue, against the club, to hunt and kill the man who’d killed his father and been responsible for Riley’s death as well.

Bart had been instrumental in holding back the club from going after him. They’d sent Len and Tommy to try to pull him home, and, when that had failed, those two, with the help of the SoCal and Montana charters, had set him up for his best chance to succeed, but it was Bart who’d talked down the rest of the mother charter from going north to have Nolan’s back. He’d gone toe to toe with both Isaac and Show over it.

Nobody who hadn’t been in the Keep during that meeting knew that it was Bart pushing hardest to turn away from Nolan, and he wasn’t sorry he’d done it. Going after Vega could pull all the shit right back down on their heads, putting not only the club in danger, but their families, too. Their children. Bart would leave his own kutte behind before he’d allow that to happen again. Under any circumstances.

But Nolan had a mother and an old lady, and those two women, Cory and Iris, were distraught. Nolan had left them of his own volition, but Bart felt the weight of his own part in their distress. God, Cory was barely holding it together, and she’d lost so fucking much already. It broke the pieces of his already broken heart.

He loved Nolan. He wanted him safe and home. He wanted him to succeed. But he couldn’t help him do it. He would never put *anything* before his children again. Not anything.

“Daddy! Daddy, watch!”

Bart shut down those thoughts and focused again on Lexi. She had the horse—*her* horse, though Cinnamon would live with Isaac and Lilli for a while longer—stopped at the mounting block. Lilli stood nearby while her daughter, Gia, held Cinnamon’s reins. Bart watched as Lexi stood in the stirrups, kicked one foot free, swung her leg over her horse’s rump, bearing all her weight on her damaged leg, and jumped down to the mounting block.

Such a small thing, the ability to dismount a horse. But for Lexi, that had been a mountain.

Bart walked to the corral gate and caught his ecstatic little girl, who was so much like her mother, in his arms.

“You did great, baby princess. I’m so proud of you!”

Bart hoped Lexi was right, and her mother was proud, too.

Cory set Loki's birthday cake in the middle of the picnic table, leaving the pink box closed to keep the bugs off of it. She set the candles—two 1s in yellow wax—on top of the box, hoping that the shade of the peach tree would keep them and the cake from melting on this hot, humid July afternoon.

She'd bought the cake at the bakery on Main Street. Usually she made a cake from a box and put some candy decorations on it, spelling HAPPY BIRTHDAY, and the kids would all come over for pizza and cake and movies. But this year, she'd wanted Loki's day to be extra special. Eleven wasn't such a big-deal year, maybe, but Loki needed something to celebrate. He missed his brother. He was scared and worried, and he felt abandoned.

Cory knew the feeling.

Nolan had disappeared a couple of weeks ago. The club knew where he was, but they wouldn't tell her. Something bad was happening, though. All the Horde was tense, and they'd been carrying openly around town, beefing up patrols. Something bad, and Nolan was at the heart of it.

He'd just up and left. Cory and Loki had come home from supper at Bart's house and found a note on the kitchen whiteboard: *I love you. I'm okay.*

Just those five words. Nothing more. But his kutte had been folded up on his made bed in his room, with his phones sitting on top. Wherever he'd gone, he'd left the club behind, too, and made it impossible to contact him.

He'd left the Horde behind. Havoc's Horde. That club was more important to him than anything. He'd turned his back on everything he loved—on his family, on Iris, on his club, on Havoc's legacy. Only something truly desperate would have compelled him to do that.

He was not okay. Cory was terrified. If she lost Nolan...

Before that thought could wend its way to its conclusion, Cory looked out over their yard and found her youngest son. Today, Loki seemed happy. His friends and family were around him, and all the kids were running through the soaker hose and playing water balloon volleyball. Thor, their old dog, was trying to keep up, but mostly just stood in the water spray and shook his head. He was having fun, too.

Double A and Cox were running around with the kids, keeping them whipped into a frenzy. Adrienne and Shannon had the littlest ones corralled at the inflatable pool. All around was Cory's family—helping with food, playing with the kids, sitting around in a motley assortment of lawn chairs, drinking beer.

For all the world, it was a normal summer Saturday afternoon, a family birthday party. Like one of their own, her son, wasn't missing, off on some mysterious, personal suicide mission. Like Cory's life, and Loki's, wasn't teetering on the edge of an abyss.

Again.

“Hey.”

Bart had come up behind her and touched her arm. She turned and tried to rearrange her face into a smile, from whatever it had been.

“You need a minute?” he asked.

“No, no. I'm okay. Just got...” She sighed; there wasn't any point in explaining where her head had been. “I'm okay. Did you bring it?”

He grinned, but above that, his eyes still peered into hers. Everyone around her knew she wasn't okay, but Bart seemed to really *know*.

“I've got it. They put a bow on it in the showroom. It looks great.”

“God, I hope this isn't a stupid idea. He's only eleven.” Loki had been asking for a dirt bike since he was seven, but the thought of him racing around on two wheels and an engine wrung her stomach out. He'd been so damn sad and distant since Nolan had left, though. He hadn't picked up his drumsticks even once since the night they'd come home to that message on the whiteboard—the one that was still there, just as Nolan had written it.

*I love you. I'm okay.*

No, he was not. He hadn't been okay in a long time. She'd thought he'd been doing well since he'd fallen in love with Iris; she'd thought he'd been settling down. Obviously, she'd been wrong.

Bart slid his palm down her bare arm and squeezed her hand. “He's surrounded by bikers. We'll teach him the ropes and keep him safe.”

Like they had Nolan. Cory laughed bitterly, and it twisted into a strangled sob.

“Hey. It's gonna be okay.” Bart pulled her hand until she stepped forward and let him hug her. “Nolan'll be home. I know he will.”

Cutting off the tears she'd almost let loose, Cory pushed back so she could glare up into Bart's eyes. “You know nothing of the sort. Don't lie to me. Don't serve me up meaningless bullshit. You of all people—just don't.”

“I’m sorry.” There was real anguish in his words and on his face.

Bart was just another of the Horde, all of them sitting around in her back yard while her son, their brother, was alone.

This was not the family that Havoc had given them. Her husband would never have allowed this, for his son or for any of his brothers.

Cory pushed out of Bart’s arms. She wanted to scream at him. She wanted to punch him. She wanted all these men who thought they were so fucking tough to get the hell out of her yard and take their women with them, too. They all knew that Nolan was gone, they all knew that he was in danger. They all knew how deep his hurt ran.

But today was Loki’s day, and he deserved—he needed—a good day. These people were the only family he’d ever known.

So she pushed her fear and her anger to the back of her mind as she stepped farther away from Havoc’s best friend. “Thank you for picking up the bike. I’ll go round up the kids for the big reveal.”

Bart stood up and shrugged out of his kutte. He tossed it to the table, and it skidded across, stopping in front of Isaac.

“I told you—I’ll be no part of this club if it goes dark again. I’ve had enough of the blood. I’ve fucking *choked* on it. If this is the club vote, I’m out.” His hands shook, and curled them into fists to steady them.

Isaac picked up Bart’s kutte and folded it, then set his hands on it, linked as if in prayer. “Never leave a man behind, brother.” His voice was low, but his eyes shot green sparks at Bart.

“Nolan left *us*. He walked away.”

Studying the gavel in his hand Badger replied, “It’s not that simple, Bart. This is Nolan. You know why he went. And you know we owe him some room.”

“Room enough to get us killed? Jesus Christ, Badge, you’ve got five kids. Austin’s not a month old yet. You want to put their heads on the line for Nolan? He *betrayed a club vote!*”

He felt sick saying it. Part of him wanted to go for Nolan, and all of him understood why he’d gone. If it had been only him, Bart would have voted differently all down the line, and the club would probably have acted in concert as soon as Vega had been tagged. But it wasn’t only him. He thought of Riley’s grey body lying on that goddamn gurney, of their sweet, serious little girl, lying so tiny in a hospital bed. The Horde had done that. Bart had done that.

No more.

“Sit down, Bart.” Badger’s voice was deadly firm. There was no sign of the pimply-faced kid Bart had known in a former life.

Bart stood and locked eyes with the Night Horde President.

“Sit down,” Badger repeated. “Or leave. For good. You make that choice right now. I want you to sit and talk this out, see if we can find a way for us all to be right. I think everybody at this table wants that. So you take ten seconds right now and decide if you want to give the club up just like that”—he snapped his fingers—“or if you want to sit awhile longer and give us a chance to get right.”

Bart stared, his body thrumming, his brain too full for sense. One fucking year ago *today*. Nobody at this table had realized that they were doing this to him on the motherfucking

*anniversary* of Riley's death. None of them had been there. They'd all been safe here in Missouri, out of the fray, out of danger.

It was why he'd fucking moved—uprooted his children, left his wife's body behind to rot alone. To keep their children safe.

And now here they were, talking about dragging them right back into the gore.

He wanted to say it, to let them know how they were ripping him apart, but he was too angry. He didn't want them to know how much power they had right now.

"Five," Badger said.

After another two beats, Bart caved and sat. A muggy breeze seemed to move through the room as all the men let loose held breath at once.

Isaac pushed Bart's kutte back to him. He caught it but left it on the table.

Badger gave Bart another glance, then scanned around the table. "The club vote," he began, "is to go for Nolan and bring our boy home. But it wasn't unanimous, and Bart makes a good point. This is dangerous. Nacto's got us good intel, but we all know the limits of intel. We can't all go on this run. It needs a low profile, and we need to keep Signal Bend and our families safe." He turned to Bart. "Brother, I won't say I know how you feel, but I will say I agree with you. You know how I feel about vengeance. It never gets anybody anything but hurt. I've voted with you all along the line. I voted with you today. I am asking you to hold tight. It won't make your kids any safer if you walk away now. You know that."

Yeah, he did. His fists coiled into the leather of his kutte, and he watched his knuckles go white.

Badger continued, "This run is volunteer only, and I want at least half of us here at home, keeping the town buttoned down."

More than half the club raised their hands. Every man who'd voted to go. From those volunteers, Badge named, "Double A. Isaac. Show. Len. Tommy. You've had Nolan's back since he was a kid. It's right you have it now. A—you're in charge."

Bart hadn't known Nolan when he was a kid, when he'd become Havoc's son. The thought of Havoc as a father, step or otherwise, had seemed ridiculous to Bart back in the day, when Havoc had first met Cory and started bonding with her boy. He'd never had a chance to see his best friend become a father and a husband, find a life that fulfilled him. Havoc hadn't had that life long enough, and he and Bart's last year or so of friendship had been rocky. Because club loyalties had come between them.

He hadn't seen the bond that Havoc and Nolan had forged, but that bond was like tempered steel. It had shaped Nolan, and Bart had sure seen that.

Maybe that was why the Horde was so ready to let Nolan's treason slide now. Maybe they did owe him that much.

They owed *Havoc* that much.

Again, Badger turned to Bart. "Help me here at home, brother. You and me—we'll lead the rest of the club and make sure our people are safe. Put that leather on your back and stand with me."

~oOo~

He went home that evening to an empty house. The kids were spending the night, like they did every Keep night, at the home of one of his married brothers. Tonight, it was Show and Shannon's, and Shannon and Iris had all the kids over for a campout in the yard.

It was probably a good thing the kids weren't home. He was exhausted and full to the brim with sorrow. Not even Lexi, who'd been hurt exactly a year ago, had marked the day, and Bart hadn't reminded her. His kids were healing. Deck had nearly forgotten Riley. Ian had left behind his anger and embraced this life. He was happy. They were all happy. Only Lexi ever mentioned Riley these days, and she did so wistfully, not sadly.

That was good. It was what Bart wanted. But it hurt, too.

Demi began baying in her crate the instant he put his boot on the porch step. He smiled a little, thinking about the pup, named for Riley's most famous character. She was getting big, at nine months old, though she hadn't lost her puppyish enthusiasm—or clumsiness. She was a good girl.

So he wasn't alone. He'd toss a tennis ball around for Demi and let her sit on the sofa with him while he watched television and drank Jack until he passed out.

He went into the house and hung his kutte on one of the hooks near the door. For a moment, he ignored Demi's pleas for freedom and stood and contemplated that leather. Had he been right to keep it?

Badger was right—there was no way he could escape the risk. Anyone who might be an enemy of the Horde would know his association and wouldn't give a shit if he'd cut ties. Not in this moment, anyway.

But more than that, what would leaving the club do? The Horde *was* Signal Bend. The club ran the town, supported it, populated it, kept it safe, kept it whole. To truly leave the Horde, he'd have to leave the town.

He'd have to leave his family. His kids' family. He'd settled them here, given them this family, encouraged their bonds to it. Somewhere along the line, putting his family first had come to mean staying with the Horde.

Just as staying with the Horde meant putting them at risk. It was a circle. No end and no beginning.

But whole.

Standing by the front door of the house he'd settled his children in to begin their lives without their mother, Bart saw something that had been missing from his understanding since that night the year before. There was no putting one thing before another. The Horde was his family, had always been his family. Riley had joined his family, and it had become hers. His *life* had become hers. She had made that choice with her eyes wide open, and she had been wholeheartedly involved in that life. She'd *loved* that life.

They had chosen to make a family together, in that life. Their children hadn't chosen it, and he owed it to them to keep them happy and safe. And he would. But they would be safe here, and in this family, they were already happy.

Riley had understood the life they'd lived. She'd been right there with him as SoCal had gone outlaw again. They hadn't wanted it—Bart had voted against it—but they'd never considered leaving their family. Riley had never brought it up even once. She'd married him when he was an outlaw, and she'd simply embraced the role of the outlaw's old lady once again. She had known the risks and wanted the life anyway. Not just for him, but for herself as well.

For the first time since that night in Nevada, exactly one year ago, when he held her cold body to his chest, Bart understood that he had not killed his wife.

He pressed his face into his patch and wept.

~oOo~

In the kitchen, he finally freed his frantic dog. As she hopped around him, her tail wagging and her ears flapping, Bart turned toward the side door, meaning to take her out.

He paused, surprised, when he saw a Tupperware container on the counter, with a piece of paper tented on the lid.

Nobody locked their doors around Signal Bend, and old ladies were constantly traipsing through his house, so he didn't think too much of it. But those old ladies also knew that his kids were with their kids, at Show's. So it was a little odd to find an offering on his counter tonight.

He picked up the note and turned it over.

*I know what today is, and I figured you wouldn't be in the mood for the clubhouse. In the container is just some snickerdoodles Loki and I made. In the fridge you'll find the one dish I can actually cook proudly: chicken casserole. It doesn't look all that pretty, but it's got cheese and sour cream and is completely unhealthy and delicious. It's cooked, you just need to heat it up. You can nuke it or heat it in the oven, either way works. There's also a couple sixes of Bud. Try to stick to that tonight if you can. You bounce back faster after a beer drunk than you do after Jack.*

*Anyway, I was just thinking about you and didn't want you to drink on an empty stomach.*

*I know today is hard. But this is the last first. It starts to get easier after this.*

*xo  
Cory*

*ps. I'm at Valhalla tonight, but if you need anything, call.*

Cory had been distant and distracted since Nolan had left, for obvious reasons. And Bart had felt guarded and guilty for his part in her unhappiness. Of all the old ladies, she was the last one he'd have expected to be thinking about him, on this day or any other.

He'd told no one what the day was. Not even his children. Other than a call from Bibi in California that afternoon, he'd marked the day alone. He had no idea how Cory had known.

Or how she'd come to understand so much about him.

Bart carried the note out with him as he let Demi run the yard. He didn't read it again, but he couldn't seem to put it away.