

A BANCROFT
BILLIONAIRE
BROTHERS
NOVEL

A *Holiday*
LOVE
AFFAIR

USA Today Best Selling Author

ALI PARKER

A HOLIDAY LOVE AFFAIR

A BANCROFT BILLIONAIRE BROTHERS NOVEL #15



ALI PARKER

STAR KEY PRESS

CONTENTS

[Find Ali Parker](#)

[Description](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Insider Group](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Copyright](#)

FIND ALI PARKER



www.aliparkerbooks.com

DESCRIPTION



Doesn't everyone deserve forgiveness on Christmas?

My ex is the last person I want to see.

Especially here.

Without love in my life, I've poured myself into my career.

I don't need anything else.

That's what I thought.

Now she's walking around my business and my head.

All. The. Time.

I can't shake her or the way she makes me sweat with need.

The worst part?

She holds my fate in her hands.

One wrong word and she could destroy my reputation.

I might even deserve it after how I left her all those years ago.

But I'm not that guy anymore.

And she's not that girl.

Maybe she'll take mercy on me.

'Tis the season, after all.

Introduction



Well hey there! Thank you so much for grabbing one of my books. I sure hope you love it.

I'd hate to part ways once you're done though. How about we stay in touch? We have a great family of readers on my Insiders Newsletter Group that you just

can't miss out on.

We do exclusive giveaways, facebook parties, Christmas cards, event invites and sneak previews for this amazing group.

And as a HUGE thank you for joining,
you'll receive a free book on me!

[Join the fam Here!](#)

CHAPTER 1



DANE

“Why aren’t you in there cooking?”

“Because you guys can’t afford me,” I said, grinning before sipping my cocktail.

My brother Kameron scoffed. “Please. I’ll buy and sell you twenty times over.”

“Sure, you will.”

It was the usual ribbing. Growing up in a house full of brothers, there was always someone giving someone else shit. Sometimes, we didn’t have anything to tease the others about. Our insults were pretty lame. Like trying to insult our wealth. We were all rich.

Our father was wealthy, and we inherited some of that wealth before setting out on our own and making money doing what we loved. My brothers and I were all different. We all had our own skills and put them to work for us.

My other brother, Jett, was huddled in the corner of my father’s study with his girlfriend, Winslet. The two of them were talking in hushed whispers, looking very animated. I was sure they were working on a new case. They had suddenly become the crackpot private investigation team that everyone in the world wanted to hire. They were good at what they did, but it was a little too much drama for my tastes. They got off on the danger.

Jett was a private investigator. It was the thing he loved to do after a series of other career choices fell apart on him. Investigating turned out to be his thing. It made his heart sing. That and Winslet.

I got off on the perfect blend of spices to create a meal that sang in your mouth.

Different strokes for different folks.

Those two were like bloodhounds on the scent of a particularly elusive criminal, and their excitement was palpable. Honestly, they were a pair of weirdos, but I couldn't deny how glad I was that they'd joined us for the American Thanksgiving holiday. It was rare our family managed to all get in the same room these days. Not everyone was here, but at least two of my brothers made it.

My father popped his head in. "I'll be right in. I need to make a call." And then he was gone. My father was always making a call or taking a call. He was always off to a meeting or replying to an email. He'd been like that since the day I was born.

I shook my head. "I thought he was semi-retired."

"If he was still working full time, he wouldn't be here at all," Kameron said.

"He looks good, though, right?" I said. "I mean, after what he went through."

"Dad's a tough old dude," Kameron joked. "It's going to take a lot more than one gangster to take him out. I think he secretly enjoyed it."

I chuckled and shook my head. "I have no doubt he did."

His near-death experience had shaken us all to our cores, a stark reminder that life was both short and unpredictable. Jett and Winslet had saved his ass. I would never claim I was super close to my father, but he was a good man. I was glad he was back. Since the incident, we had all become a little closer. I supposed that was how it always was—you never realized what you had until you came a hair's breadth from losing it.

Dinner was all about trying to mend the family. It wasn't that we were broken, but we were all busy. We all had busy careers and a few of my brothers were recently married or seriously involved with women. It made it difficult for us to give each other a lot of time. We were committed to bringing our family back together and making an effort to spend time with each other and our father. Life was short.

While enjoying the comfort of my father's lavish estate, my phone started to vibrate in my pocket. I quickly checked the screen and saw my cousin's name. "I'll be back in a second."

I stepped out onto the back porch, the cool autumn air hitting my face. I'd been waiting for the call from my cousin Grayson in New York City. We'd been playing phone tag for weeks, and I was eager to catch up.

“Hey, Grayson,” I answered.

“Dane! Finally, you answer! I’ve been trying to reach you forever.” Grayson’s voice was filled with relief.

“Sorry about that, things have been a bit chaotic around here,” I admitted. “How’s the Big Apple treating you?”

Grayson chuckled. “Oh, you know, the city never sleeps. Having two kids that drink energy for breakfast doesn’t help. Plus, the business. I’m sorry to call—wait, is it Thanksgiving there? You’re in Canada.”

I laughed. “A few of us are at my father’s just because American businesses are closed and there’s not a lot we can do. It’s a good time for us to get together. Are you with your family?”

“We’ll be heading to my mom’s shortly,” he replied.

“Everyone is healthy?”

“Yes,” he said. “But enough about me, how’s everything back home? How is Uncle Armand?”

“He’s hanging in there,” I said, my voice softening. “It was a close call, but he’s on the mend. We’re all here trying to make up for lost time. Nothing like a near-death experience to remind you how important someone is to you.”

“Family is everything,” Grayson said.

Ever since my father, Armand, returned from his business trip to Singapore, things had taken an interesting turn. Grayson and I had been in touch more frequently, rekindling our connection as cousins. Our fathers were brothers, but my father did not care for his brother. It went back a long way, but basically, my dad was in love with Kathy, Grayson’s mother. Uncle Art was a world-class asshole, knocking up women all over New York. We knew of twelve sons. Six with my Aunt Kathy and another six with random women.

My dad hated the way Art treated Kathy. The running joke was how many more Bancrofts were out there? Art was a prolific reproducer. It was like he was trying to create his own city.

“I’m hoping to catch up with you next week,” I told him.

I was headed to New York for the entire month of December to oversee the opening of my flagship restaurant, Edge.

“I’ve got an offer you can’t refuse,” he said with a laugh.

I raised an eyebrow, intrigued. “Oh? What’s that?”

“My family and I are taking off for most of December, heading out to the

mountains for the holidays. We'll be back on Christmas Eve. Now, I know you've got your fancy hotel reservations and all, but I wanted to extend a special invitation. You're free to stay in the guest wing. I promise, the kids won't bother you—too much.”

I hesitated for a moment, touched by Grayson's generosity. “Grayson, that's incredibly kind of you, but I wouldn't want to overstep. It's the holidays, and you'll be away with your family.”

“I've got a fully stocked bar and a chef's kitchen. You won't have to worry about a thing. Plus, I'm sure you'll want a break from the hustle and bustle of the city. Trust me, after spending your days in the city surrounded by grumpy people in the so-called holiday spirit, you're going to want the peace and quiet my home offers.”

“It's a generous offer, but you don't need to do that.”

Grayson laughed, dismissing my concerns. “Dane, don't even worry about it. I promise it's not a big deal. We've got plenty of space, and I'd feel much better knowing you're comfortable while you're in the city. Besides, we're family. What's mine is yours.”

His words warmed my heart, and I smiled. “You really mean that?”

“Absolutely,” Grayson replied earnestly. “I know how busy you'll be with the restaurant opening, and I'd hate for you to feel like you're stuck in a hotel room all month. This way, you'll have a home away from home.”

I considered his offer, realizing that it was too good to pass up. “You know what, Grayson? I think I'd be a fool not to accept. Your place sounds incredible, and it'll be a nice change of pace. Thank you.”

“Of course,” he said.

We chatted for a while longer, making plans for my stay and discussing the details. Grayson assured me that he'd leave a list of his favorite spots in the city, and he even promised to introduce me to some of his friends. By the time we hung up, I felt grateful for the unexpected hospitality. We didn't grow up close. With our fathers at odds, we didn't spend holidays together or have big get-togethers.

With Grayson's generous offer to stay in his guest wing during my month-long stint in New York City, I felt a sense of relief. The prospect of finding a hotel with any availability this close to the holidays seemed daunting, and Grayson's hospitality was a godsend. It made my life a little easier.

I walked back into the sitting room with everyone still sitting around,

waiting for the feast to be done. My father looked thoughtful as he sipped his wine, lost in his own thoughts. I noticed he did that a lot lately since he returned from his kidnapping ordeal. While he didn't suffer any major physical harm, I knew it affected him. One didn't get kidnapped and held for ransom and not have some kind of thoughts about it.

"Everything okay?" I asked him.

He blinked and looked up at me. "I'm sorry?"

"I asked if everything is okay? Do you need anything?"

"No," he said, smiling. "Business?" He nodded toward the phone in my hand.

"Kind of," I said, grinning. "It was Grayson."

He perked up. "Oh? Is Kathy okay?"

"As far as I know, yes," I said and sat down again. "I was getting things ready for my trip. I'll be staying with Grayson in New York for the entire month of December."

My dad's eyes lit up with curiosity. "Oh, really? That's quite a change of plans, Dane. What brought this on?"

I shrugged, trying to act nonchalantly. "Grayson offered. He said he'll only be home a little while and then they're going on a trip. Besides, with the restaurant opening and all, I figured it would be more convenient."

Dad nodded slowly, a glimmer of mischief in his eyes. "Christmas in New York doesn't sound too bad, does it? Perhaps I should consider making my way down there as well."

Jett and Kameron exchanged amused looks, and I smirked. We all knew what was really on our father's mind. His interest in Aunt Kathy wasn't exactly a well-kept secret. Sure, it might sound strange to others, but it wasn't as weird as it seemed. After all, she wasn't a blood relative, and our dad had a soft spot for her that was undeniable. Aunt Kathy had come to Vancouver to stay for a while after my father returned from Singapore. She had doted on him, and he loved it.

"Dad," Kameron chimed in, a mischievous glint in his eye. "You just can't resist the charm of the city, can you?"

Dad chuckled, seemingly unfazed by our teasing. "It might be nice to catch up with Kathy and see how she's doing. All of her sons are going to be busy with their own families. She might appreciate the company."

"I think that's a very good idea," Jett said, nodding. "You two can do all the Christmas stuff together. Both of you could use the company."

As the conversation shifted to holiday plans, I thought about the trip to New York. I had been planning the opening for my newest restaurant for months. I couldn't wait to get there and see it all in person. I had planned everything to the last detail, from the menu to the decor, and I was confident it was going to be a success.

A huge success.

CHAPTER 2



GINGER

The cozy corner of my favorite café, Frothed, had become my sanctuary, a haven for both work and leisure. I loved the smell and the ambiance. And the people. I gazed outside, lost in thought as I stared at the sky. It was gray, promising the first snowfall was coming soon.

I returned my attention to my laptop screen, my fingers dancing across the keyboard. I was engrossed in writing a piece about the soon-to-be-open restaurants in the East Village, my neighborhood, and my favorite place in the world.

The East Village had always been a vibrant and ever-evolving neighborhood, and I was excited to share the latest additions to its gastronomic scene with my readers. There were plenty of promising new eateries on the list, but one had captured the attention of the city like no other—the mysterious Edge.

I barely managed to gather any concrete information about Edge, but the buzz surrounding it was undeniable. I was pretty sure that was the reason it was all being kept under wraps. The mystery made everyone more curious. It was a very smart marketing strategy.

The restaurant was set to open one week before Christmas, a bold move in a city known for its competitive dining scene. What intrigued me even more was the fact that it was already fully booked, reserved exclusively for the high society elite of New York City. The frustration I'd felt when I'd tried to book a reservation months ago still lingered, but it was a clear sign that Edge was set to become a coveted hot spot.

Again, it was probably another ploy. People always wanted what they couldn't have. If the restaurant was booked, it must be good, right? I

wouldn't be surprised to find out it was booked with the owner's friends and family just to keep it out of reach of normal people. I was going to be pissed if it was all a scam just to bloat the popularity.

I sighed, momentarily lost in thought, before resuming my writing. I described the anticipation in the air, the whispers of exclusivity, and the tantalizing secrecy surrounding Edge. The restaurant's location had been kept under wraps, as had its menu and chefs. Now, we had a location but nothing else.

It was a slow unveiling meant to tantalize. All anyone knew for certain was that it promised to be a culinary experience unlike any other. I added a few of the rumors that were circulating about the restaurant and pointed out why they may or may not be valid.

As I typed away, a familiar voice broke through my concentration. It was Dez, standing by my table with a mischievous grin. "You're spacing out," he said, laughing.

"I'm thinking."

He looked out the window of the coffee shop he owned with my best friend, Carmen, who just happened to be his wife. "Looks like it might snow," he said.

"I hope so," I said, smiling. "I love snow. It makes everything look so much prettier. And cleaner."

"Until the neighborhood dogs pee on it and the exhaust from the cars turns it black," he joked.

"It snowed in Vancouver," I said with a sigh.

"Ah, someone is missing home," he said with a smile.

"A little," I replied. "I always love the first snow. But I love the first snowfall here. It feels, well, magical. The noisy city is quieted."

"And it means no one is out getting coffee," he said. "It makes it difficult for us to make money when people stay at home and make their own coffee."

"True, but it's not like it takes long for the sidewalks to be cleared and everyone is flocking here to get warmed up with the best coffee and pie in the Village."

"Let's hope so," he said, grinning. He pointed out the window to the bakery across the street. "He's going to make me look bad."

I smiled at the man hanging lights above his storefront. I had watched him on the ladder for over an hour. It was probably two strands of lights at most, but he was still working on it. That was because his wife kept telling

him how to do it, judging by the scowl on her face and her hands on her hips.

“Carmen said she was going to have you put some decorations up,” I told him.

He groaned. “Great.”

I could tell he wasn’t thrilled about the idea of decorating, but I knew he would do it anyway. He was always willing to make Carmen happy, even if it meant stepping out of his comfort zone. I glanced over at her and saw the mischievous look in her eyes. She knew he wasn’t a fan of decorating, but she also knew he wouldn’t say no to her. They had that kind of relationship. They were best friends and lovers, and they knew each other better than anyone else.

“You don’t want to be the only Scrooge on the block,” I joked.

He laughed. “I suppose not. But I’ll leave the creative stuff to Carmen. She’s much better at it than I am.”

We watched the wife plug in the lights. Christmas cheer sparkled up and down the block. I felt a sense of warmth inside. It wasn’t just from the coffee in my belly, but from the company I was in. Carmen and Dez were my other family. They took me in and let me hang out with them and made sure I didn’t feel like a third wheel.

Suddenly, the doorbell jingled, and in walked a group of rowdy teenagers. Dez looked at me and cringed a bit. “Let’s hope they aren’t as obnoxious as they sound.”

I returned to my writing, trying to put together something cohesive. I wanted to write something that got my readers excited for the new restaurant coming to the area. Unfortunately, I didn’t know anything about the place and therefore couldn’t write the article. I wanted to. I really did. I wanted my neighbors to get excited. The East Village had been my home since I moved to New York to start my journalism career. It was my second favorite place on the planet. Home was always going to be Vancouver, but that was my old home. My youthful, childish home. New York was my adult home.

The words on my laptop screen blurred together, my thoughts spinning in circles as I hit a writing wall. I had been trying to piece together a story about Edge for weeks, but my lack of information left me frustrated. I hated not being able to give my readers the full scoop. I decided to get some eyes on the place. Maybe there was a new juicy tidbit I could add to my article.

As I sat there staring blankly at the screen, I couldn’t help but feel like a failure. I had been a journalist for years, but I still struggled with writer’s

block. The sound of the rowdy teenagers in the background only added to my frustration. I needed to clear my head and find some inspiration.

Carmen delivered drinks to the group of teens and stopped by my table. "It's going to snow," she said.

"Yes, it is. I would pray for a big storm, but I'm not ready for that just yet."

"That reminds me I need to take our winter coats to the dry cleaners. I'm sure they smell like mothballs."

"Better hurry," I said, laughing. "I think you can say it is officially winter."

"I know, I know," she said with a shake of her head. "I need more time in the day."

"Don't we all," I said, laughing, and shut down my laptop. "I'm going to head out."

"Did you get much done?"

I groaned. "Not really. Not as much as I wanted to. I'm going to walk over and see if there's been any progress."

"You'll have to let me know," she said, smiling. "I'm going to assume they won't be direct competition, but just in case."

"With all the hype, one would think it's the kind of place that serves royalty and A-listers," I said.

"Are you saying my café would never be in the same class?" she said, giggling.

"I hope it never will be," I said, smiling. "I don't like pretentious. Your café is perfect, and you know it. I think I spend more time here than I do in my own apartment."

"And we're glad to have you. I'll catch up with you later. You'll have to tell me all about what you find out."

"I wouldn't hold your breath," I muttered. "These people are determined to make a big, grand entrance. I just hope they don't crash and burn. The last thing we need is a crappy restaurant taking up space that could have housed something cool. I'm still waiting for something exciting and unique."

"There are plenty of restaurants."

"I'm craving something new. Something I've never had." I slipped my laptop into my bag and finished the last of my coffee.

"That's because you've had everything," she said, laughing.

It was true. It was my job. I was a food blogger and my readers trusted

me to give them honest reviews. The restaurants I wrote about also respected my opinion. I never came right out and insulted a chef or business owner. I provided what I thought was constructive feedback. It was my schtick and it had made me pretty successful.

I waved goodbye to Carmen and Dez, bundling up in my warmest coat to brave the cold, and made my way to the address for the new restaurant. It was only a few blocks to Edge. I felt a rush of excitement. The city was abuzz with anticipation for Christmas, but my heart pounded with excitement for this place that held so much mystery. What sort of restaurant was it? Who would dine here? What culinary delights awaited those lucky enough to secure a reservation?

As I approached the glamorous front of Edge, I couldn't help but pause, taking in the sight of the exterior. It was sleek and modern, with a façade that exuded an air of sophistication. The windows were shrouded in darkness, revealing nothing of the interior. The restaurant's name, etched in elegant gold lettering, glowed softly in the dim light.

I stared at the exterior, my breath misting in the cold air. I had a thousand questions and no answers. Most restaurants were desperate to get write-ups about their business. They wanted to give bloggers like me a chance to sample the food and rave about it. Whoever was running this place was playing it all very close to the vest. I didn't like it. I liked being in the know.

I was drawn closer to the glamorous front door. I crouched down and walked under the construction tape blocking the stairs into the restaurant. As if cheap tape was going to stop anyone. My hand pressed against the cold glass, and I tried to peer inside. All I could see were shadows, hints of an interior that held secrets I was determined to uncover. It really was obnoxious. Who did that?

I sighed with frustration. I was getting nothing for my article. I couldn't publish it as it was. It was just words. There wasn't any exciting new information in the piece. From behind me, a voice interrupted my thoughts.

"Can I help you?"

I whirled around, my heart pounding with a mix of surprise and embarrassment. I knew I shouldn't have crossed the tape, but my insatiable curiosity was always getting me into trouble. An apology was on the tip of my tongue, ready to spill out, but it died as soon as I locked eyes with the dangerously handsome man standing at the bottom of the steps.

His eyes widened with recognition, and for a moment, we both seemed

frozen in time. “Holy shit,” he said followed by a deep laugh. “Ginny Rowley? What the hell are you doing spying on my restaurant?”

His words hit me, and my initial embarrassment was replaced by a mixture of shock and disbelief. “*Your* restaurant?” I managed to ask, my voice barely above a whisper. My mind was spinning.

I lifted my chin and tried to pretend the appearance of Dane Bancroft hadn’t rattled me to my core. I wasn’t the least bit drawn in by those hazel eyes that still haunted my dreams.

CHAPTER 3



DANE

As I stood there, stunned at seeing Ginny Rowley, I couldn't help but marvel at how damn good she looked, even in a conservative outfit that left not one inch of skin showing. There was a fire in her eyes as she glared daggers at me, and a red flush colored her freckled cheeks. It was maddening how effortlessly sexy she looked, even when she was clearly furious.

"Dane," she said stiffly. "You're opening this restaurant? Why all the mystery? I figured a guy with an ego as big as yours would have a statue of himself around here somewhere."

I chuckled at her snarky remark. Leave it to Ginny to kick things off with an insult. "You know, Ginny, that's actually a good idea. I'll have to think about it. A statue of myself right in the center of the dining room. I'm sure the ladies would love it. Although it might make the men jealous."

Her eyes narrowed, and she crossed her arms. "You're such an ass."

I laughed. "So, why are you peeping into my restaurant, Ginny?"

"I'm not peeping," she retorted defensively.

I shrugged, a smirk playing on my lips. "Peering. Peeking. Whatever you want to call it when someone is looking through a window they're not supposed to."

She descended the steps, glaring at me. "I'm working, if you must know," she muttered.

I followed her back onto the sidewalk, unable to resist teasing her. "As a peeping Tom?"

She shot me a withering glare, her patience clearly wearing thin. Ginny always had a fiery attitude. She was very easy to tease. It was just as good now as it was back in high school.

“No, as a food blogger and critic, Dane. I’m scoping out restaurants that are scheduled to open this month for an article I’m working on. I heard about this place and thought I would stop by.”

I raised an eyebrow, genuinely surprised. “No shit? So, you’re putting those skills you got from culinary and journalism school to good use, then?”

Ginny rolled her eyes, her irritation palpable. “Of course, I am. This is what I’ve always wanted to do, and you knew that. Why are you acting so surprised?”

I scoffed. “I’m not acting surprised.”

She lifted an eyebrow at me before pressing. “Yes, you are.” She shook her head. “You really didn’t think I was serious. Surprise, I was. I am.”

I chuckled at her exasperation. Some things never changed. Ginny had always been passionate about food and writing, and her determination had been evident even back in culinary school. “I’m not surprised, Ginny. I’m impressed. You’re living your dream, and it’s about damn time.”

“Thank you, Dane.” She softened just a bit at my words, and her expression lost some of its edge. “Why are you being so secretive about this place?” she asked in a way that sounded more like an accusation. “I don’t remember you being so dramatic.”

I shrugged. “Because it’s a surprise, Ginny. I wanted to surprise the city.”

“Why?” she asked.

“It’s a restaurant, but it’s not just any restaurant.”

Her brows rose, and she perked up. “It’s not?” she asked, a glimmer of interest in her eyes.

“No, it’s not,” I answered, smiling. “It’s a new place that’s unlike other restaurants in the area.”

Her eyes widened. “How so? Are you selling humans for dinner?”

And that was the snappy, smartass I remembered. “Maybe,” I teased.

“I’m putting all of this in my article,” she warned. “Why are you being so weird about this place? Is it a lot of hype? Are you planning on being a fine dining establishment? Is it an exclusive restaurant that only allows a select group of people to eat here?”

“You have a lot of questions,” I said, grinning.

“That’s because I’m a journalist,” she shot back. “Why aren’t you hyping up the place? If you haven’t told anyone what this place is, why is it impossible to get a reservation? Are you lying when you say it’s booked?”

I laughed. “Why would I lie?”

“To make the place seem unattainable for the average person and thus making it more desirable,” she said.

I shook my head. “No, Ginny. That’s not the reason why it’s fully booked. The truth is, the restaurant is exclusive, but not in the way you think.”

“Then how?” she demanded, her curiosity piqued.

“Because it’s mine,” I said with a cocky smile.

She rolled her eyes. “Great. I’ll just put that in the article. Don’t be surprised if the place is a ghost town. You can’t just open your doors and expect people to show up if they know nothing about it.”

“It’s killing you,” I said.

“Excuse me?”

“You’re so pissed you don’t know the details.”

She rolled her eyes again. “You’re shooting yourself in the foot. I can help make your restaurant a success.”

“I’m sure you can, but I think I’m doing okay,” I said, laughing.

She sighed and shook her head. “Great. Good for you. Congratulations. You’re a hero.” Her sarcasm dripped from every word.

“You want the story,” I said.

“It’s not a story,” she said. “It’s a stupid review. A teaser. I don’t want a damn thing.”

She was getting frustrated, and it was funny as hell. I loved her sass.

“We’ll do a deal,” I said.

“What kind of deal?”

I smiled. “I’ll give you the details for the restaurant and you run an exclusive on the place. I’ll give you a personal interview and an exclusive first look at the menu. You’ll get a sneak peek at the restaurant and the inside scoop. After that, you can write the review.”

She looked up at me. “Why the hell would you do that?”

I shrugged. “Because like you said, I need the promotion.”

“As if I would want to give you any free advertisement.”

I laughed. “I thought that’s what you did.”

“Whatever.”

With a playful grin, I decided to try and rekindle our old friendship. “So, where’s the best place for a bite to eat around here? Since you’re the expert and all.”

She arched an eyebrow, a hint of amusement in her eyes. “You’re in the

East Village, Dane. There are countless options. But if you want a good meal a couple of blocks up and to the west, there's a place you might like."

I nodded, genuinely interested. "Sounds perfect. Why don't you join me for a drink and lunch, Ginny? It's been a long, long time. I'd love to catch up and see what you've been up to."

Her laughter was a pleasant sound, but it was accompanied by a shake of her head. It wasn't true laughter. There was a hint of irritation in the laugh. "What makes you think I'd want to do that?" Her eyelashes fluttered and she had a snarky smile.

I felt a twinge of disappointment at her response. "We used to be friends, didn't we? I thought it might be nice to catch up."

Ginny's expression softened, and for a moment, I saw a glimpse of the old Ginny, the one I used to know. "Dane, NYC might be a big city, but it's a small town. I'll see you around. And don't worry, I'll be back to tell the story of your restaurant. I really hope it's good. You've certainly hyped it up enough."

With that, she turned and stalked off, leaving me standing there, watching her go. I wondered why she was the one acting like she had been burned when she was the one who had turned her back on me all those years ago.

As I contemplated our brief but significant encounter, I couldn't shake the feeling that there was unfinished business between us. Ginny had always been a force to be reckoned with, and her presence in my life had left an indelible mark. She was the one woman that I was never able to get over. At least, not all the way. Every day, there would be something small that would remind me of her. It was usually something that brought a smile to my face. A good memory that was always followed by a twinge of hurt and regret.

Instead of going to the restaurant she recommended, I went around back to go inside my restaurant. I had a meeting and things to do, but I would have ignored all of that to sit down and catch up with her. I supposed it was probably a good thing she shot me down.

I let myself in the back stockroom and turned on the lights. There were boxes neatly stacked and new equipment still waiting to be opened and put into the kitchen. I loved the days before I opened a restaurant. Everything was pristine without a speck of dust or a layer of grime.

I went around and started checking what had arrived and what was still missing. I'd done this enough times to be able to eyeball what should be present. I didn't need checklists, but I did have a manager that would go

through everything and make sure it was all good.

I walked into the kitchen and smiled at the high shine of stainless steel. Every inch was squeaky clean.

We were in the final stretch. I had a crew coming in to unpack the dishes and the rest of the small equipment. Everything would be ready for the employee night in a couple of days.

I took a walk to the dining room and cringed. It wasn't even close to being set up, but I reminded myself it wouldn't take long. It was the usual jitters before opening night.

The back door buzzer cut through the silence, startling me before I realized what it was. I opened the door and saw the crew that would be doing the final set up. After a quick meeting, I left once again to go meet with one of my fresh-produce vendors. I insisted we only used the highest quality ingredients. I was one of the pickiest, snobbiest buyers when it came to the food I served in my restaurants.

This was my flagship restaurant. I couldn't afford wilted lettuce or unripe tomatoes.

As I walked down the street, I took a deep breath and smiled. The air was crisp and clean, and the first snowflakes were falling sporadically.

As I walked into the produce market, I was greeted by the scent of fresh fruits and vegetables. The colors were vibrant, and the fragrance was intoxicating. It was strange to be inside what was essentially a vibrant garden while it was snowing just outside.

"Good morning, Mr. Jones," I said. He looked surprised that I knew his name. I stepped forward to shake his hand. "I'm Dane Bancroft. We've done a lot of emailing."

"Mr. Bancroft!" His face said it all. I knew my business was a huge boon for him. I was expecting to keep him in the green—literally. "It's so nice to meet you. Has something changed?"

"Nope." I shook my head. "I just thought I would pop in and see the place in person. How's the produce today?"

"Fresh as always," he replied, grinning from ear to ear. "What can I get for you today?"

"I think I'll grab a few things," I said.

"Ah, checking the quality." He chuckled. "I back up every single piece of produce I sell."

"That's why I chose you."

I walked around the market, picking out the perfect fruits and vegetables I wanted to take out to Grayson's place to sample. It was my version of quality control. I examined each one closely, checking for any imperfections or blemishes. I picked up a ripe avocado and pressed it gently, feeling the softness beneath my fingers.

I bought my produce and left, impressed with the organization. It gave me even more confidence that I had chosen right.

CHAPTER 4



GINGER

As I walked away from my encounter with Dane Bancroft, I seethed with a mixture of indignation and disbelief. The nerve of that man. How could he have the audacity to invite me out for a drink as if nothing had ever happened between us? Like we were best pals or old friends that simply lost touch?

“Asshole,” I muttered.

I continued down the busy street, my thoughts consumed by our brief but unsettling reunion. Who did he think he was? And why did he choose to open his flagship restaurant in my neighborhood of all places in New York City? It was as if fate were conspiring against me, bringing him back into my life when I least expected it. I hoped I would never see him again.

I couldn’t shake the feeling of frustration that had settled deep within me. It had been years since I had last seen Dane, and I had been content with the distance that had grown between us. But now, he had resurfaced, and my carefully constructed walls of indifference were beginning to crumble. Just seeing him stirred about three million emotions in me.

What were the odds of him choosing a location less than a fifteen-minute walk from my condo? It was as if the universe were playing a cruel joke on me, forcing me to confront the unresolved feelings that lingered beneath the surface. I had put distance between us a long time ago. I wanted to leave the past in the past.

I couldn’t deny the memories that had resurfaced with his unexpected reappearance. Dane and I had once been close. Way too close. I had never allowed myself to get that close to anyone ever again. He had taught me a lesson I wouldn’t forget. It had been painful, and I had chosen to walk away

from it all.

As I reached the corner of the street, I paused to catch my breath and collect my thoughts. I couldn't let Dane Bancroft's reappearance unsettle me. I had a job to do, and I was determined to excel at it. I knew that I would have to visit Edge eventually, to write about it and share its story with my readers. But for now, I needed to put aside my personal feelings. I wasn't going to admit to knowing the owner.

I stormed back into Frothed, my heart still pounding with a mix of anger and disbelief. Carmen saw me come in and knew right away that something was amiss. It was before the lunch rush, and the café was relatively quiet, giving her the opportunity to step out from behind the counter and join me at a small table near the window.

"What's going on?" she asked, her brows furrowed with concern. "I thought you would be happy with the snow finally starting to fall."

I looked out the window. "I barely noticed, to be honest."

"What's wrong?"

I couldn't contain my frustration any longer and launched into a heated rant. "I ran into someone from my past. Someone who acted like nothing had ever happened between us."

Carmen leaned forward, her eyes locked onto mine, urging me to continue. "Someone from your past? Like an old friend?"

I nodded, my voice laced with bitterness. "Yeah, like an old friend. The kind of old friend I never thought I'd see again. Never wanted to see again."

Carmen's frown deepened as she pieced together the puzzle. "Does this someone happen to be the ex you refuse to ever speak about? The guy you left back in Vancouver before you came to school in NYC?"

I shrugged, feeling a surge of irritation. "Maybe. So what if it is?"

Carmen smiled softly and shook her head. "Nothing, Ginger. I'm just curious. It's been years since you left Vancouver, and you've built a whole new life here in New York. I just didn't expect you to run into anyone from your past, especially not him. Don't bite my head off."

I took a deep breath, my anger beginning to subside. She didn't deserve my shitty attitude. "You're right," I admitted, my shoulders slumping with frustration. "It's just that I never expected to see him again, and the way he acted, like nothing had ever happened between us, it just threw me off. He wanted to get a drink! Seriously! A drink? Like everything was just fine."

Carmen reached across the table and placed a comforting hand on mine.

“I understand. You wanted to keep all that stuff in the past. I get it, but remember, you’ve come a long way since then. You’re not the same person you were back in Vancouver. You’ve got experience and confidence. He takes nothing from you. In fact, you should be proud of what you’ve done.”

“You’re right. I have come a long way, and I have worked hard to build the life I now love. This was supposed to be my corner of the world. I just don’t understand why he invaded my space. He can be anywhere, actually anywhere, and he chooses to come here. Not just here, but within walking distance of my home.”

“He’s not invading your space,” she said, smiling. “Ignore him. Don’t give him the time of day. It’s a big place. You don’t have to see him.”

“It’s not that big,” I muttered. “Not to mention, I’m so bummed it’s his restaurant. Edge held so much promise. It was like an enticing present waiting to be unwrapped on Christmas morning—an oddly shaped box with extravagant wrapping paper and a sparkly bow. Now I’ve got a peek and it’s so disappointing. It’s like getting a box of shit. Dane is the shit.”

She laughed. “That’s one way to look at it.”

“How am I going to write anything that isn’t jaded? I want to slam his place just because it’s his. I know that’s not right, but that’s what I want to do.”

“You’re a professional,” she said. “You have the respect of thousands, maybe millions of readers. They trust you to be unbiased. You’ve always been able to do that, even when you’ve encountered some real assholes.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” I conceded, my tone resigned. “I should be able to separate the restaurant from the man behind it. It’s not him, it’s the food I’m supposed to be judging.”

“Exactly. Focus on what Edge has to offer as a dining experience. Put aside your personal history, and you might be surprised.”

I sighed again, my thoughts drifting to Dane. He wasn’t just a man to me, and that was the problem. He was the only man I had ever loved, the one who had known every inch of me, inside and out. He was the person with whom I had seen a future, a life together that had seemed so promising—until it hadn’t. I thought he was the one I was going to spend the rest of my life with.

The memories flooded back, bittersweet and painful. Dane and I had once been inseparable, two young and ambitious souls with dreams of conquering the culinary world. We had supported each other through thick and thin, shared our hopes and fears, and let love blossom in the midst of it all.

But as time went on, our dreams evolved, our paths taking us in different directions. It had been a heartbreaking decision to part ways, to leave behind the person who had meant so much to me. I couldn't say it was my decision. It just kind of happened.

The door opened and a cold breeze came in behind a group of people dressed in business attire. "Showtime," Carmen said.

It was the beginning of the lunch rush. "I'll see you later."

"Are you going to stay?"

I shook my head. "I'm going to go home and sulk and try like hell to write this stupid piece. If I can't write it, I have to come up with something else to write. Right now, I just want to pout and fume."

"Cheer up," she said, smiling. "Go home and make some of that peppermint hot cocoa you love. Sit in front of the window and watch the snow. That will cheer you up."

"Thanks," I said, sighing.

The door opened again and in came another group of people. "We'll talk soon," Carmen said before she rushed over to grab menus for the customers.

I walked out a second time. I hated the way I felt. I had put away my feelings for Dane a long time ago. Now, they had all flooded back. It was overwhelming. Years of feelings and emotions were boxed up tight and stored in the back of my mind never to be revisited. Seeing Dane opened the box and they all hit at once.

I got home, kicking off my shoes and leaving them in the basket by the door. I hung up my coat, put my laptop bag on the table, went to my fridge, and pulled out a bottle of juice. Then I drank it and looked around my apartment. My apartment was on the fifth floor of a prewar building. I loved my home. It was the perfect place for me. I loved the mix and match of colors and eclectic furnishings. I knew it wasn't right for everyone, but I loved it. There wasn't a hint of white, black, or beige in my place. I liked cool things that had history. I liked my surroundings to inspire me. I could never be inspired by anything plain.

I needed to get the article done. Something. I worked for myself, but part of keeping up my readership was regularly posting new content. I sat down, pulled up the file, and stared at the screen. I stared at my cursor blinking tauntingly.

My article on Edge was still waiting to be written, but my emotions were still a tangled mess. I needed to clear my mind and find a way to focus on the

task at hand. Taking a deep breath, I made a decision. I opened a new document and began to type.

“My ex is opening a restaurant right here in NYC, and I hope it’s terrible...”

The words flowed from my fingertips, a cathartic release of the emotions that had been swirling inside me. I wrote about the unexpected encounter with Dane, about the flood of memories and feelings that had resurfaced in his presence. Hurt, anger, and betrayal flowed through my fingers and onto the page.

As I continued to write, my words revealed my conflicting emotions. I poured out my frustrations and my lingering pain, and my unresolved feelings came alive on the page. It was a therapeutic process. The article would never see the light of day, but it felt good to get it all out. It wasn’t the first time I did some free writing about him.

As the words flowed, something unexpected happened. The anger and bitterness that had fueled my initial words began to soften, replaced by a hint of nostalgia. I remembered the good times, the laughter, and the shared dreams.

Maybe, just maybe, I wasn’t as over him as I had convinced myself I was. The restaurant was just a reminder of the life we used to have together, and the life that I still wanted.

I shook my head, trying to clear away the conflicting emotions. I needed to focus on the article I was supposed to be writing. But the words wouldn’t come. I glanced around my apartment, taking in the eclectic mix of colors and furnishings. It was a reflection of who I was and who I wanted to be. My apartment reflected who I was today, not the old me.

The old me that was crazy in love with Dane.

CHAPTER 5



DANE

I pulled my rental car into Grayson and Hannah's driveway, the tires crunching softly on the freshly fallen snow. The house was already decked out for Christmas, the front lawn adorned with twinkling lights and the roof outlined with festive decorations. I was pretty sure it was a hired company that worked their magic to transform the place into a winter wonderland. I couldn't see Grayson climbing a ladder and hanging lights on the massive house. Not this many lights anyway.

Through one of the front windows, I caught a glimpse of Hannah inside the cozy living room. She was engaged in a playful dance with her six-year-old daughter and their son, Gage, who I remembered as being a very energetic three-year-old. They were smiling and laughing as they twirled around in front of the beautifully decorated Christmas tree, their faces illuminated by the soft glow of the lights.

I smiled at the heartwarming scene. Hannah was a fantastic mother, and her love for her little family was evident. I didn't know her all that well, but the few times I had met her I had been impressed. Growing up, Grayson had been a dick. He was family, but he had a stick shoved so far up his ass it was difficult to like him. Over the last year or so, our families reconnected, and his brothers had told a lot of stories about the change in Grayson, all thanks to Hannah.

As I stepped out of the car and made my way to the front door, the cold winter air nipped at my cheeks. I caught a glimpse of Grayson through the window. He picked up Gage and gave Hannah a quick kiss. He had the perfect little family.

Damn.

The sight before me hit me like a sledgehammer to the gut. The scene in Grayson and Hannah's living room filled me with an overwhelming mix of emotions. I had always wanted a family of my own, but life had a way of taking unexpected turns. For years, business had taken priority in my life. I was always working or chasing exotic foods. But seeing Ginny earlier today had stirred something deep within me, something I had long buried.

There was a time when I had believed that Ginny would be the one by my side, that we would build a life together that looked very much like the one I was witnessing now. A life that felt whole and happy, full of love and the laughter of children. In her eyes, I had seen a future that would make me smile like Grayson was now.

I shook my head, trying to shake off the memories and emotions that threatened to overwhelm me.

Get it together, you sap. You and Ginny weren't good for each other then, so why would it be any different now?

The truth was, our love had burned brightly but briefly, consumed by the ambitions and dreams that had led us down separate paths. It had been a painful decision to part ways, but it had also been necessary. Our love had been intense, passionate, and all-consuming, but it had also been dead weight, holding us back from reaching the dreams we were both chasing.

As I watched Grayson, Hannah, Leah, and Gage share a moment of pure joy and togetherness, I felt a pang of regret. Regret for the choices I had made, for the path I had chosen, and for the love I had let slip away.

But life was a series of choices. This was the path I put myself on. I had no one to blame but myself. It wasn't that I was miserable. I just didn't have the same level of happiness Grayson did. I wasn't complete. I knew that I couldn't change the past, but I could make some different decisions that might one day get me to that happily ever after.

I rang the bell and felt a little guilty for interrupting such a sweet moment. Grayson was the one to answer the door. "You made it," he said, smiling. "Come in. How were the roads?"

"Good," I said, nodding. "It's just getting started, so it wasn't too bad."

"They do a good job clearing the roads," he said as I took off my jacket. "You won't have any trouble getting into the city."

There was a large tree in the center of the foyer decorated in white and gold. It was very elegant.

"Sounds good," I said, inhaling the scent of fresh pine. I knew the tree

was artificial and assumed there was a candle or something that set the mood.

“Everyone is in the living room,” he said, leading me across the massive foyer. “It was a dance party. Leah’s school did a Rudolph play and she hasn’t stopped singing for a month.”

I smiled at the idea, feeling a little pull at my heartstrings. I hoped one day my daughter would be in ballet and get to have a Christmas recital. “You sound like a proud papa.”

“The proudest.”

Stepping into Grayson and Hannah’s home was like entering a winter wonderland of holiday magic. The living room was beautifully adorned in Christmas decor that filled every corner with festive cheer. An assortment of figures that were as tall as the kids stood in the corner in a beautiful nativity scene.

A towering Christmas tree stood proudly in front of the living-room window. Unlike the elegant tree in the foyer, this one had clearly been decorated by the kids. Handmade ornaments covered the tree along with strings of popcorn that I assumed the kids put together as well. Beneath the tree lay an assortment of gifts wrapped in bright paper.

Garlands of fresh pine and holly adorned the staircase railing, which explained the pine scent. Red bows were intertwined within the garland. A cozy fire crackled in the fireplace. The mantel above the fireplace served as a showcase for holiday decorations, from miniature snow-covered villages to cute figurines and a row of stockings. Each stocking had a name in blue embroidery.

“Hello,” Hannah said, smiling, and approached me.

Leah and Gage were still in the midst of their playful dance around the Christmas tree. Their laughter and giggles were infectious.

“Hello.” I smiled and pulled her in for a quick hug.

“Sorry about the wild children,” she said, laughing. “This is the time of night we let them run around like feral creatures with the hope they’ll fall right to sleep.”

“Ask her if it works,” Grayson said dryly.

Hannah laughed. “It’s better than nothing.”

“It’s fine,” I said. “They’re having fun. I grew up in a pretty loud household myself.”

“We are so glad you’re here,” Hannah said and leaned against Grayson, whose arm automatically went around her. “The guest room is fully ready for

you, and if you need anything, just let me know.”

“I can’t thank you enough for having me,” I said. “Your home looks absolutely stunning, by the way. The decorations are simply breathtaking. It’s very festive. It’s worthy of a postcard.”

Hannah beamed with pride, her eyes shining with holiday spirit. “We wanted to make this holiday season extra special. I suppose we want every year to be special, but this year I guess I’m feeling extra thankful.”

“Which is why I am taking most of the month off,” Grayson said. “We’ve decided to take some time away from the hustle and bustle of daily life and reconnect. With the kids in school and all their activities and Hannah and me constantly on the go, it feels like we rarely have time to just sit back and relax together.”

“I cannot wait to get out of town,” Hannah said.

“Where are you headed?”

“It’s a gorgeous cabin in the woods, surrounded by nature and tranquility. It’s the perfect place to unplug. There won’t be anywhere to go or phone calls to take or business emails to deal with.”

“I’m glad you’re going to be here,” Hannah said. “You can keep an eye on things.”

“Well, I promise not to burn the place down while you’re away,” I joked.

“I should check on dinner,” Hannah said. “Leah, Gage, you guys come wash up and set the table. Grandma will be here soon.”

“Your mom is coming?” I asked Grayson, who gestured for me to follow him.

“Yes,” he said, nodding.

“I hope I’m not crashing a family dinner,” I said. “I’m happy to stay in a hotel.”

“You’re not crashing,” he said. “She knew you were coming and insisted on stopping by.”

“I look forward to seeing her,” I said, smiling.

“Can I get you a drink?”

“Sure,” I said, nodding.

He walked to a bar on the opposite side of the room. I watched him punch in a code and open a door. He held up a bottle. “Hannah insists we keep it all locked up. My study is kept locked. She doesn’t mess around when it comes to keeping her babies safe.”

“It’s smart,” I said, nodding. “I remember getting into my dad’s liquor

cabinet more than once.”

“Me too,” he said, grinning.

“Hello?” Kathy’s voice called out from the foyer.

“In here,” Grayson said.

Kathy walked in with a bright smile. She was a vision of holiday cheer, dressed in a vibrant ruby-red turtleneck that perfectly matched her lipstick. She looked good. She looked happy and healthy. I knew there had been some health concerns.

“Kathy, you look absolutely radiant,” I said and gave her a warm hug.

Kathy’s eyes twinkled. “Why, thank you, Dane. It’s wonderful to see you again.”

James, Kathy’s youngest son, walked into the room with a pretty woman following behind him. “Dane!” James said as he shook my hand.

I had met James a few times when he came to Vancouver with Kathy. He lived with Kathy in the massive Bancroft estate along with his wife. His wife was Kathy’s caretaker, but I had not met her before now.

“Hi, I’m Rory,” she greeted me. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

I shook her hand, returning her smile. “Likewise, Rory. I’ve heard so much about you.”

“How’s your father doing?” Kathy asked. “I want to visit him, but traveling in this cold weather can be quite challenging.”

“He’s doing really well,” I said. “He’s been thinking about you too. I think he was going to try and get over for a visit.”

Kathy blushed like a teenager; her voice filled with affection. “Oh.”

Their love story was not a normal one. My dad and his sister-in-law went way, way back, long before any of us were around. Life got twisted and my dad ended up in Vancouver and married my mother. I believed they genuinely loved each other, but he always held a special place in his heart for Kathy. He stayed away because he couldn’t stand to see what his brother was doing to his wife, but with Art dead and gone, my father stepped back into her life. They needed each other.

“Is Hannah in the kitchen?” Kathy asked.

“She is,” Grayson said, nodding.

“I’ll go see if she needs help,” Kathy said.

“I’ll come with you,” Rory said.

As the ladies made their way to the kitchen, James turned to me with a twinkle in his eye. “So, Dane, I heard you’re getting ready to open a new

restaurant.”

“I am.” I took the drink Grayson offered. “In the East Village.”

“You must be excited,” James said. “Your father mentioned you’ve been working on this for a while.”

I nodded. “It’s been crazy, but I’m definitely excited.”

“Are you taking reservations?” Grayson asked.

“We were, but we’re booked out a couple of months,” I said with a laugh.

“Shit, how did you manage that?”

“Word of mouth,” I said, shrugging. “I’ve got an excellent team on the ground here in New York. They’ve been dropping hints and creating a lot of buzz around the place. We’re keeping it all very secretive until the grand opening.”

James raised an eyebrow. “I like the sound of that. What kind of cuisine are you serving?”

“It’s a little bit of everything,” I said, shrugging. “My recipes are based off a variety of flavors. It’s not any one cuisine.”

“I can’t wait to try it,” Grayson said.

“I’ll make sure you get a table,” I promised him with a grin.

Just then, Hannah emerged from the kitchen with Kathy and Rory trailing behind her. “Dinner’s ready,” she announced with a smile.

CHAPTER 6



GINGER

The restaurant was abuzz with excitement as I sat at my table. I was here to do research for my blog's latest review. The new owners had taken over, and the anticipation for the revamped menu was the talk of the neighborhood. My one million plus followers were eagerly awaiting my thoughts and recommendations. I was the one that acted as the guinea pig. People couldn't afford to go out to eat and get a shitty meal. They wanted to spend their money on something good.

As each beautifully plated dish was presented to me, I snapped pictures. People ate with their eyes first. I wanted people to see what they were getting, including the portion sizes and plating in general. A man looking to take a woman out on a first date wanted to take her somewhere special.

I took a bite and let the flavors dance on my palate. As I chewed, I was already composing eloquent descriptions in my mind to share with my readers. I tried to pick a few words that would aptly describe what I was eating. It was hard to come up with creative ways to describe food after writing so many articles and reviews.

My focus was briefly disrupted when I noticed a man a couple of tables away taking pictures of his plate of food. At first, I ignored it. In this day and age, it was pretty normal to see people taking pictures of their food. But as I glanced in his direction again, I groaned inwardly. It was none other than Sampson Prewet, my least favorite food critic in the city.

Prewet had a reputation for being haughty, pretentious, and often downright mean in his critiques. His reviews were scathing, and he seemed to relish tearing restaurants apart. He loved destroying people that invested their life savings into opening their dream restaurants.

My mood soured as I realized that we were both here for the same purpose—to taste and review the new menu. I knew that our paths would inevitably cross, and I had no desire to engage with him. I was here to do my job. He was a vile, nasty man that carried a cloud of ick around him. Just being in the same room with him made me feel gross.

I quickly looked away when he looked at me, but it was too late. Prewet spotted me. “I wasn’t aware you would be here,” he said.

“I wasn’t aware I needed to tell you where I was going,” I shot back.

He chuckled, got up, and moved to sit at my table. “I was asked to come,” he said. “You know all these places give me the best table to try to impress me, but it makes no difference. They could serve the same garbage to me while I was sitting on a throne, and it would still taste like garbage. I think it’s up to people like us to make sure no unsuspecting citizen ever spends a penny on this poor excuse for a meal.”

I gave him a dry look. “Sampson Prewet, always a pleasure,” I said with a great deal of sarcasm.

I watched in embarrassment as the waitstaff scrambled to accommodate Prewet’s demands to have his drinks and dishes moved to my table. He had an array of dishes at his table and couldn’t be bothered to pick them up and move them his damn self. He wasn’t even eating the damn things but told the waitstaff not to clear the table because he needed to be reminded of the swill he’d been forced to put in his mouth. He’d made a mess of each plate and then took a picture making sure the entire restaurant saw his displeasure.

In stark contrast, I had been discreetly snapping pictures and making quick notes on my phone throughout the meal. I understood the importance of preserving the essence of each dish, but I also respected the fact someone tried. Someone worked hard to create the dishes he was massacring with his fork.

His actions were inconsiderate, and his insistence on having his way bordered on entitlement. It was clear that he thought his position as a food critic granted him some kind of strange power. He acted like he was a king.

“Did you try that atrocious crab cake?” he asked loud enough for the entire restaurant to hear.

I couldn’t hide my disdain for his behavior any longer, and a subtle eyeroll may have escaped me when he wasn’t looking. To me, Prewet was the epitome of an inconsiderate ass, a bully who reveled in wielding his influence over others. His critiques were as harsh as they were colorful, and

he seemed to take pride in being harsh.

I cleared my throat, trying to sound diplomatic but firm. “I didn’t think it was atrocious. It’s a work in progress, but I believe it’s important to respect the hard work and dedication of the restaurant staff. They are all working hard.”

“Oh, Ginger, you’re so diplomatic,” he said with a nasty laugh. “These people are here to serve, after all. Besides, I need these visual reminders for my articles. I can’t risk forgetting any detail. My brain is tempted to block out the horror.”

I raised an eyebrow, my patience wearing thin. “You don’t have to be so obnoxious. If you don’t like something, explain why. You don’t have to harass the staff.”

Our conversation was interrupted by the head waiter, who looked both exhausted and exasperated. He politely asked if there was anything else we needed, his words carrying an unspoken plea for us to wrap up our meals. I knew he wanted to get Sampson out of the restaurant as quickly as possible. He seemed dead set on making a scene.

Prewet merely waved him off dismissively, as if his presence was beneath him. “I’m not finished yet.” After the waiter walked away, Sampson shook his head. “Seriously, does the chef not understand the use of salt? This is so bland.”

I found the food to be quite enjoyable. It might not have been the most extraordinary culinary experience I’d ever had, but it was far from the abysmal disaster Prewet was making it out to be. It was a decent meal, well prepared and reasonably priced for the quality. “I think it’s better when food isn’t over-salted,” I said, shrugging. “I like to add my own salt.”

For me, it was clear that this restaurant catered to a specific clientele—a group of diners who appreciated visually creative meals that didn’t venture too far from their comfort zones. It offered decent food at an affordable price point. I intended to write my review with that audience in mind, highlighting the positives and suggesting that it might be the perfect spot for those seeking a creative yet approachable dining experience. A place that didn’t require a suit and tie and cost a two-week paycheck.

“Again, you’re making excuses for poor execution,” he muttered.

“I think there’s a particular clientele that would appreciate this place.”

“You always see the silver lining. To me, it’s nothing but mundane and just boring. And the taste? Don’t even get me started.”

I sighed inwardly. His negativity was relentless, and it seemed that nothing could sway his opinion. I took another bite of one of the main dishes and glanced around the dining room. It was tastefully decorated for the holidays. It wasn't overkill. It was just enough. It made it feel very family oriented.

"The Christmas decor is charming," I commented, trying to find some common ground.

He snorted. "It's cliché and trite."

I realized that it would be futile to try to change his mind.

"Have you heard anything about that new place opening in the East Village?" Sampson asked, his curiosity evident. "They say it's creating quite a buzz, though I doubt it'll live up to the hype."

I raised an eyebrow, feigning casual interest. "Oh, you mean Edge? Yes, I've heard a few things about it."

I had an edge. I realized that by taking Dane up on his invitation, I would get the inside scoop on Edge that none of my competitors possessed. I would have the opportunity to pick Dane's brain about his restaurant, the inspiration behind it, and the culinary journey he was embarking upon.

The thought of being the first person to write about Edge was very exciting. Anything to scoop Sampson was worth it, even if it meant I had to talk to Dane. It was the lesser of two evils. The idea of getting under Sampson's skin was too good to pass up.

Before he could respond, the dessert arrived, a beautifully plated dish adorned with holiday-inspired decor. The server presented it with a flourish, clearly very proud of the presentation. I thought it was perfect.

However, Prewet, ever the critic, couldn't resist complaining about the tackiness of the Christmas decor once more.

I took another bite and tried to ignore his complaining. But as I savored the sweetness of the dessert, a devious plan began to form in my mind. If Sampson was going to be negative about everything, I might as well give him something to really be negative about.

"I hear Edge is planning on having a Christmas-themed menu," I said, trying to sound nonchalant.

Prewet rolled his eyes. "Great, more clichés. I swear, if I have to eat another gingerbread cookie or candy cane-flavored dish, I'm going to lose it."

I grinned inwardly. This was too perfect. "Actually, from what I heard, the owner is planning on doing something a bit more unconventional. He's

going to be incorporating flavors like smoked ham and roasted chestnuts into his dishes, giving them a festive twist.”

Sampson wrinkled his nose in distaste. “That sounds terrible. Who wants to eat ham and chestnuts for dessert?”

I shrugged. “To each his own, I guess. But I have a feeling it’s going to be a hit. People are always looking for something new and exciting, especially during the holidays.”

Prewet huffed, clearly not convinced. But I knew that his negativity would only reflect poorly on him in his upcoming review. Meanwhile, I was still considering the exclusive scoop on Dane’s innovative menu, and the attention of the foodie scene would be on me.

I didn’t think Dane’s restaurant would suffer from Sampson’s bogus review. And if it did, I couldn’t say I would be all that sad if Dane did get a shitty review.

“I wonder if we’ll ever get a good restaurant in this city,” Sampson complained. “I’m so sick of eating shitty food.”

I’d had enough. And I had tasted enough of everything to write my review. “Goodnight, Samson. Maybe you should go home and pop a frozen meal in the microwave. Maybe that’ll finally satisfy your discerning tastebuds.”

I walked out of the restaurant without even putting my coat on. I had to get away from him and all his negativity. He was so dark and gloomy. The man was determined to be miserable.

I put my coat on, wrapped the scarf around my neck, and stuck my hand up to hail a cab back to my apartment.

I looked up at the sky and smiled. The sky wasn’t all that dark. Between the usual light pollution and the addition of Christmas lights, it was so beautiful.

I hopped in a cab and started a rough draft in my head. Unlike Sampson, I thought the place was pretty decent. I hoped my review outweighed Sampson’s negative article.

As the cab drove through the city streets, I thought of Dane’s restaurant. I knew his cooking. I remembered it very well. I imagined his new restaurant was going to be all about those dishes he had practiced perfecting all those years.

CHAPTER 7



DANE

The bustling energy of Edge was like drinking twenty Red Bulls. I moved around the restaurant, taking in the sight of my new establishment. It had been a labor of love and it never looked better. Edge had become more than just a restaurant. I had expanded my brand with locations across North America, but this one held a special place in my heart. The interior design was a testament to the vision I had in mind—dark, sexy, and inviting. The flow of the space felt organic, effortlessly balancing both masculine and feminine elements.

It was the interior that I'd envisioned from the very start but never managed to execute. This time, I did it. It was perfect. I actually thought about redoing my other restaurants but put aside the thought. This was my flagship. This was supposed to be the one that set the standard for my brand.

The hum of excitement hung in the air. Tonight was special. It marked the first time my entire staff had gathered in one place. I had personally handpicked every member of this team, from managers to chefs, line cooks, dishwashers, servers, bussers, hosts, and every role in between. I believed they were the right people to bring my vision to life, and I was eager to introduce myself to each of them and all of them to each other.

I took the time to approach each team member one-on-one, shaking hands and making eye contact. It was important to me that they felt a personal connection to the restaurant and to me as their leader. I wanted them to know that their role was crucial in the success of Edge. If they liked me, their boss, they were going to be far more inclined to put their best foot forward. They were going to care about their jobs.

“Thank you all for being here. I’ve handpicked each one of you because I

believe you have the passion, dedication, and talent needed to make Edge truly extraordinary. This restaurant isn't just about the food. It's about the experience we provide to every guest who walks through those doors."

Everyone looked at each other. Some of them knew each other from being in the business but most were strangers. I wanted them to work as a team. It was probably a little cheesy, but I wanted to create a family.

"I want Edge to be more than just a place to dine. I envision it as a hub and gathering center for New Yorkers and tourists alike who are passionate about food and unforgettable experiences. We're here to create memories, to push the boundaries of what's possible in the culinary world, and to share our love for the art of cooking. We're not doing anything crazy or truly innovative, but we're serving good food that is going to create memories as well as remind people of their grandma's Sunday dinners."

I saw the hopefulness in their eyes. They were all excited. I couldn't have been prouder of the team I had assembled. I believed in their ability to make Edge the best restaurant in the city. Maybe the state.

"With that said, let's eat!"

I had hired caterers to take over the kitchen, treating my team to a delightful three-course meal. If I could have cooked the whole meal for them, I would have done it. But that would have meant I was in the kitchen the whole time and I wouldn't have been able to hang out with them. Tonight was about hanging out and getting to know each other. No one was working.

With a glass of wine in hand, I laughed along with my staff, sharing stories and anecdotes. As the night went on, the conversation turned to more personal topics. One of the chefs, a young man with a shaved head and tattoos covering his arms, shared his struggles with addiction and how cooking had saved his life. No one would touch him, but once he had cooked for me, I knew I wanted him in my kitchen.

Another server revealed that she was a single mother, working multiple jobs to support her children. And then there was the sous chef, a middle-aged woman with piercing blue eyes, who spoke about her passion for French cuisine and how her dream was to one day open her own bistro.

Listening to their stories, I felt a connection.

"What about you?" one of the hostesses asked.

I smiled. "Not much to tell."

"You're not from New York."

"No." I shook my head. "Vancouver, but I have family here and this place

has been my dream.”

I took a sip of wine, trying to gather my thoughts. I didn’t want to reveal too much. My past was something that I preferred to keep to myself. If they knew I was filthy rich, I had a feeling I would lose some of their respect.

But they all looked at me expectantly, waiting for me to say something more. I took a deep breath and decided to give them a little peek into my life.

“I grew up in Vancouver,” I began. “I spent a lot of time helping out in the kitchen. I learned to cook from my mom. She was the best cook I’ve ever known.”

There was a moment of silence, and then one of the servers spoke up. “What made you want to open a restaurant in New York?”

I smiled, thinking back to the moment that had changed everything for me. “A few years ago, more like ten, I was in a bad place. I happened to go to a restaurant to sulk and eat. It was run by a woman who had poured her heart and soul into the place. The food was simple but delicious, and the atmosphere was warm and welcoming.”

I took another sip of my wine before continuing. “It was like a light bulb went off in my head. That’s when I knew what kind of restaurant I wanted to have. I wanted people to be comfortable and not have to worry about which fork to use or wonder what was on their plate.”

Everyone nodded and understood. We connected. Just like that, we were starting a journey together.

“Are these your recipes or your mother’s?” someone asked.

I laughed. “I have to give credit to my mother, but I have made them my own. I have experimented with different ingredients and techniques over the years, trying to add a little twist to traditional dishes.”

“I bet your mother is proud,” one of them said.

“She was. She would have been. She passed away before I really hit my stride.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It was a long time ago,” I said with a small smile. “When I cook, I feel like I’m honoring her.”

“That is very sweet,” one of the ladies said. “That is truly special.”

“Thank you,” I replied.

I found myself opening up to the group of strangers who were now becoming friends. We talked about our favorite dishes, shared stories about our lives, and laughed until our stomachs hurt.

“What about you?” I asked my sous chef. “What do you think of my recipes?”

She took a moment before responding. “I think they’re amazing. You’re right, there’s a simplicity to them that makes them approachable, but also a complexity that keeps them interesting. And the flavors are just outstanding. They aren’t boring. Trust me, when you told me you wanted to serve meatloaf, I almost walked out of the interview.”

I laughed. “I really think we need to come up with a catchy name that isn’t quite so boring. People are going to see it on the menu and think they wasted their time making a reservation.”

“You’re known for your simplistic dishes,” she said. “People that make a reservation and come in here willing to pay the prices on the menu know they are getting a lot more than a piece of meatloaf. I’m proud to get to be the one preparing those foods you spent a lot of time developing.”

A sense of pride washed over me, knowing that my hard work was paying off. “Thank you. That means a lot coming from you. I hope to keep coming up with more dishes. I want to keep the menu fresh.”

We continued to chat and enjoy the meal, basking in the warm glow of good company and good food. As the night wore on, I felt grateful for the chance to share my passion and my story with these wonderful people. I was so happy I chose each and every one of them. I prayed this thing would be a huge success. I didn’t want to have to lay anyone off. I knew it was inevitable people would move on to new jobs, but I hoped I could keep them all.

As the night wore on, a sudden knock at the door interrupted the festivities. I excused myself from the group, making my way to answer it. My staff’s laughter and jokes filled the air behind me, a comforting symphony that put a grin on my face. I assumed it was an anxious customer hoping we were open. I didn’t mind turning them away. Soon enough, everyone would have a chance to enjoy our food.

I opened the door, the cool drizzle of rain misting my face, and I was stunned to find Ginger standing there. The surprise left me momentarily speechless. What was she doing here? Had she come to rain on my parade, quite literally, by offering a scathing review of my newly opened restaurant?

I nodded toward the freshly planted spruce trees lining the path to the entrance, their branches adorned with sparkling white lights for the holiday season. “I see you’re here to admire my tree planters. Impressive, aren’t they? Please don’t shit in them.”

“Excuse me!”

“I remember you and your mischievousness,” I said. “I remember being dragged along on some of your misadventures.”

“You’re disturbed,” she muttered. “Who shits in a tree pot?”

“I took a stroll around some of the city today,” I said. “Apparently, it happens.”

Ginger rolled her eyes at my attempt at humor, a familiar expression of exasperation on her face. “No, Dane, I didn’t come here to shit in your tree planters or rain on your parade. I’m here to give your business a chance.”

Her words caught me off guard. “You want to write an article about my restaurant?”

“Yes, it’s my job. You hyped this place up enough. I get a hundred comments a day asking for my opinion about this place.”

I slowly nodded, intrigued by the position of power she had placed me in. “So, you need to review my restaurant.”

She wrinkled her nose, her freckles almost making me smile. I always loved her freckles. They made her look like the young woman I remembered. She took a deep breath. “I would like a chance to review your restaurant because that’s what I do.”

“A chance, you say? Well, I suppose I have one condition.”

Her eyes narrowed as she waited for my condition, clearly aware that I held the upper hand in this negotiation. I smiled at the anticipation in her expression.

I leaned in closer, my voice low and conspiratorial. “You have to come inside right now and join me and my employees for dinner.”

Ginger blinked in surprise. “Right now?”

“Consider it an opportunity to taste the food before anyone else. But there’s a catch—you have to do it right here, right now.”

The challenge was clear, and I watched as Ginger processed my proposal. It was a chance for her to experience Edge firsthand and to be the first to write about it.

CHAPTER 8



GINGER

As I followed Dane inside Edge, my initial annoyance at the situation slowly morphed into sheer amazement. The interior of the restaurant was a combination of warm lights, rich colors, and elegant decor. It was as if I had stepped into another world, far removed from the cold and rain outside. The place took my breath away, and I couldn't help but be impressed.

I understood why there was so much hype. He was going to live up to it. I followed behind him and looked around, noticing the people that were clearly eating. "I thought you said you weren't open," I said.

He moved behind me and I automatically unbuttoned my coat for him to help me out of. It was strange to fall back into old habits so easily. Dane hung my coat up and smiled at me. "Shall we?"

"What are all of these people doing here?" I hissed.

Dane guided me to a large table surrounded by about twenty-five people. "We aren't open," he said and pulled out a chair for me. "This is a team dinner."

I groaned inwardly, regretting my impulsive decision to come here. "You should have mentioned that," I hissed.

"We don't mind, do we?" he asked the group as a whole.

"Not at all," one said.

"Is this your girlfriend?" a young woman, pretty and bubbly, asked Dane.

"No!" We both said at the same time.

"No," I said more calmly. "I'm—"

"She's an old friend," Dane said.

"Oh, are you from Vancouver?"

I smiled. "I am."

“I’ll get you a plate,” Dane said.

He left me alone with his team. I smiled at them. I had a feeling they didn’t buy our denial we were a couple.

“How long have you known Dane?” one of them asked.

“Oh, we go way back,” I said.

Thankfully, Dane returned before the interrogation could really take hold. “Here you go,” he said.

He placed the dish before me, his eyes holding a challenge as he gestured for me to dig in. The aroma wafting from the plate was tantalizing. I felt a twinge of curiosity despite my initial reluctance. I looked at the food and was a little underwhelmed by the plating, but it wasn’t like I ordered anything. I could forgive the plating.

“Thank you,” I said, smiling. I felt like everyone was watching me. I took my first bite, smiling and nodding. “Mmm.”

Dane sat across from me and reached for a bottle of wine. He poured me a glass. “What do you think?” he asked.

I didn’t immediately answer. I was a little surprised by what I was tasting. It was good, but it lacked the extravagant experience I had anticipated. Instead, it fell into the realm of standard, unsurprising fare that one would deem as *okay*. It was a far cry from the culinary fireworks I had expected from someone of Dane’s reputation. I knew his cooking. The man had lost his touch.

“It’s good,” I said, smiling, and reached for my wine.

The rest of the team went back to their own conversations with a few going back to the kitchen to get seconds. The food wasn’t spectacular, but the company was really good. They all seemed to really like their job. Laughter filled the air. It was clear that they came from all corners of the globe, each bringing their own unique experiences and perspectives to the table.

I picked up on a French accent. “What’s your job here?” I asked the woman.

“That’s my sous chef,” Dane said.

“Are you going to be serving French cuisine?” I asked.

“I grew up in France, but my family moved here when I was fifteen,” she explained.

I sat back and listened while they all chatted with each other. Some of them had worked in Dane’s other restaurant locations and spoke highly of him. They praised his dedication to making them feel valued and cared for,

despite his hectic schedule as a restaurateur with multiple establishments.

One of the women, a spirited woman from Texas named Cara, told me about her admiration for Dane's leadership. "He makes you feel like you're part of something bigger," she said with a warm smile. "He's not just a boss. He's a mentor and a friend."

"How long have you worked for him?" I asked.

"About five years," she said, smiling.

"She's the best manager a guy can find," Dane said. "It's why I've had her open three of my restaurants. She's a boss at what she does. She knows exactly what needs to happen."

"What about the other restaurants?" I asked. "Will you be managing all of them?"

"Oh no," she said, laughing. "I work long enough to train my replacement."

"And her replacement's replacement," Dane added.

I could appreciate a man that knew good people and treated them well. That said a lot about him. I knew he was a good man.

Another staff member, a chef from Australia, chimed in with his own stories of working with Dane. "He's a true visionary," he said. "He challenges us and is always very patient. When he first met me, I was working at Denny's."

I burst into laughter. "You're joking!"

"Nope, dead serious."

I looked at Dane, who was grinning like an idiot. "How?" I asked. "How did you know he was going to be a good chef?"

"I asked him to make me chicken fried steak," Dane said, shrugging.

It sounded like a joke. "No, you didn't."

"I did," he said, nodding.

"Isn't that on the menu?" I asked. I couldn't really say. It had been a long time since I ate at a Denny's. Very long. I remembered a few drunken visits and the only thing I was interested in was greasy bacon and fries.

"It was, but they didn't have it that night or something," Dane said. "So, he made one for me. It was damn good. I asked what he was doing working at Denny's. I had him come into one of my restaurants and cook something straight off my menu. He kicked ass. I gave him a job."

"And now he hopes to take my job," the sous chef joked.

"Damn straight," he said, laughing.

“Dane’s going to open up a restaurant for me,” she said, grinning. “We’ve been working on a menu that blends my French background with his home cooking.”

“French Fries,” Dane joked.

Listening to their stories, I gained a newfound appreciation for Dane as not just a talented chef but also as a leader who inspired loyalty and dedication in his team. It was clear that he had created a tight-knit community within his restaurants. I loved that he wasn’t pompous. He was filthy rich, but he acted like one of the guys. I bet he would even jump in and do the dishes if things were backed up.

As the evening went on, they continued to share their stories.

I felt envious of the camaraderie they shared. It was a far cry from the cutthroat world of restaurant wars I was used to. After a bad review, it wasn’t uncommon for the sous chef or restaurant owner to take it out on the underlings. I could tell that would not happen in this place.

Dane excused himself to take a call, leaving me alone with the sous chef. She took a sip of her drink and leaned in closer to me.

“So, what’s the deal between you and Dane?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

I felt my cheeks flush. “What do you mean?”

“Oh, come on,” she said, rolling her eyes. “I’ve seen the way he looks at you. And trust me, Dane doesn’t just look at any girl that way.”

My heart skipped a beat. Did Dane really have the hots for me after all this time? I had always thought of him as my past. I was not going to fall under that spell again.

“Dane and I, well, I don’t know how to explain it. We’re not friends.”

“But you were,” she said with a smile.

“A very, very long time ago,” I said.

The sous chef let out a knowing chuckle. “Uh huh, well it seems like there’s still some tension there. Why don’t you try talking to him and see where it goes?”

I shook my head, trying to push down the fluttering feelings in my chest. “It’s not that simple. We have a complicated history, and I don’t think it’s a good idea to revisit it.”

She shrugged. “Suit yourself. But just remember, life is too short to hold on to grudges and past mistakes. Sometimes you just have to take a chance.”

I nodded, not wanting to engage in the conversation any longer. Dane

returned to the table, and the conversation shifted to a new topic.

“That was the produce guy,” Dane said. He started talking about vegetables and what not.

As I sat across the table from Dane, memories of our shared past flashed through my mind. It was hard not to think back to when I was nineteen, hopelessly in love, and utterly captivated by the infectious charm he wielded over everyone. Dane had a way of making any room feel brighter, warmer, and more alive, and back then, he had made me feel the same way. I used to feel like a flower opening to the sun when he walked into a room. He looked at me and my heart skipped a beat. Dane had been my whole world.

His laughter was contagious, and even now, years later, it still held that same magic. I smiled as he laughed easily at the jokes and banter around the table. Our eyes met, and for a brief moment, it was as if time had stood still.

Dane lifted his glass of wine to me, that trademark smile of his playing at the corners of his lips. It was a smile that had melted my heart countless times before, and it still had the same effect on me now.

Unable to resist the pull of our shared history and the easy camaraderie of the evening, I smiled back at him, raising my own glass in a silent toast.

He winked and it felt like the world stopped.

Then, I remembered I hated him. I shot him a dirty look, earning a little laugh from him.

But even as I scowled, I couldn't shake the memories of our past. The way his lips used to feel on mine, the sound of his voice whispering sweet nothings in my ear, and the warmth of his embrace as we lay in bed together. It was all still so vivid, so real, even after all these years.

I took a sip of wine, trying to push those thoughts away. I had moved on, or at least I thought I had. But with Dane sitting across from me, all those old feelings came rushing back.

I was suddenly feeling a little flushed. This was why living in New York City was my safety net. I didn't have to worry about running into Dane. I didn't have to worry about walking into a coffee shop and seeing him sitting there looking all cool and casual. It was hard to sit across from him and not remember all the good times.

I had managed to convince myself I wasn't really in love with him back then. I was too young to know what love was.

But now, looking into Dane's eyes, I knew the truth. I *had* been in love with him, and maybe I still was. It was a scary thought, and I didn't know

what to do with it.

Fortunately, he wasn't going to be around long. He owned restaurants all over. He would be here for a while and then he would go on to his other restaurants. My life would go back to normal, and I would be able to put him out of my mind once again.

CHAPTER 9



DANE

As the evening began to wind down, I said my goodbyes to the staff. It had been an unexpectedly enjoyable evening. I was more confident than ever that things were going to be good. I had a great crew. I couldn't wait for opening day. Tonight had gone a long way toward calming my nerves about opening night. There would still be some hiccups, but the team had a good connection, and they would all help each other when someone started to struggle.

Ginger was quietly stacking plates. "You don't need to do that," I said.

"I don't mind," she said and carried the plates toward the kitchen.

I grabbed another stack and followed behind her. "We can just put them in the dishwasher," I told her.

The new dishwasher had all the bells and whistles. It was supposed to be the best of the best. I wanted to make things easy for my dishwashers. And I never wanted to risk serving customers' food on dishes that were not totally clean.

"Did you buy all new equipment?" she asked as she looked around.

"Yes," I said, nodding. "I prefer new with warranties. I can't tell you how many times I thought I was saving money by buying used only to have a grill go down in the middle of dinner service."

Ginger nodded in agreement. "It's always better to have reliable equipment," she said. "And I bet your employees love it as well."

I laughed. "I think that's another motivating factor. If you truly care about your people, you're going to give them the tools to do their job right. I like giving them the coolest, latest equipment because it makes them feel special."

Ginger smiled as she finished stacking the plates. I noticed how her smile

lit up her face. She was gorgeous, with light hazel eyes, full lips, and long, light brown hair that cascaded down her back. A sudden surge of desire coursed through my body. It was hard to ignore the attraction I felt toward her.

As if sensing my thoughts, she turned toward me and caught my eye. “Is everything okay?” she asked, looking concerned.

I cleared my throat, trying to shake off the sudden urge. “Yes. Nothing. Fine.”

I realized my words made little sense. She caught me off guard. If she knew what I was thinking, she’d probably kick my ass. She gave me a funny look and walked to the trash to toss some of the napkins from the plates.

“What’s this?” she asked and pulled out one of the tin catering packages. She held it up and looked at it. “Is this—Did you—”

Now she was the one struggling to complete sentences.

I flashed a mischievous grin. “I had dinner catered for the staff,” I explained casually. “I didn’t want them to have to work to feed everyone tonight. That would defeat the purpose of everyone getting to relax and enjoy themselves. Tonight wasn’t about promoting my menu. It was about my people getting to hang out and get to know each other.”

She frowned and tossed the package back in the trash. “I assumed you invited me inside to taste *your* food, to experience Edge firsthand and gather material for my article. I have nothing now. I’ve spent the last couple of hours thinking about what I would write. You totally deceived me.”

I laughed and shook my head. “I never said me or my chefs made the meals and you never asked.”

“It was implied.”

I smiled and continued to load the dishes in the dishwasher. “Not even a little.”

“You went to the kitchen to get me a plate,” she argued.

“Because that’s where we keep the food,” I said, laughing. “We were keeping it warm.”

“It’s a total letdown,” she muttered. “I expected a scoop, a behind-the-scenes look at your restaurant, not a reheated meal.”

“I had it catered,” I said as if that was some kind of a valid excuse.

“What gives?” Her disappointment was evident, and I felt a tiny bit of guilt for the mild deception.

I chuckled at her reaction. “Relax, Ginger,” I said with a reassuring grin.

“You’ll get your chance to taste the real deal, I promise.”

“Were you really going to let me write an article based on what I ate tonight? Were you going to wait for the article to come out and then dismiss it? You were going to make a fool out of me. Why would you let me write about food you *ordered*?”

“I can’t control what you do and don’t write,” I said, shrugging.

“You have to know that I wasn’t overly impressed with what I ate. It was okay, but I would think you would want to impress me. You let me believe I was eating something from your menu.”

“Oh, no,” I teased. “I can do better than a last-minute group dinner for your tasting experience. Just give me a little time to line it up. You popped by when we weren’t even officially open for business.”

“I saw the lights were on,” she countered. “I thought maybe you were having a soft opening.”

“The door was locked.”

“For a soft opening or a friends and family night,” she said, shrugging. “It happens. Often times bloggers like me are invited to those soft openings.”

“But I didn’t invite you,” I said with a smile still playing at my lips. I liked putting her on the defensive. I liked getting under her skin.

Her frown deepened, and her annoyance was evident. Her eyes flashed with irritation. She thought she was going to get to eat my food. I knew that. I supposed it gave me some satisfaction that she wanted to eat it.

“You could have just told me you weren’t actually serving dinner,” she said, sighing. “I would have understood. Or you could have told me at the door you were hosting an employee meeting.”

“I don’t believe I owe you an explanation.”

She growled and started angrily tossing things in the trash. I immediately felt a little guilty for tricking her. She was right. I had done it on purpose. I supposed I was still bitter about how things ended between us.

“Are you genuinely interested in what my restaurant will serve?” I asked. “Or are you hoping to pick it all apart and write a hit piece?”

“I would never write a hit piece,” she said, scoffing. “I’m a professional. I have no interest in promoting or destroying any restaurant, regardless of my feelings for the owner of an establishment.”

“Are you saying you have feelings for me?” I teased.

Her withering look said more than any words could say. “I have many feelings.”

I laughed. "I know you do."

"None that you would like," she snapped. "I'm leaving. Thanks for nothing. Good luck getting a fair review from any of the other critics. You're an outsider. People are not going to like you in general."

"It's New York," I said, shrugging. "Everyone is an outsider."

"You don't live here. You're just a dude trying to get in on the culinary scene. I'm sure you're going to jack up your prices for a plate with enough food to feed a toddler. I'm so sick of people like you that sell hype and try to pass it off as amazing food that no one else can make."

I raised an eyebrow at her tirade. Clearly, she wasn't having a great day or maybe she hated me. I had a feeling it was the latter.

"Do you really want to try our offerings?"

"Duh," she snapped. "What exactly do you think I do all day? Seriously, Dane. What's wrong with you?"

I had missed her fiery, snappy attitude. "I would like to formally invite you for an official tasting," I said. "In a week, before our official opening, we'll be hosting some private functions. I would be happy to have you stop by."

She hesitated for a moment before reluctantly agreeing to the proposition. "Fine," she replied, her annoyance still lingering in her tone. "I'll take it."

It was obvious she was still pissed at me for duping her with the catered food, but she hadn't asked if my people cooked it. "Great," I said, smiling. "You're not going to be disappointed."

"Yeah, we'll see. I'm leaving. I think you can handle this."

"I'll walk you out," I said.

"I don't need to be walked to the door."

"Can I give you a ride home?" I asked. "It's cold and wet out there."

"I'll walk."

"To the subway? Just let me take you. It's safer."

She shook her head. "I live up the street. I'll walk."

"You live in the neighborhood?" I asked with surprise.

"Yes."

I raised an impressed eyebrow. "Well, look at you," I said, smiling. "You're doing well for yourself."

"Are you genuinely surprised by my success?" she asked defensively.

I chuckled softly. "No," I admitted. "I suppose I'm not. Your hustle was always going to take you places, including away from me."

The comment caught her off guard, and she stepped outside, almost as if she needed to put some distance between us. But as she crossed the threshold, she came to an abrupt halt. It was snowing.

Hard.

The air was calm and still with almost total silence. There was no bustling street traffic to disturb the serenity of the moment. Twinkle lights adorned the trees up and down the street, casting a soft, ethereal glow, while the fresh powder on the ground reflected light in all directions, creating a bright and magical atmosphere.

We both stood in silence for several seconds. It felt like walking into a church in the middle of a prayer. I didn't want to break the peacefulness of the moment. Ginger held up her hand, allowing the snowflakes to melt in her palm. A genuine smile graced her lips, and I felt a rush of nostalgia.

"I remember how much you love the snow," I said quietly with my gaze fixed on her.

Her eyes met mine, a hint of vulnerability in her expression. For a brief moment, it felt as if we were the only two people in the world.

"It's so pretty," she said with a hint of a smile. "It feels so clean. I love spring, but I think the first snowfall is like the cleansing of fall and summer. It's fresh and pure and beautiful."

"Yes, it is," I said, nodding. "Let me walk you home. It's not safe for a woman to be walking the streets alone at night."

She waved her hand. "Do you see anyone?"

"No, but that doesn't mean they aren't there."

"I walk alone all the time," she said, sighing. "I think you've been watching too much TV. It's fine. This is a good neighborhood."

"Let me be a gentleman," I insisted.

I couldn't take my eyes off her. Memories flooded me. I remembered so many good times with her. We had been crazy in love. She was the one woman I always thought about when I was alone at night and feeling a little lonely. Sometimes I wondered if I blew my chance at being with my soulmate. I knew it was silly, but if there was only one person for everyone, what happened if you missed your chance with that one person? Were you never going to be truly happy?

"I'm going to hold you to your word about the tasting next week," Ginger said, cutting through my meandering thoughts.

"You're not getting it unless you let me walk you home," I said with a

cheesy grin.

Ginger feigned annoyance. “I don’t remember you being quite this insufferable,” she quipped, her eyes twinkling with a hint of amusement.

“Trust me, I’ve always been this obnoxious,” I said, laughing. “Ask any of my brothers.”

“Fine,” she said. “Let’s go.”

CHAPTER 10



GINGER

As Dane locked up the restaurant, the snowfall intensified, filling the air with a soft silence that just kind of cradled me.

“Ready?” he asked as I pulled my scarf tighter around my neck.

“I am,” I said. “But you really don’t need to walk me home. I do this all the time.”

“I told you the deal,” he said. “I was raised to be a gentleman. I can’t let you walk home alone.”

“Fine,” I said, knowing to argue was futile.

As we walked, my feet were quickly soaked. I wasn’t expecting snow and had not worn waterproof shoes, but I didn’t mind. I reveled in the magic of the snow, feeling like a child once more as we walked through the pristine, white landscape. There were some footprints, but for the most part, it was all untouched.

“Do you spend a lot of time in Vancouver?” I asked him.

“I’ve been spending more time in Vancouver than I did in the past,” he answered.

The way he said it was with a tone that said there was a reason his habits had changed. I wondered if he had a family. Was he married? I did a little mental rewind and was certain I didn’t see a ring on his finger. But that didn’t mean anything. He might be in a serious relationship. We were serious and I never got a ring.

“How’s your dad? Your brothers?” I inquired.

Dane’s expression softened, and he smiled as he spoke about his family. “My father is doing well,” he said. “He had quite the adventure recently. It took some time for him to recover, but he’s back to his old, ornery self. He

was kidnapped by a crazy real estate tycoon in Singapore.”

I stopped walking abruptly, and my eyes widened with shock. “Kidnapped?” I echoed, unable to hide my surprise. He smiled and I immediately realized he was joking. I slapped at his arm. “You shouldn’t joke about things like that. It’s not funny.”

“I’m not joking.”

I stared at him, searching for some clue he was kidding. When I didn’t see it, my heart dropped. “You’re serious.”

Dane chuckled, realizing that he had just dropped a bombshell. “Yeah,” he admitted, his laughter tinged with amusement. “It’s a long story.”

As we walked, Dane recounted the tale of his father’s abduction and subsequent rescue. I was in complete shock. I had always known that Dane’s family was anything but ordinary, but this story took it to a whole new level. I knew they were wealthy, but to be kidnapped and held for such a ridiculous ransom and they actually considered paying it surprised me.

“You always did have a flair for the dramatic,” I quipped.

Dane chuckled, a playful glint in his eyes. “I promise you, Ginger, it’s true,” he insisted. “My brother Jett was the one who went out there and got him back. Jett turned into some hardcore mercenary-type dude. Not in a bad way, but he was not playing. He was not going to leave without my father.”

I raised an eyebrow, still not entirely convinced. The Bancroft brothers had always been a unique bunch. They were always getting into some kind of trouble or shenanigans. I remembered Jett as the most unconventional of the lot.

“I’m still not sure I should believe you,” I said. “It’s a pretty fantastical story.”

“I’m serious,” he said, laughing. “Trust me, when Jett told me what was going on, I thought he was full of shit. But it was real.”

“How did Jett manage to rescue him?”

“Jett is not a man I would want to fuck with,” he said. “He’s a private investigator. My dad’s case was the first one that was that serious, but now he and his girlfriend are in high demand. They are constantly chasing the most dangerous cases they can find. The harder, the better.”

“He’s settled down?” I asked.

He smirked. “I don’t know if I would call it settled down, but he is very involved with Winslet. They were meant for each other. I think they are both nuts, but they are happy risking their lives all the time.”

I smiled and shook my head. “That tracks,” I admitted. Jett had always been a bit of a wild card.

As we finally reached my doorstep, I stopped and turned to look at him. “Thank you for the walk,” I said.

Dane smiled. “Anytime,” he replied, his tone warm and inviting.

I had to remind myself we weren’t friends. What we had was long gone. “Good night.”

“Wait,” he said.

I turned back around. “Yes?”

“I’m staying at my cousin Grayson’s house,” he said. “I doubt you know him. We’ve only recently been reacquainted.”

“Grayson Bancroft?” I repeated.

I didn’t know why I never put it together before. Of course, he was related to one of the richest families in the state. Obviously, I didn’t know Grayson Bancroft personally. We didn’t exactly run in the same social circles.

“Yes,” he said. “My father and their father are—or were—brothers. After my uncle died, my dad kind of crept back into Kathy’s life.”

“Kathy?”

“Bancroft,” he clarified. “My dad and Kathy go way back.” He stopped talking and shook his head again. “I’m sorry. It’s a really long, twisted story. Anyway, I’m staying at Grayson’s house for a few weeks while I get the restaurant opened. I was wondering if you’d like to come to his house for dinner this Sunday? They’re heading out of town after, and all the brothers are going to be there. My father is going to be flying in as well if he can make it. You should come.”

I hesitated for a moment, considering his invitation. It would be one hell of an experience getting to attend dinner with one of the most influential and wealthiest families in the country, but it would also be a little intimidating.

“I’ll think about it.” I opened the door to step inside the lobby of my building.

“What’s the worst that could happen?” he asked with a mischievous grin. “You have dinner with one of the most reputable—and wealthy—families in all of New York? Come on. Live a little. Be my date. No strings attached. I don’t want to go stag, you know. All my cousins are married, most of them with kids, and I’ll be meeting some of them for the first time. I could do with some backup.”

I sighed, my resistance beginning to crumble under Dane's relentless charm. "I said I'll think about it."

"It's in two days," he pushed. "I kind of need to know."

"Dane, I don't know. I don't know them. I don't even really know you."

"You know me," he said, smiling.

"Not anymore."

It was quiet for several seconds. I realized my comment was a little harsh. But it was true. We hadn't been together in a long time. We'd both grown and started new lives. I wasn't the same girl I had been back then. I grew up. He'd grown up.

"It's just dinner," he said with that smile that was all charm. "I promise I won't ask you to stay the night. Take pity on me. Don't let me be the odd man out. These guys are all normal and settled and have wives and families."

I retrieved my keys from my purse and pointed them teasingly at him. "You're just as pushy and pigheaded as you always were."

Dane chuckled, his eyes twinkling with amusement. "You used to love that about me," he remarked.

"Yeah, I used to," I replied. I had to keep the nostalgia out of my voice. I didn't want him to get the wrong idea.

"It's just dinner," he said again. "Come on, I promise I won't bite."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm not making any promises. It's short notice. I do have a life."

He grinned. "Are you telling me your dance card is full?"

Damn him and his silly, goofy little boy charm that always had a way of melting my heart. "It might be."

"Why don't you give me your number and I'll text you the address?" he said. "If you want to show up, I'll be there."

"That's just your way of getting my number."

He winked again. "You know you want to give it to me. You can always block my number if you really don't want to talk to me."

I did want the official invitation to his private dinner at Edge. "Fine, but if you send me dick pics, I will take them straight to the police."

"Ah, baby, why would you do that? There's nothing criminal about my dick, unless—"

"Don't even say it," I said and cut him off. I knew he was headed straight toward sexy talk, and I wanted no sexy talk with him. No way.

I pulled out my phone and we quickly exchanged numbers. "Goodnight,"

I said.

“Are you sure I can’t walk you to your door?”

“No,” I said firmly.

“You don’t want to invite me in for a drink?” he said and flashed that panty-dropping smile.

“No.”

I walked in and closed the door. I climbed the stairs up to my apartment. I couldn’t stop smiling. Dane was both the best and worst thing that happened to me. I had never loved anyone like I loved him. That also meant he was the only person that had the power to hurt me the way he did. He smashed my heart. He didn’t shatter it—he smashed it into a billion pieces with a sledgehammer.

I took off my coat and wet shoes. Curiosity got the best of me. I sat down at the table and opened my laptop. I did a quick internet search for Grayson Bancroft first.

“Damn,” I whispered when I saw the little bio on him.

The dude was crazy rich, and he had the cutest little family. I supposed I wanted to make sure they were real. They looked like a normal family.

After I finished the light stalking on the Bancroft family in New York, I did a little search to see if I could verify the kidnapping story.

There was nothing to be found. That didn’t necessarily mean it didn’t happen. Rich people didn’t like to make the news. And I hadn’t looked into anything that happened overseas. It didn’t matter.

I was exhausted. I needed to sleep. I crawled into bed with Dane on my mind. Back when we were silly teens, young and in love, I thought he hung the moon. We spent hours talking about everything and nothing. We were so content and happy to just hang out.

Why was life so cruel? Why couldn’t it just be easy? Why couldn’t everyone have the phone number of their soulmate? This whole game of searching for a man or woman to spend the rest of your life with when Fate already knew exactly who you were supposed to be with was just cruel.

I missed my Dane. I missed being with him. I missed being in love with him. I missed the boy that laughed easily and loved big. I missed the boy I fell in love with after he flashed me a single smile. I missed the man he became that I never got to know. I missed our talks at night.

Yeah, I missed a lot of things.

But that was then, this was now. There was over a decade of hurt that had

transformed into bitterness and ultimately indifference.

Still, I wondered what it would be like to run my fingers through his hair again. To feel his lips on mine. To be held in his strong arms.

As I drifted off to sleep, I couldn't help but dream of Dane.

CHAPTER 11



DANE

The scent of apple pie, roasting ham, and rolls filled the air as I stood in Grayson's grand foyer. One after another, Grayson's brothers arrived. With every brother came a wife and a couple of kids. It wasn't long before the house sounded like one of those pizza places with arcade games.

"Dane, come get a drink with the men," Jack called out.

I hoped Ginger was going to show up. I checked the time and realized she wasn't coming. I was the lone wolf in a houseful of happy couples.

"That sounds like a good idea," I said and followed Jack down the hall to Grayson's study.

The moment I walked in, Jack closed the door, almost completely blocking the sound of kids screaming and laughing.

"What'll you have?" Jack asked.

"Scotch," I answered.

"Good man," Jack said, laughing.

Another brother, Mason, was sitting in an armchair and sizing me up. I had only met a few of them, but tonight, I was getting to meet the whole contingent of Bancroft brothers. Well, half the contingent. The other half were brothers from other mothers. While they told me they all got along, this was Christmas, and it was reserved for their family alone.

I took my drink and sat down across from Mason. He was clearly the biggest, surliest motherfucker I'd ever met with the Bancroft name. Mason was dark. It was a nice dinner, and everyone was wearing dress shirts and slacks except him. He had on faded jeans and a T-shirt that showed off a lot of tattoos. One of these things was not like the other.

Mason looked me up and down. "What's your father's deal with my

mom?”

“Knock it off, Mason,” Jack said.

I didn’t know all of them, but I knew *of* them. Mason, the biker married a badass chick, Adelaide. Jack, who happened to work with Grayson, was married to Natasha. Colt ran the family charity foundation with his wife, Maisie. Channing was the wandering spirit who had taken most of the pictures I saw around the house. He was married to Madelaine. And James, the caretaker of his mom, was married to Rory. He was the one I knew well.

I chose to stay quiet while the rest of them talked about their kids, wives, and the various extracurricular activities they all had. I could have disappeared, and it wouldn’t have made a difference. I enjoyed the banter. They reminded me of my brothers, except we were almost never in the same room.

I got a text and pulled out my phone to check it.

I’m here.

I grinned and jumped up. “Excuse me,” I said to the men. “My date has arrived.”

There was a round of cat whistles as I walked out of the study and into the cacophony of happy, young kids screaming up and down the long halls. I understood why the house was so big. It wasn’t just because they were wealthy. They needed a fucking mansion to have family dinners. I couldn’t imagine what it was like when the other three brothers and their families attended a family meal. It would be like running a fucking circus. Someone had turned on cartoons in the family room, which was conflicting with the Christmas music pumping through unseen speakers.

I opened the front door to find Ginger. She looked like a million bucks. “Hi,” I said, grinning, and gestured for her to walk in.

She was carrying a bottle of wine in one hand and a platter of what looked like fresh-baked shortbread cookies in the other. My heart skipped a beat. Her nervousness was palpable. “I’m so glad you came,” I said.

“I should probably go,” she murmured. “This is not my scene.”

“Mine either,” I said. “Stay. Please. Take mercy.”

One of the kids raced by with a Nerf gun. I reached out, grabbed Ginger, and moved her a split second before the apparent attacker in the Nerf war raced through the foyer, followed by a second and a third.

“Holy crap, how many kids are here?” she asked.

I laughed. “Honestly, I’m not sure. A lot. I’d say at least two times six,

minus one. Could be more.”

She gave me a funny look. “That makes no sense.”

“Let me take your coat and then I’ll start the introductions. I think we have enough time before dinner to get through them all.”

I hung up her coat and led her to the study first. Colt attempted to take the cookies, but I pulled them back. “We’ll take these to the kitchen,” I said.

We walked into the kitchen with the women bustling about. Rory was sitting at the bar frosting cupcakes.

“Ladies, I’d like to introduce you to Ginger,” I said.

They all stopped.

“Hello,” Hannah greeted her first.

“I brought wine and cookies, but I have a feeling I didn’t bring nearly enough,” Ginger said.

“Oh, I’ll be the taster,” Rory said, smiling, and took the plate.

We went around the kitchen introducing Ginger to all of them. As I made the introductions, Ginger’s eyes darted around the room, taking in the bustling energy and the cheerful faces. She smiled nervously, clearly feeling a bit out of her comfort zone.

“We’re so glad you could join us,” Hannah said. “Dinner is just about done. Dane, would you mind trying to round up the kids?”

The look on my face must have said it all.

The women all burst into laughter.

“What?” I asked.

“I’ll help him,” Ginger said with a small laugh.

“It’s a lot like herding cats,” one of the ladies called out with a laugh, which was followed by more raucous laughter.

It took about fifteen minutes, but we managed to get all of the kids to wash their hands and into the dining room. At least, I hoped we had them all. I assumed if any were missing the parents would realize it.

As the evening progressed, Ginger’s smile became more genuine, and she seemed to relax. I felt myself relaxing as well. Thankfully, with so many people around the room, I didn’t have to say too much. Ginger and I could enjoy the meal and offer the occasional smile or agreement.

“So, Dane, how do you two know each other?” Mason asked.

Ginger’s cheerful demeanor faltered slightly, and I knew she wasn’t comfortable discussing our shared history in front of the entire family. “It’s a long story,” I replied, hoping to shut the conversation down.

Mason leaned in, his eyes dark and stormy. “Come on, Dane. We’re family. You can’t keep secrets from us.”

“Some things are better left unsaid, Mason. Let it go.”

Ginger shifted uncomfortably in her seat, and I could see that my reaction had made her uneasy. I wasn’t about to spill our history. It was messy and really not suitable dinner conversation.

“How’s the restaurant coming along?” James asked.

It was clear he was trying to change the subject. Unfortunately, Mason had had a little to drink, and added with his usual personality, I saw the defiance before he said another word.

He looked at me and flashed a smile that reminded me of a rabid dog. “Bancrofts are almost always trouble, and I think Ginger here should run while she still can,” he said.

It sounded like a joke, but it didn’t feel like a joke. The comment struck a nerve. Mason had no idea about our past, about the pain and heartache we’d both experienced. I couldn’t let him make light of it. “Mason, you have no clue what you’re talking about. Don’t joke about things you don’t understand.”

The room fell silent, the tension palpable. I immediately felt a wave of regret wash over me. It was supposed to be a fun family gathering and I had made it weird and uncomfortable. Even the kids stopped talking.

Ginger cleared her throat and very slowly put down her fork. “Excuse me,” she said with her voice a little unsteady.

As she left the dining room, I watched her with a feeling of helplessness and frustration. I had let Mason’s teasing get to me and it made Ginger uncomfortable.

“What are you trying to hide, Dane?” Mason snapped. “You know we don’t let just anyone come to dinner. Our homes are private.”

“She’s not just anyone,” I snapped.

“Do you even know her?” he shot back.

I stood up from my chair, my anger boiling inside me. “Of course, I know her. I know her better than you think,” I said, my voice low and steady. “And you have no right to make her feel uncomfortable or unwelcome here. We may have a messy history, but that doesn’t mean you get to treat her poorly.”

Mason sneered at me. “This isn’t your house. This is my brother’s house.”

“Your brother was fine with me inviting my friend,” I shot back. “What’s

your deal? Why are you picking on her?”

He shrugged. “I need to know who I’m breaking bread with.”

“Mason, stop,” his wife said. “We’re enjoying a nice dinner.”

“Mason is just putting Dane through his paces,” Channing said. “He always has to puff out his chest and act like he’s the big bad wolf.”

“You could be nicer,” Jack said. “Honestly, our kids are here. We don’t need this kind of drama at the dinner table.”

Mason rolled his eyes. “Fine, I’ll drop it. But I’m watching you, Dane. Don’t think you can just waltz in here with any old girl and expect us to be cool with it. I don’t know what your family deals with, but ours has been targeted more than once.”

“Hello, Uncle Armand was just kidnapped,” James said.

I gritted my teeth, anger simmering inside me. I knew Mason was just trying to get a rise out of me, but he didn’t have to be such an ass about it. I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself. I was a guest in Grayson’s house. “I don’t go around picking up strays,” I said. “If my dad would have been able to make it, he would tell you he knows Ginger. Honestly, man, look at you. Where do you get off judging anyone?”

Mason raised his brow. “I’m just being cautious. You can never be too careful these days.”

I could feel the tension in the room. Mason’s words had put everyone on edge. I knew I had to do something to diffuse the situation. “Look, Mason, I understand where you’re coming from. But Ginger is a good person. I don’t need your approval. You don’t know me or her.”

Mason looked at me for a moment before nodding.

Before I could respond, Grayson’s voice cut through the tension like a knife. “Enough!”

We both turned to look at him. There was a stern expression on his face. “This is my house, and it’s the Christmas season,” he reminded us. “If you want to argue, you can take it down the street and off my property. There are kids here, and I won’t have you ruining their holiday. Mason, Dane is my guest and Ginger is his guest.”

Hannah placed a hand on his shoulder, her touch calming.

As the room settled into an uneasy silence, I decided it was best to step away and clear my head. I excused myself from the table and headed in search of Ginger. I didn’t know what Mason’s deal was, but I had heard plenty of stories about him over the years. He was the one that had essentially

been disowned. I was beginning to understand why. The guy was like trying to hug a cactus. How he managed to get a woman to marry him was pretty remarkable. I was a good guy, and I was still single. The only woman I loved, he scared off.

“Ginger?” I called out and walked toward the living room. She wasn’t there. I continued down the hall. “Ginny?”

The house was huge, and I still didn’t have the layout down. I got twisted around and ended up back by the dining room. They were all talking, enjoying their meal like nothing ever happened.

That just pissed me off more.

CHAPTER 12



GINGER

The tension hung thick in the air as I zipped up my coat and adjusted my scarf. I couldn't get out of the house fast enough. The fight or flight instinct was strong. I was typically a fighter, but I knew when I was outnumbered. This was way out of my league. I shouldn't have come tonight. His invitation annoyed me. What was his game plan? What did he want from me? Why would he walk me right into the lion's den?

Then again, I shouldn't have been surprised. Dane had done me dirty once already. Coming all the way out to this big-ass house and pretending I could ever fit into this world was stupid. These people were used to hanging out with people like them. I didn't belong. Even in their casual, family dinner attire, I bet there was at least fifty-grand in clothing in that room. We were not the same.

The Bancrofts were like royalty in this state. I was not worthy to be in their big, fancy house or sitting at their table that probably hosted actual royalty. I was a food blogger. I didn't come from money. My parents worked for every dollar. Yes, I was doing okay for myself now, but I was nowhere near the level of wealth these people were at.

I thought the women were all very nice. I enjoyed them. I was silly enough to believe we could actually be friends. I should have known better. They were nice, but we would never be friends. I wouldn't know how to relate to them. A couple of them had very successful careers that made them just as wealthy as their husbands. They had kids and mommy groups.

And the men. They seemed polite, but Mason was an asshole. I didn't understand why he was after me. I wondered if we had encountered each other in the past. I didn't think so, but the guy had it out for me. It made me

very uncomfortable.

Dane found me just as I was about to step outside. “Ginger.”

“Don’t,” I said with a shake of my head.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“Why did you invite me here?” I asked him. “Was this some kind of payback?”

The festive music was still pumping through the speakers. While the house was beautiful, the cheery atmosphere that had been present when I first arrived was long gone. Now the music just sounded obnoxious.

“What? No! Why would you think that?” Dane tried to grab my arm, but I jerked it away from him.

“Because it feels like I was ambushed,” I growled. “I don’t know why I bothered to come out here. I knew it was going to be a nightmare. I should have known you couldn’t be trusted. First the bullshit dinner. You tried to set me up. You wanted to make a fool out of me, but I found out your secret. Now, this. Dammit, Dane. What the hell. Leave me alone!”

“I didn’t do this on purpose,” he said. “This wasn’t a setup.”

I glared at him. Pain and anger flowed through my body. I couldn’t believe he would be so cruel. After all these years, why was he back in my life now? Why was he so intent on destroying me?

“I didn’t want anything from you except a nice evening with my extended family. My cousins are a newfound part of my life.”

“Good,” I spat. “Keep them. You fit right in. You’ve done some pretty shitty things to me, but this is ridiculous, Dane. Is your life so dull you had to seek me out just to screw with me?”

“That’s not what this is,” he insisted. “I don’t know what happened in there. I thought it would be nice to have dinner with my family. My dad and my aunt are very friendly, and it seems like we’re going to be spending more time together. I thought—”

“You thought,” I said with disdain. “You thought it would be funny to make a fool of me. Whatever. You’ll fit right in. Congratulations. I really hope this is enough for you.”

“No, Ginger,” he said again. “I’m sorry.”

“Whatever. Get away from me. I hate you. I hate you for doing this to me again. I hope you’re happy.”

“Absolutely not,” he insisted. “I’m not happy. I let him know it was wrong.”

I opened the door and let the cold night air rush in.

But he didn't let me go that easily. He followed me out into the night. "Please, stay," he said. "Let's go back and finish dinner. You can tell Mason he's a dick. No one is going to stop you."

"Not a chance in hell," I said, laughing. "No way. I'm not going back in there. Lucky for me, I will never see those people again. I know for certain I will never run into them at the grocery store or picking up my drycleaning."

"Please, Ginny."

That was it. He thought using my nickname was going to soften me up. Not a chance in hell. I turned on my heel and pointed a finger up into his face, frustration and anger bubbling up. It was like the fifteen years of healing never happened. I was put right back into that moment. Every ounce of pain was back, combined with the fresh pain, making it almost unbearable to process.

"I'm sick of pretending, Dane," I hissed. "Sick of pretending you didn't blow up my life. Sick of pretending things are amicable between us when they're anything but. I was doing just fine out here on my own until I ran into you. Now you're getting back in my head, under my skin. You're a distraction, and I'm too busy with work to afford such a thing. I don't know what you're trying to do, but you need to stop. Go back to your life and leave me alone. I haven't needed you for fifteen years and I don't need you now. You are just a guy dropping in to blow up my life all over again. Just go. Just leave me alone."

His infuriating smirk only served to stoke my anger. I threw my hands up in exasperation and let out a loud squeal. He just smiled bigger. "I'm distracting you?"

He thought distracting me was a good thing. That was exactly the kind of response I should have expected from him. Arrogant and cocky. That was Dane. He was so used to getting his way with a charming smile and a flash of those bedroom eyes. People often talked about that thing. It was a thing only a few people possessed. It was like they were magicians. He could put anyone under his spell, including me. More than once and he was trying to do it right now.

"You're impossible!" I sighed in frustration. "Out of everything I said, you focused on that one word. You're so immature. You have always been a childish asshole."

I walked down the driveway to my car. With all the other cars in the

driveway, my car was parked way in the back. Despite the cold weather, I didn't feel cold. I was too pissed to feel anything.

"If I'm such a childish asshole, why did you agree to come to dinner?" He asked it with that same irritating laughter in his voice.

"Pity."

I unlocked my car door but before I could open it, Dane beat me to it. "Don't go."

"I'm leaving."

He stood in front of my door. "Ginger, I'm sorry. I don't know why he got all weird."

I shoved him out of the way. "Move."

I got in the car, shoved my key in the ignition, and tried to start it. There was a clicking noise, but nothing happened.

"Oh, come on," I groaned. "This cannot be happening."

I wondered who I pissed off. What did I do to deserve this shitstorm?

"I'll give you a ride home," Dane offered.

"No, thank you. You have a dinner to eat."

"Ginger, I'll take you home," he insisted.

I pulled out my phone. "I'll call a cab."

He snatched my phone away. "You're the one being childish. Why can't you just accept a ride home?"

"I don't need a ride from you! I don't need anything from you. Trust me, you've done enough."

"You have it all wrong. It wasn't me who blew up your life; it was you who blew up mine."

I stopped, taken aback by the accusation. "The hell I did! You dumped me!"

He let out a sardonic laugh. "I think we each remember the past very differently."

We stared at each other, both of us fuming. It was crazy because there was nothing to be mad about. It was all a long time ago. It didn't matter anymore. I shouldn't care. But dammit, all of those old feelings were still there. How could he do that to me? How could he show up in my life fifteen years later and turn my world upside down?

The sexual tension that had always simmered between us was too strong to ignore. The chilly night seemed to fade away as Dane reached out and pulled me close, capturing my lips with a fiery, electric kiss.

I was caught off guard, but my body responded immediately to his touch. It was like no time had passed at all, and we were back in our teens, full of passion and lust. My mind was telling me to stop, but my heart and body were screaming for more. I wrapped my arms around his neck, pulling him closer as our tongues danced in a heated battle.

Dane broke the kiss, his breath ragged. "I know we shouldn't, but I can't resist you, Ginger. I've missed you so much."

I didn't know what to say, my mind still reeling from the intense kiss. "I never should have kissed you. I know I shouldn't let you kiss me again."

"But you did, and I can't regret it. Being with you again was more than I could have hoped for."

I was torn. I shook my head. "This is wrong. It's so wrong. We're so wrong."

"We're not wrong. I know you felt it. I felt it. We're perfect together."

"We are not perfect together," I said, scoffing. "You and I both know it."

He grinned. "Okay, perfect might be a little overkill."

I stared at him, searching his eyes. I knew I shouldn't. I had no business kissing him. I shouldn't even be talking to him. It took me so long to get over him.

That was a lie. I wasn't over him. I never did get over him, which was why I was so eager to kiss him again.

"Ginny?" he whispered.

"Kiss me."

CHAPTER 13



DANE

Her request was music to my ears. My insides felt like they were burning. I wanted her more than I wanted fresh air. It wasn't even a want. It was an intense need. I felt like I might wither and die if I didn't get to kiss her.

Fuck that. I wanted a lot more than a kiss. My lips slammed against hers. The force of my kiss pushed her against her car. Her hands quickly grabbed my face while my hands dropped to her hips. I forgot all about the fact we were in my cousin's driveway. I didn't care that it was cold outside. All I needed was to be with her.

Her mouth opened wide, inviting me to explore. My tongue plunged inside, tasting her sweetness. She moaned against my lips, sending shivers down my spine. I trailed kisses down her neck, nipping at her skin. Her breathing quickened, and her hands tugged at my hair.

Our mouths once again came together. We kissed, our lips making love to one another. I grabbed at her breasts, my hands groping and kneading. She moaned as I squeezed her nipples, pulling and tugging on them.

As our lips parted, I gazed into her eyes. They were dark and filled with a hunger that matched my own. With a quick movement, I lifted her up and placed her on the hood of her car. The cold metal sent shivers down her spine, but she didn't resist as I pushed my body between her thighs.

I could feel the heat radiating from her core as I ground my hips against hers. Her hands moved from my face to my chest, pulling me closer to her. I could feel every curve and line of her body as my hands roamed over her, desperate to touch every inch of her.

With a low growl, she pushed her hips against me. She wanted more. I was going to give her more. A small moan escaped her lips as she felt my

hand move to her thigh. Her skirt was hiked up, teasing me and encouraging me to go higher up her leg. My fingers danced over her leg, moving closer to her center with each movement.

The sound of a car door slamming shut made me stop. I pulled away from her, looking around, and saw a shadow rushing back toward the house carrying a bag.

“Let me take you home,” I whispered with my forehead resting against hers.

It wasn't really a request. It was a demand.

She nodded. “Okay.”

I grabbed her hand and started to pull her toward my car parked further up the driveway.

“Should I call a tow truck?” she asked.

“We'll worry about it later.” I had only one thing on my mind.

We got in the car, and I drove just a little too fast to get back to her place.

“You remember where I live?” she asked.

“Yes.”

We didn't talk on the way. I wasn't sure I could have a normal conversation. The words I wanted to say were dirty and would probably have her jumping out of the car. I couldn't explain what was happening. It felt like I swallowed a bottle of lust, and my body was trying to find a way to expel it.

I couldn't think of anything but her body underneath mine. I couldn't stop thinking about her perfect legs wrapped around my waist. I wanted to feel her body shudder beneath my touch. I wanted her to scream my name.

I pulled the car to a stop in front of her building and cut the engine. She opened the door and got out. I followed her and slammed the car door shut.

We climbed the stairs together, both of us breathing hard by the time she reached her door. She fumbled with the keys but finally managed to get the door opened. I wasted no time getting my hands on her.

I kissed her hard and fast. I didn't care that we had yet to make it inside her apartment. All I wanted was her. It was hard enough to keep my hands to myself on the drive over.

My hands drifted from her face, down her back, and settled on her ass. She responded by wrapping her arms around my neck.

“Do you want this?” I asked.

“Yes.”

Her voice was a whisper, but it was enough to spur me into action. I bent

at the knees and scooped her into my arms. I kicked the door shut, plunging us into darkness. Only a dim light on the end table illuminated the area. She wrapped her legs around my waist, and we moved from the doorway to the living room.

Her hands were tearing at my shirt. It was then I realized I wasn't wearing a coat. I ran out of the house and into her arms. I pushed her coat down her shoulders, down her arms. I let it fall to the floor. Her shoes were next. I pulled each shoe off, and my hands lingered on the smooth arch of her foot. I was desperate to feel her against me.

"Hurry," she whispered. "Take your shirt off."

I understood her urgency. I tried to undress myself and her at the same time. I didn't have enough hands so she started to remove some of her clothes before helping me.

"Let me," she said.

I shrugged out of my shirt. She grabbed it and tossed it aside. Her hands ran over my chest with her breath coming in short pants.

I grabbed her face and kissed her. I kissed her hard, my tongue stroking hers. She moaned and threw her head back. My hands drifted lower, lower, until they reached her thighs. I brushed my fingers along the skin just above her skirt. I tugged at her skirt until it fell to the floor. She kicked it aside. I would have loved to take the time to drink in the sight of her perfect body, but I was too desperate. My fingers hooked in the string that ran over her slender hips, holding her panties on. I jerked hard. Her whole body moved. She gasped as I pulled hard again. A tearing sound followed by another sharp gasp from her filled the silence in the room.

Her hands undid my belt and attacked the button and zipper on my pants. They fell to the floor seconds later, leaving us both naked and breathing hard.

"Please," she begged.

I lifted her with my hands under her ass and pushed her against a wall. A picture fell to the floor but neither of us cared. She wrapped her arms around my neck. My hips pushed against hers, pinning her body to the wall without her on the floor. She kissed my neck, my shoulder. She was moaning and kissing me. Her nails raked across my back. Her breath came in short pants. She nipped at my ear while her body writhed against the wall.

"Please," she begged again.

I took her mouth in mine and kissed her again. I wanted her to be as desperate as I was.

I moved my hips forward, rubbing my hard cock against her. She moaned into my mouth, basically crying for me to take her. I moved my hand between her legs, cupping her pussy and feeling the wet heat.

“Yes,” she murmured.

My mouth covered hers once again while my fingers explored between her legs. My cock throbbed with the need to feel her surrounding it. My fingers pushed inside her tight sheath.

She gasped into my mouth. Her body arched against the wall, her head falling back. One of her arms stretched out, knocking another picture to the floor as I plunged my fingers inside her over and over.

“You’re so tight,” I groaned.

She lifted her legs. Her thighs wrapped around my hips. I moved one arm under her ass and held her weight with my arm. My other hand moved between her legs again. I pushed a second finger inside her and pushed deep. She moaned and whimpered. Her nails dug into my shoulders.

“Don’t stop,” she begged.

I kissed her neck and her shoulder as her body writhed against the wall. My fingers pressed deep inside her. I made sure to hit the spot that I knew would make her scream.

I pressed against it with the pad of my thumb, pulling a scream from her. Her body tightened around my fingers. Her pussy gripped them and started pulsing.

I pulled them out and lifted her from the wall. She wrapped her arms around my shoulders and her legs around my waist.

“Please tell me you have condoms,” I murmured.

“Bedroom.”

“Where?”

I could feel the wetness from her orgasm pressed against me as I carried her toward the hallway. It was making me dizzy with need. I could hardly remember how to walk in that moment. My eyes were glazed over with desire.

“Left.”

I kicked the door open and carried her to the bed covered with twenty pillows. Light from the adjoining bathroom spilled into the room. I placed her on the bed and took my first real look at her. Gone were the teenage curves and in their place was the body of a woman. My heart skipped a beat as I looked down at her.

“Drawer,” she whispered.

Her one-word sentences told me she was still in the haze of ecstasy. I didn't have to wonder what she was saying. I quickly reached over and jerked open the nightstand. I saw the box of condoms and pulled one out with my hand shaking. I quickly rolled it on and pounced on her. I didn't think I had the self-control to hold back even another second.

I grabbed her legs and dragged her toward me. I poised myself above her and looked into her eyes. I needed to be inside her. I lowered my face to hers.

I kissed her and slowly slid into her. She moaned softly. She was so tight and warm. I felt like I was going to explode before I even got all the way in. My cock slid into her inch by inch. She whimpered and writhed on the bed. I pushed in deeper with my muscles tensing.

I pulled back and watched as my cock sank into her. It was like her pussy was sucking me in and trying to hold me there. I pulled back and thrust back into her. It was all I could do to stop from exploding. She was so tight and so hot. I wanted to fuck her for hours.

I thrust into her again. I watched her head go back, her arms stretching out to the sides as her hands twisted the blanket.

I pulled her arms toward me and pinned them above her head. I watched her body wiggle and writhe as I thrust into her over and over again. I struggled to hold back. I wanted to draw it out and enjoy it, but I couldn't. I felt like I was going to burst.

I flattened my body against her and bit her neck. She gasped and moaned. I felt her sex clench around me.

“Come for me baby,” I whispered.

She cried out and I felt the walls of her pussy pulse around my shaft. That was all it took. Her orgasm triggered mine. I thrust wildly into her as I exploded. She moaned and writhed beneath me. I held myself pressed against her while I emptied into her. Her legs wrapped around my hips, pinning me deep inside her. My muscles slowly relaxed.

I pressed my face to hers and kissed her. Our bodies both jerked and twitched as we rode through the aftershocks together. Her hands slid up and down my back in her attempt to soothe. I kissed her once again and rolled off of her. I pulled her close to me, our bodies slick and sticky with perspiration. We lay there catching our breath and enjoying the moment. I thought how wonderful it felt to be together like that.

CHAPTER 14



GINGER

Breathless, I lay on my back, gazing up at the familiar stucco patterns on my bedroom ceiling. I couldn't believe we had just done that. My body felt limp and amazing at the same time. I couldn't even begin to find the words to explain how good that was.

I turned my head and saw him lying beside me, his chest rising and falling as he caught his breath. I traced my fingers down his chest, enjoying the soft groan that escaped his lips. He turned his head and looked at me, his eyes smoldering with desire.

"Damn, that was incredible," he whispered, his voice low and husky.

I smiled lazily, feeling a sense of satisfaction wash over me. Giving into the desire that had been burning since I saw him standing outside his restaurant had been worth every single moment.

"I know," I replied, my voice barely above a whisper.

Dane kissed my cheek and rolled away. I heard him walk into the bathroom and then the faucet running. I couldn't bring myself to turn my head and look at him. I knew he was naked and I was suddenly bashful. I scrambled under the blankets to hide my own nudity. I couldn't believe we just did what we did. I turned into a woman I didn't recognize. I felt like a wild woman. He unleashed something in me I had not felt—well, since him. Even when we were together, I never felt that level of ecstasy.

As I lay there trying to collect my thoughts, Dane let out a whistle. I smiled. It was hard not to feel proud. I rocked his world. I had no doubt he could be with any woman he wanted, and he chose me. He chose me, and if his whistling was a clue, he didn't regret his decision.

It reminded me of high school. Walking into a party with him always

made me feel like I won. I won the grand prize. Dane was hot back then. Everyone wanted him, but I was the one that got him. I never worried about him straying. He was loyal and devoted, even when we were young and reckless. I always imagined we would be together forever. That was silly, I realized now. Youthful dreams.

Dane's voice, coming from the bathroom, snapped me out of my reverie. "Wow, that was way more fun than the family dinner," he called out, the sound of running water in the background. "I don't know what was being served for dessert, but I guarantee it wasn't better than what you offered."

I laughed, feeling my cheeks flush. "You're terrible," I said, still unable to believe what had just happened between us.

"Baby, you and I both know that was not even a little bit terrible. I was good."

"I'm so glad to see you've become so much humbler over the years," I said.

He popped his head around the corner. "Humble is overrated."

"A little humility is not a bad thing."

"I will be humble and admit I'm going to need about five minutes and then I'm going to prove to you exactly why I don't have any reason to be humble."

The thought of sex with him again excited and terrified me. I was going to get sucked back into his orbit. He was a powerful presence and I found myself struggling to remind myself of what happened. I couldn't let myself go through that pain again. He broke me once. Sex was good, but I didn't want to put myself back to the point of feeling lost and bereft when he walked away from me again.

I ran a hand through my tousled hair and let out a soft chuckle. "You should probably get back to the party. They're probably wondering where you went."

Dane emerged from the bathroom, a mischievous grin on his face. "I think I can explain myself in the morning."

I tried not to look at him, but damn, he was all grown up. Gone was the lanky body of the teenage boy I loved. In its place was a gorgeous man. His flat stomach and defined chest muscles were covered by a smattering of black hair. I could still feel his muscular arms around me. And then there was that part of him in the middle. He was definitely all grown up.

As he moved toward my bed, I propped myself up on my elbows,

suddenly self-conscious. “No, you should go. This was... an accident, and it isn’t going to happen again. I don’t want things to get too comfortable.”

Dane chuckled, his warm eyes fixed on mine. “Trust me, I can make you very uncomfortable while I’m pleasuring you.”

The words sent a shiver down my spine. I wanted to know what he had in mind, but no. I could not fall under his spell. “No, thank you.”

He laughed. “That was a very polite rejection.”

“I don’t want to confuse this,” I said. “It’s better if you go. I don’t think it’s a good idea for us to stay the night together.”

“Why?” he asked. “It’s not like we haven’t slept together before, and I do mean sleep.”

“I just... I don’t want things to get complicated again,” I explained, feeling vulnerable.

“Complicated?” he repeated, sounding incredulous. “We’re both single, we’re both adults. What could be complicated about that?”

I bit my lip, knowing that he had a point. But it wasn’t just about being single and adults. It was about what happened between us before, and how I felt like I had lost myself in him. I couldn’t let that happen again. “It’s complicated because of how I feel, Dane. I can’t do it to myself.”

“Alright,” he said, smiling. “I’ll respect your wishes. But for the record, it’s usually me telling beautiful women to leave my bed.”

I rolled my eyes, a mixture of amusement and exasperation. “Is that supposed to impress me?”

Dane grinned and started to get dressed. “I’ll let you be the judge of that. I won’t bother you anymore. I’ll let you know next week when you can come for your food tasting.”

I knew it was more than just the food I was interested in. “Sounds good. I’ll see you next week.”

“I’ll lock the door on my way out,” he said. “Unless you’d like to walk me to the door?”

He knew damn well I was naked under the blanket. “I think you can find your way out.”

With a final wink and a crooked smile, he left my room, and I lay back, heart racing, wondering what this might mean for us in the future. It was a silly, impulsive mistake. I acted without thinking. I let my desire get the best of me. I needed to control that in the future. I had never been one to fall into bed with just any random guy.

Granted, Dane wasn't exactly a random guy, but still.

I could still feel him on my body.

I was surprised by how willing he was to leave. Was it maturity or was he happy I let him off the hook after a quickie? It was so difficult to tell with him. That easy smile made it difficult to know exactly what was going on in his mind.

I threw off the blankets after I was sure he was gone. I grabbed my robe, threw it on, and went to the living room to lock the deadbolt. My home was never going to be the same. I could feel his presence. I needed to get some sage and get rid of any lingering presence.

For now, I went back to the bathroom to take a shower. As I stood under the hot stream, the water pelted my skin like a million tiny needles. I scolded myself for letting things go so far with Dane. I never should have let that happen. He belonged in my past, and sleeping with him was just going to complicate things.

As the scalding water coursed over me, I berated myself over my own foolishness. My hands clung to the bathroom tiles, and I hung my head under the cascading water. This was not how I had envisioned my evening, but somehow, I had let my guard down. He was so damn tempting. He was the last cookie sitting on the counter begging to be eaten. I didn't have the self-control to ignore him.

But as the water continued to cascade down my body, I thought about what happened. The way his lips felt on my skin, the way his hands roamed over every inch of my body. It was as if I had forgotten what it was like to feel desired. And Dane had made me feel that way, even if it was just for a fleeting moment.

After my shower, I made my way to the bedroom. The soft glow of the bedside lamp illuminated the condom wrapper. I hesitated for a moment, staring at the empty space where Dane had been lying just moments before. My eyes drifted to the pillow he had used. I climbed back into bed and couldn't resist the urge to pull it close to me.

I buried my face into the pillow, inhaling deeply. His cologne lingered on the fabric, a scent that was all too familiar, and I savored it. It was the same cologne he'd worn on our last day together. I loved it on him—Diamonds for Men by Armani. It was the perfect scent for him, sweet and spicy. *I should buy him a bottle of it for Christmas.*

Closing my eyes, I let the memories flood in. I remembered a younger,

more carefree version of Dane, the one I had been so madly in love with.

The Dane who had taken me on spontaneous road trips and made me laugh so hard I cried. The guy that had held me close during my darkest moments and whispered sweet nothings in my ear. The Dane who had promised me forever.

Tears streamed down my face as I thought about the years that had passed since we last saw each other. The pain of his absence had dulled, but it was still there, a constant ache in my chest. And now, here he was, back in my life and in my bed, leaving me feeling confused and vulnerable.

I knew I had to be strong. I couldn't let myself fall back into the same old patterns with him. But on the same thought, more memories flooded me.

I recalled the times when we would spend our days doing absolutely nothing. He'd scoop me over his shoulder, carry me off into the ocean at Kits Beach, with the sound of the waves in my ears and the warmth of the sun on our skin. Simpler times, when it was just us against the world, sharing dreams and adventures.

But those days were gone. The thought hung heavily in the air, and I wished things had stayed simple. If only he had given me the room to breathe, to chase my dreams alongside his. If only he had let me grow as a person, too.

CHAPTER 15



DANE

The next morning, I went in search of Grayson. I felt bad for the way things went down the night before. I could have handled it better. I needed to find Hannah and apologize to the lady of the house as well. She had made a delicious dinner and I ruined it. With a little time to cool down, I realized I could have politely told Mason to fuck off without making a scene and storming out. But in my defense, I did have to go after Ginger.

I meandered through the house. It was quiet, which told me the kids were likely not in the house. I found my way to Grayson's home gym. Upbeat music was echoing around the room. It was an impressive space. Gleaming exercise equipment was all around the room that was at least twenty degrees cooler than the rest of the house. Grayson was on a treadmill with sweat dripping down his face. The tank top he was wearing had the telltale V of sweat as well. The guy was a beast, which explained how he managed to stay in such great shape.

He hopped off the treadmill and grabbed a towel. "Hey," he said, slightly out of breath. He picked up his water bottle and sucked down big gulps.

"Grayson, I want to apologize about last night," I said, getting right to the point. "I'm sorry for disrupting your family dinner. You guys were nice enough to invite me and I acted like a fool."

He wiped his face with the towel. "Mason has always had a bit of a chip on his shoulder, and he's easy to rile up."

I nodded, acknowledging his point. "I know, but that doesn't excuse my behavior. I should have handled it better, especially in front of family. I'll find Hannah and apologize."

Grayson's frown softened, and he shrugged. "We all have our moments,

Dane. You're not the first Bancroft to get into a heated argument. You're definitely not the first person—hell not even the thousandth person—to mix it up with Mason.”

I sighed and nodded. “Even if he was out of line, I should have taken the high road.”

“He shouldn't have said anything about Ginger,” Grayson said.

“What was that about?” I asked him. “I thought you were okay with her coming.”

“We were very okay with her coming,” Grayson said, laughing. “Mason is paranoid about people. He trusts no one.”

“Including me,” I said.

“Nah, he's cool with you. Trust me, last night was nothing. Mason and I have come to blows. We've all gone rounds with him. He loves controversy. Since he's been married, he's settled down a lot. I think he's just looking for a little excitement.”

“So glad I could entertain him,” I muttered.

“Try not to take it personally,” he said. “I know it doesn't seem like it, but it wasn't a personal attack. He's abrasive. Trust me, his wife let him have it after you left the table. I did as well. He just loves getting a rise out of people.”

“I'll try and keep that in mind,” I said.

“What happened to you last night?” he asked. “Hannah went to your room to take you a slice of pie.”

“I had to take Ginger home,” I said. “Her car wouldn't start.”

He nodded. “I see. She's nice. Pretty, too. Where did you meet her?”

I smiled, not sure how much I was going to tell him, but a moment later, the story was spilling out. “Ginger and I have a history. She was someone very important to me when I was younger. She's from Vancouver.”

Grayson nodded with a small smile. “I figured there was more to the story. Hannah said she could tell there was something going on with you guys.”

I leaned against a nearby weight bench and smiled. “We had something special. I saw a future with her, the way I see it with you and Hannah now. We were in love. It was the best two years of my life. We were happy, like really happy.”

Grayson listened. “But something went wrong?”

I nodded. “She left. Packed up for New York in a heartbeat. It was a one-

way ticket, and she broke up with me on her way to the airport.”

Grayson whistled, clearly surprised. “That’s rough, Dane.”

I continued, bitterness seeping into my voice. “She left like our time together meant nothing, like I meant nothing to her. It stung, Grayson, it really did. I’ve never felt like that before. It gutted me. I had all these ideas about my future. She certainly seemed like she wanted the same future. And then bam. It was over. It was like getting hit by a freight train.”

“So, what happened? Why did she leave?”

I shook my head. “She never really explained, just said she needed a fresh start in New York. She never looked back. I was the dumbass sitting back in Vancouver with the pieces of my heart at my feet.”

He smiled.

“What’s so funny?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Dane, you’re in New York City for business, not pleasure, right?”

I nodded. “Of course. That’s why I’m here.”

“Well, buddy, you’re screwed.”

I blinked, confused by his response. “I don’t get it. What are you talking about?”

“You’re in the same city as your ex, who also happens to be a famous food critic, and you’re reopening your restaurant. That’s not just business. That’s fate.”

I sighed, realizing the truth in his words. “I know, but I need to keep my focus on the restaurant. I can’t let old emotions get in the way.”

“I get it, man, but don’t be so quick to dismiss your feelings. Sometimes, life has a funny way of giving us second chances. Did you come out here and choose to open a restaurant knowing you would run into her?”

“No! I haven’t followed her career. I didn’t know she was a blogger.”

“Are you sure about that?” he joked.

“I’m positive.”

“But you stayed the night with her last night,” he said, grinning. “I’m guessing you guys didn’t stay up all night playing cards.”

“Actually, I didn’t stay the night,” I corrected. “I came back.” I helped him string up a punching bag. “After she kicked me out,” I added begrudgingly.

He stopped what he was doing and looked at me incredulously. “She kicked you out? What did you do, man? Do you want me to give you some tips? Maybe you guys do it different in Canada, but here, when a woman

kicks you out of her bed, it's because you did it wrong.”

I rolled my eyes. “I didn't do anything wrong. Trust me, there were no complaints. She just said she thought it was better if I left. She didn't want me staying the night.”

“What did you say to her?”

“I don't know. I assumed I was staying the night. I thought we came to an understanding.”

“You thought she was going to take you back,” he said.

“I don't know. Not take me back, but just something. The last fifteen years I've done everything I could to put her out of my mind. When I ran into her, it was like—”

“Like fate stepped in,” he said, smiling.

“I don't know, it just felt right. It felt like no time had passed. All those old feelings I had for her were right there again. It threw me off. And then we were kissing and I'm sure you can figure out the rest.”

“You love her.”

I shook my head. “No. I can't. She's not the same person. I'm not the same person. We were young and dumb back then.”

“But you're still in love with her,” he insisted.

I gave that some thought and maybe I was, but last night she'd kicked me out. That said it all. She didn't love me. I couldn't let those old feelings get in the way of my restaurant.

“It doesn't matter,” I said. “I've got things to do while I'm here.”

“You're going to go home kicking yourself in the ass if you don't try and work through this,” he warned.

“I don't think there is anything to work through,” I said. “What happened last night was just some residual feelings. Hopefully, we got it out of our system. This restaurant is the most important thing I have going on in my life right now. I have put so much time and energy into making it happen. I need to stay focused. I'll have to see Ginger one more time when she comes to do the review of my restaurant. Then I'll go home. I'll go back to reality. I need to get as far away from her as I can. I can't get sucked back into old habits. That woman ripped my heart out the first time. I'm not sure I can survive a second time around.”

“You know, Hannah and I didn't just meet and fall in love and have a happily ever after,” he said. “There was a lot of drama. The woman was smart enough to kick my ass to the curb. She made me beg and grovel before

I won her over. I've never forgotten that time when she wanted nothing to do with me. I *never* want to go back to that time, which is why I remind myself of how close I was to losing her forever. I remind myself of how horrible I felt. That makes me do a lot better. When I get lazy and think I can slip back into my old ways, I remember what it was like not having her."

"I didn't lose Ginger," I said. "She dumped me on my ass and never looked back. It's not the same. She had a life she wanted to live, and it had nothing to do with me."

"So, you're worried she's going to break your heart again."

I sighed heavily and looked down at my hands. "I'm scared of what might happen if I let her back in. She's like a hurricane that destroys everything in her path, and I don't know if I'm ready to face that again."

He nodded slowly, understanding in his eyes. "I get it. But sometimes, the things that scare us the most are the things that are worth fighting for. You don't want to look back on this moment and regret not giving it another chance."

I chewed on my bottom lip, mulling over his words. Maybe he had a point. Maybe I was letting my fears hold me back from something that could be incredible. But could I really take that risk? Could I put my heart on the line again, knowing how easily it could be shattered?

"I don't know," I murmured, my voice barely above a whisper.

"Just think about it, okay? Don't make any rash decisions. You could look at this as getting a second chance to do this right. Like I said, if I didn't get a second chance with Hannah, I would be a fucking mess. You think Mason is a dick? You should have seen me before Hannah. And if she would have left me for good, I would have made Mason look like a teddy bear."

I nodded, understanding what he was saying. "I'll deal with it later," I said. "Let me go a few rounds with this bag. I could use the release. And then I need to have Ginger's car towed to the shop."

He walked to a shelf and grabbed some tape. "Here, tape up and you can have your way with my bag."

I laughed and held out my hands while he taped them up for me. It'd been a while since I got to take on a punching bag. I took my first hit and felt the satisfying thud of my fist against the bag. The sound echoed through the room, drowning out the thoughts in my head.

I continued to hit the bag, feeling my muscles tensing and my heartrate increasing. It felt good to let out my frustrations. The sound of my punches

echoed in the room, each hit releasing a bit of the tension that had been building up inside me.

As I punched, I couldn't help but think about his words. Maybe he was right. Maybe I was letting my fear control me. Maybe I needed to take a chance and see what could happen.

I hit the bag harder, feeling a sense of determination building up inside me. I couldn't keep living my life in fear of getting hurt. I needed to take a chance and go for what I truly wanted.

With a final, forceful punch, I stepped back from the bag, feeling the adrenaline coursing through my veins. I turned to face him, my breathing heavy and my heart racing.

"You're right," I said, my voice strong and resolute.

He smiled, his eyes sparkling with pride. "That's what I like to hear. You won't regret it, I promise."

CHAPTER 16



GINGER

The lunchtime rush at Frothed was relentless. I stood in line, eagerly anticipating the moment when I could finally place my order. The aroma of coffee and freshly baked pastries swirled around me. The place was packed, which was great for Carmen and Dez.

The café was decked out for the holidays, with strings of twinkling lights and festive decorations adorning every corner. I smiled at the decorations. Poor Dez. He didn't stand a chance. What his wife wanted, she got. But it looked good. It looked really festive and just kind of made you happy.

Finally, the line at the counter started to dwindle, and I was able to place my order. I decided on a delicious panini and a gingerbread latte, my go-to holiday treat. I found a table that had just been vacated and took a seat. When it was this busy, the staff had to go back to fast-food style with the customers lining up. When it wasn't busy, Carmen insisted on waiting on the customers. Nobody seemed to mind waiting in line.

I ate my panini, listening to the many conversations happening around me. Everyone was talking about their holiday vacations, what gifts they were buying for their loved ones, and the recipes they were going to try. I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but it was hard not to. Eventually, the lunch rush slowed to just a few people enjoying a leisurely meal or cup of coffee.

Dez and Carmen joined me at my cozy corner table. "Try this," Carmen said. "It's gingerbread biscotti."

"Oh, that sounds yummy," I said. "Did you make it?"

She nodded. "I want to put it on the menu, but I thought I should run it by the expert first. I don't want to sell them if they're garbage."

"I think they're great," Dez said.

I took a bite and nodded, letting the sweet, flaky cookie crumble in my mouth. "It's amazing," I said. "Really good." I took a sip of my latte. "And it complements the latte or vice versa. You definitely need to sell these."

"You're not just saying that?" Carmen asked.

"No. You know I would tell you the truth. This is amazing."

"Thank you," she said, smiling again.

"How was your weekend?" Dez asked.

"Oh yeah, did you go to that dinner you mentioned?" Carmen chimed in.

I groaned and nodded. "I did."

"What dinner?" Dez asked.

"Her old fling," Carmen explained. "He's in town and invited her to have dinner with his family."

Dez looked confused. "An old fling? Who? I've never heard of this guy."

"Shh," Carmen shushed him. "It was an ex-boyfriend. He's opening that restaurant. They ran into each other. He's related to the Bancroft family."

"He is a Bancroft," I corrected.

Dez shook his head. "A what?"

Carmen sighed with frustration. It was cute watching the two of them. "The Bancroft family. The people that own half the city. Super rich. It doesn't matter. Just let her talk. How was the dinner?"

I hesitated for a moment, sipping my latte and contemplating whether or not I should tell them what happened. "Well, let's just say that I made a big mistake."

Carmen leaned forward. "What happened?"

"I slept with Dane."

Dez and Carmen both looked surprised. I didn't blame them. I was surprised myself.

"Wow," Dez said, laughing. "I wasn't expecting that."

"It's been a while, hasn't it?" Carmen said. "Since you've been intimate with someone?"

I hesitated, cringing a little. Dez and Camen were my best friends, and I didn't hide from them. "Yes. I've been busy. And the dating scene is such a drag. I don't have time to deal with the nonsense."

Carmen shook her head. "No, you've placed work as a shield between yourself and dating. It's a convenient excuse. No one is going to question it, but it's not true. You just don't want to date."

Dez smiled knowingly. "You can't fool us, Ginger. You've been too

focused on your career to let anyone get close. Your work is your little wall.”

I rolled my eyes but couldn't help but smile. They knew me too well. “Fine, you're right. Work has been a shield, and it's time to drop it. I need to open myself up to dating again.”

“What about Dane?” Dez asked. “Are you going to date him?”

“No.” I shook my head.

“You can't just brush it off,” Carmen said. “You and he clearly have chemistry. What if this could be something amazing?”

I shook my head, trying to dismiss the idea. “You don't understand. Dane and I had our chance, and it didn't work out. We're better off leaving the past in the past. We didn't work the first time. We're not going to work this time.”

Carmen raised an eyebrow. “Are you sure about that? What if you're letting an opportunity slip through your fingers?”

In the back of my mind, I considered their words. What if we had worked things out? What if we had stayed together? A sense of longing began to creep into my thoughts, and I wondered what it would be like to be with him.

Dez's eyes sparkled with mischief. “What if it could be something really great?”

I sighed. “You guys, it's so far from my mind right now. I really do have a lot on my plate right now. And he doesn't live here. He's going to go back to wherever it is he's living.”

“We just want you to be happy,” Carmen said. “If that means giving Dane another chance, we'll support you all the way. I think there's obviously something there.”

“No. It was just something that happened. I think it was closure. When we broke up before, we didn't really get the chance to have a real goodbye.”

“Sure,” Dez said. “Because you're so prone to jumping into bed with random men. You're into this guy.”

“Was,” I corrected. “I was into him. I was a teenager. It doesn't mean I'm still into him. It's been a very long time.”

Carmen and Dez exchanged a look. “We go way back. You never forget your first love.”

I rolled my eyes. “He's just a guy I used to date. We thought we were in love, but we were nineteen. I don't think you can really know what love is. It was puppy love. We were way too naïve to understand what real love was.”

“But you still have feelings for him,” Carmen said.

“I do not have feelings for him,” I protested. “I just don't want to give it

another shot.”

“You just want to use him as your plaything,” Dez joked.

I smiled. “I didn’t use him. I’m sure he was aware it was not the kind of thing that would ever turn into anything.”

“I need to meet this guy,” Carmen said. “Is he hot?”

“Unfortunately, he is,” I said, sighing. “Which is why I found myself doing something I shouldn’t have.”

“Why not?” Carmen shrugged. “If he’s an ex, then it doesn’t count. It’s just revisiting a good time.”

I shook my head. “It’s not that simple, Carmen. I’m not the same person I was back then, and neither is he. We’ve both changed, and I don’t think we’re compatible anymore.”

Dez leaned in. “But what if he’s changed for the better? What if he’s grown up and realized what he lost when he let you go?”

I considered this for a moment. It was possible, but I didn’t want to get my hopes up. “Even if that’s true, I don’t want to get hurt again. I’ve moved on from him, and I don’t want to risk reopening old wounds.”

Dez leaned forward. “What if he’s changed? What if he’s a completely different person now?”

“I highly doubt that,” I said, but the seed of doubt had been planted.

I thought about Dane and what it would be like to be with him again. Maybe he had changed. Maybe things could be different this time around. I shook my head, trying to rid myself of the thought. But it kept nagging at me, like a persistent itch that couldn’t be scratched.

“She’s thinking about it,” Carmen said, laughing.

“I am not,” I insisted. “In a perfect world, Dane and I could rekindle what we had and forget all about the stuff that drove us apart. Unfortunately, we don’t live in a perfect world. This is the real world and we both have very different lives.”

“It’s okay to think about it,” Dez said. “Sometimes revisiting the past can help us move forward.”

I glared at him. “That’s easy for you to say. You’re not the one who got their heart broken.”

“But you’re stronger now,” Carmen interjected. “You’ve grown so much since then. You don’t have anything to lose. You have a career, a beautiful home, and us. You might discover your life could be even better with him in it.”

“I like my life,” I pouted. “I came to New York to build a life and I have done that. I did it by myself without him or any other man. Dane couldn’t support me then. I don’t see him being able to support me now.”

“You’ve changed,” Dez said. “Maybe Dane has too.”

I sighed, knowing they were both right. Maybe it was time to face my past head on and see if there was anything left worth salvaging. “Fine,” I said. “I’ll think about it. Not that it matters. He might not want anything. It’s safe and easy to go back to what you know. And like I said, it was never suggested it was anything like getting back together.”

But the thought of seeing Dane again made my heart race with anticipation and fear. What if he was the same person who broke my heart? What if he had moved on and didn’t want anything to do with me and was just looking to get laid? I couldn’t blame him. I didn’t exactly put up a fight.

“Are you going to see him again?” Carmen asked.

“He’s invited me to a special tasting event for his restaurant,” I said. “So, I’ll see him then, but that’s it.”

“So, there’s a chance there will be a repeat performance,” Carmen said, laughing.

I rolled my eyes at Carmen’s teasing. “Don’t get ahead of yourself, Carmen. It’s just a tasting event,” I said firmly. But even as I said it, I knew that I was lying to myself. There was a part of me that was hoping for more, even though I knew it was dangerous to go down that path again.

After finishing my lunch, I left the café and walked home. The sun was out, which melted the snow and left a slushy mess. I thought about what it would be like to be with Dane. I wasn’t foolish enough to think it would be like it used to be. You could never go back. We were both adults now. Back then, we were carefree kids that didn’t have any responsibilities. If it didn’t work for us back then when there wasn’t really any stress in our lives, how was it going to work now?

But the thought still lingered in my mind. I couldn’t shake off the idea of seeing Dane again. As much as I wished it wasn’t true, I was still very attracted to him. I wanted to pick up where we left off like nothing happened. My heart was clouding my logic. There was a very good chance he would break my heart again. I couldn’t risk it.

Despite the warnings my mind gave me, my heart still yearned for Dane. I tried to distract myself by keeping busy. I painted my nails, cleaned my apartment, and even did some yoga to calm my nerves. Nothing seemed to

work. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw Dane's face, and my heart ached with longing.

CHAPTER 17



DANE

The restaurant was buzzing with excitement. It was our warmup for our big opening on Friday. It was a choreographed dance as my staff prepped for the upcoming event. Food bloggers and critics would be descending upon us, and it was our moment to shine. It was a chance to iron out all the wrinkles before we had our opening night.

I gathered my team in the dining room to give them what I hoped was another rousing pep talk.

“Alright, everyone, gather around,” I called out. The kitchen staff and servers formed a semi-circle, giving me their full attention. “We have a big night coming up on Friday, and I expect nothing but excellence from each and every one of you. This is our opportunity to make a lasting impression. The reviews are going to have a huge impact on our kickoff. These critics can make or break us. We only get one chance to make a good first impression. I want to leave an impact on these people. I want them to walk away thinking about when they are going to come back with their friends and family. I want them talking about our food in a positive way.”

“We won’t let you down,” someone said.

“I’m going to give each of you a copy of our menu,” I said. “I’m including the recipes, but please know, these are my recipes. I would appreciate you keeping these to yourself. I want you to study them. If our customers ask you what’s in a menu item, you need to be able to answer them. You can’t be running back to the kitchen and asking them questions.” I handed out printed menus and recipes to my team. “The kitchen team will be cooking every dish on the menu today. We’re going to keep doing it until they are perfect, which is good for you guys. We’ll be eating the meals, and

everyone is going to get the chance to taste everything. I want the front of the house to be able to give customers a genuine opinion of what the dish tastes like.”

Everyone cheered. I was excited to have the whole team taste the meals. I had personally developed every single recipe. I expected them to be not just delicious but unforgettable. I wanted our guests to crave our menu.

“As you can see, we’ve got an incredible menu lined up for Friday,” I said. “I need you all to have these recipes and the menu memorized. We’re not just serving food; we’re offering an experience. This is fine dining but in a casual atmosphere. I want it to be a place where guests bring their families on birthdays and special events. When the kids are asked what they want to eat on their special day, I want it to be our place. Our guests will have questions, and I want everyone prepared to answer them. If you don’t know something, find the answer. There is no room for errors.”

The kitchen staff nodded in agreement. I had been friendly the other night, but now I was the boss. I wanted everyone to understand I expected their best.

“This is not just another night. This is our night to shine. Our guests will include seasoned critics and bloggers who can influence our reputation. I have faith in each of you, and I know you’ll rise to the occasion. If you have any questions or concerns, please tell me sooner rather than later. Use your eyes. If you see someone that looks unimpressed or like they aren’t enjoying their meal, ask them. Talk to them. Don’t let it fester. We always have a chance to fix a bad meal, but if they leave here with a bad taste, that’s what they’re going to print. We don’t want that. Mistakes happen, but it’s how we handle those mistakes that counts.”

I watched as they went back to their respective stations. Everyone knew what to do. We were doing a dry run with some of the staff acting as customers ordering. I moved around the dining room, offering tips to the servers on how to talk up dishes and what I expected from them. Once the orders started making their way to the kitchen, I headed back there. That was where the magic was going to happen.

I moved around the kitchen, offering guidance and answering questions from my staff. I stopped to sample some of the sauces and dishes before they went out.

I knew we would be ready by Friday. The culmination of months of planning and hard work was about to be put to the test.

Gathering my team, I addressed their apprehensions. “I can see that some of you are feeling a bit anxious,” I began, my tone encouraging yet firm. “I hired each of you for a reason. You wouldn’t be here if you weren’t capable and didn’t share the values that Edge represents.”

I moved around, making eye contact with each staff member to emphasize my point. “However, I need you all to understand that our reputation is built on consistency and excellence. If any of you show a side of yourselves that doesn’t align with our brand, I won’t hesitate to make changes.”

I wanted them to know that I held them to high standards, but I also believed in them. We were a team, and this event was a collective effort. I couldn’t do it on my own. I could feel the tension in the kitchen. It wasn’t anything I wasn’t used to. The orders were coming in and they were struggling to keep up with the demand. I purposely instructed the front staff to do that. It was going to happen, and it was better they knew how to handle it.

I grabbed an apron and quickly put it on. “Where can I help?” I asked.

“Oh, you don’t have to do that.” Margarite looked terrified.

“I want to help,” I said. “They’re my recipes. Just tell me what ticket you’re on.”

“I’m sorry. I got hung up on a grilled salmon dish.”

“It’s our first real run,” I told her. “Just tell me where you are, and I will help.” I looked at the tickets. “I can do the chicken alfredo.”

“That would be so helpful, thank you,” she said, smiling.

I jumped in, enjoying the time in the kitchen, despite it being a little warm. The heat, the clatter of pots and pans, and the sizzling of ingredients filled the air as we fell into our rhythm. It was time to show them that, despite my high standards, I was willing to roll up my sleeves and get my hands dirty.

The staff moved like a well-oiled machine with my sous chef calling all orders and keeping things moving. The soothing sounds of chopping and sautéing filled the air. I watched every dish go up, checking the plating and making sure every dish looked just like it would when we served our cranky food critics. So far so good. I felt proud.

I grabbed a towel and challenged one of the chefs to a brief towel-whipping competition. He accepted with a grin, and soon towels were snapping playfully, the kitchen filled with laughter. It was moments like these

that I believed created a strong bond within the team.

“Guys, you’re kicking butt,” I told them. “I need to go check out front but keep going. You’re going to roll right into desserts. That’s the easy part.”

As I stepped out of the kitchen, I took a deep breath, feeling a sense of accomplishment. But my heart sank as I saw one of the waitresses, Tammy, in tears.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, concerned.

She smiled and shook her head. “I’m just being silly. I spilled a drink and dumped a plate of mozzarella sticks in Judy’s lap.”

“I would prefer you take a breath and slow down,” I said. “You don’t have to rush. The kitchen staff is rushing. You are the face the customers are going to see. You can’t be flustered and freaked out.”

“I feel so ridiculous.”

“Hey, it’s why we’re doing this practice run,” I told her. “Trust me, you are not the first and you are not going to be the last waitress to spill a drink on someone.”

I patted her on the back and gave her a reassuring smile. “Take a deep breath, clean up the mess, and go back out there with confidence. We’ve got this.”

Tammy wiped away her tears and headed back out to the dining room.

“Servers, it’s time to switch,” I said. “You are now the customers. Be gentle, but not too gentle. We need to be ready for anything on opening night.”

I watched as the waitstaff smoothly transitioned into their new roles as customers. They were laughing and chatting, enjoying the food and drinks that were being served to them. I smiled, feeling proud of them all over again.

I made my way around the tables. “What do you think of the marinara?” I asked one of the dishwashers eating some of our mozzarella cheese sticks.

He nodded. “It’s good. It’s different. Is this your recipe, too?”

I grinned and nodded. “Yes, it is. I wanted to add a little twist to it.”

“Well, it’s working. You might just have a hit on your hands.”

I thanked him and continued making my rounds. A couple of waitresses who were now acting as customers were arguing over something.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

One of the ladies cringed. “I’m sorry.”

“For?”

“I don’t really like the stroganoff,” she said.

“That’s okay,” I said, laughing. “You’re not expected to like everything. Do you not like it in general or is there something specific?”

She looked very uncomfortable. “It’s really salty.”

“I don’t think it’s bad,” one of the other ladies said.

I grabbed one of the plastic forks we were using. “Do you mind?” I asked.

“Go ahead.”

I took a bite of the stroganoff, and immediately, I could taste the excess salt. It was a mistake, a rookie mistake. I had tasted the dish dozens of times, but somehow, I had missed it. I swallowed hard, feeling a little irritated.

“You’re right,” I said. “It’s too salty. I’ll fix it. I’m glad you said something. You guys are tasting the food to identify these problems. Don’t feel bad.” I turned and faced the rest of the diners. “Guys, listen up!”

Everyone gave me their full attention. “If you taste something and it tastes like shit, let me know. You are not going to hurt my feelings. These are things we need to fix before opening night. If it’s not right, tell me. If you are not impressed, tell me.”

I made my way back into the kitchen, feeling frustrated with myself. I got lax and stopped testing everything leaving the kitchen.

“Everyone, stop what you’re doing,” I called out.

I told them what I expected from a quality control standpoint. I wasn’t angry, but I made it clear it was a mistake I couldn’t let happen again. They had to get it together. They had to do better.

As I looked around the kitchen, I noticed that some of the chefs looked a little unsettled. Perhaps they were worried about disappointing me. I couldn’t blame them for feeling that way, but as the captain of this boat, it was my job to make sure that everything was up to par.

“Listen, guys,” I said, my tone softer than before. “I’m not trying to be hard on you. I just want to make sure that everything is perfect. We only have one shot at this, and I want to make sure that we get it right.”

The chefs nodded in agreement, and I could see the determination in their eyes. “Everyone just taste the food before it hits the plate. You know what it should taste like. That’s it. With that said, you guys are kicking ass back here.”

CHAPTER 18



GINGER

I took a little extra time getting ready for the night. Usually, I just put on something comfortable. I wanted to blend in with the rest of the clientele. But tonight was different. It was the first time I was seeing Dane since I kicked him out of my bed. I had been going back and forth between wanting him back in my life and wanting to run in the opposite direction.

I chose a black dress with my favorite heels. I didn't want to look like I was going out on a date. If it looked like I was trying too hard, Dane was going to know I dressed up for him. I didn't want to give him the satisfaction. But I also wanted him to look at me and kick himself in the ass for letting me get away.

“Eat your heart out.”

Photographers snapped pictures of me and the other critics as we approached the front door. It was evident the restaurant was aiming for publicity and recognition, but I couldn't help feeling a bit exposed. I was glad I dressed up. I should have known Dane would make it a red-carpet event. All the hype was bound to attract the media.

Walking into Edge, I was immediately impressed. It was better than when I stopped by last week. They had added more holiday decorations. Twinkling lights adorned every corner, and fragrant wreaths hung from the walls. The spirit of Christmas was in the air, but it was all very tasteful. A hum of excitement filled the air.

Dane greeted us as we entered. It was impossible not to notice how impeccably sharp he looked. His charming smile disarmed me as usual. His eyes met mine and I felt that familiar warmth I got whenever he looked my way. This time, I felt heat in that look. I pretended it didn't bother me, but I

was pretty sure he knew.

He began a welcome speech, his voice confident and charismatic as he introduced the menu we were about to experience.

I listened intently as Dane explained the inspiration behind each dish. The more he spoke, the more my mouth watered. It was clear that his passion for food was still alive and well. He had always been a master in the kitchen, and it was no surprise that he had opened up his own restaurant based on him experimenting with familiar dishes.

As I listened to him talk, I checked him out. The suit he was wearing was obviously tailored to his perfect body.

It hugged him in all the right places, showing off his broad shoulders and toned arms. I imagined running my hands along the fabric, feeling the warmth of his skin beneath it. I shook my head, trying to snap myself out of the thoughts that were quickly spiraling out of control.

“Thank you all for coming tonight,” Dane said with his usual perfect smile. “We’ll get you all seated and get started. Tonight, we’ll be serving small portions of our main courses, but for reference, we will be displaying full portion sizes for you to include in your review if you choose.”

He was so cool and comfortable. I didn’t think anything bothered him. He knew his food was good. He knew the restaurant was amazing. I supposed he didn’t have any reason to worry. After getting to meet his staff, I understood why. They all loved him, and they were all ready to make him happy.

We were seated family style at the same long table I had sat at with his staff. Everyone was talking about the decor and how exclusive it felt. Dane walked by and winked at me before heading back to the kitchen.

There was a bit of a commotion at the door. “Sorry,” I heard someone say.

I recognized the voice, but I was really hoping I was wrong. I casually glanced over my shoulder, and sure enough, it was fucking Sampson.

I noticed other people at our table had a similar response to Sampson’s arrival. I was glad it wasn’t just me. The man really was insufferable.

I turned my attention to the table setting and the ambiance. I liked that the music was kept very low. I hated trying to talk over obnoxious music, whether it was good music or not. Glass Christmas baubles dangled overhead from a chandelier adorned with spruce and pine boughs. The table was a sight to behold, decorated with white candlesticks nestled in elegant gold holders, while the plates were pristine white with delicate gold trim. I was excited to

try the food.

To my disappointment, Sampson settled down right beside me, muttering his disapproval at the elaborate decor. He grumbled that he couldn't afford to be distracted by all this "crap."

"Why do they do this?" he asked. "It's all so kitschy."

"I think it's beautiful."

"Of course, you would," he said.

"You missed the review of the menu," one of the other bloggers said.

"I'm sure it's nothing I haven't seen before."

"I think it sounded unique," I said, shrugging.

I didn't want to tell them I knew Dane and knew how creative he could be with some of the most basic dishes.

As the first course was being served, I realized that I was not the only one who was impressed.

Our first course was a warm and cozy soup accompanied by a freshly baked slice of bread. I savored each spoonful, appreciating the comforting flavors. Beside me, Sampson was quick to start criticizing the simplicity of the dish to the other bloggers seated nearby. A few of them seemed amused by his exaggerated interpretations of the meal.

With an air of superiority, Sampson pulled out a notebook and scribbled the word "Shit" beside "first course." I rolled my eyes, frustrated by his perpetual negativity. It seemed that nothing would ever be good enough for him.

Despite Sampson's relentless cynicism, I was determined not to let it sour my experience. The flavors of the soup were soothing and well balanced, a testament to the culinary expertise Dane brought to the game. The warm atmosphere and delightful decor only added to the enjoyment of the meal.

I focused my attention on the other bloggers at the table who were engaged in lively discussions about the dish. While Sampson remained a perpetual critic, it was evident that many of the bloggers appreciated the dish for what it was—a simple yet delicious start to our dining experience.

As our plates were cleared, Sampson started complaining again. "What's with the tiny portions?" he mumbled. "I'm still hungry."

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. This was typical Sampson behavior. Always complaining, always unsatisfied.

"If you would have been here on time, you would have heard Mr. Bancroft explain they were serving small portions because he will be serving

a lot of the menu,” I said with a hint of snark. “He wants to give us a chance to taste everything.”

Sampson scoffed, clearly unimpressed. “I don’t care,” he said. “I’m not paying for tiny portions.”

“You’re not paying,” I reminded him.

“I mean I would never pay for this,” he snarled.

I sighed inwardly, feeling my frustration with Sampson rising yet again. But before I could say anything else, another dish arrived. It was a strawberry and spinach salad.

The vibrant colors caught everyone’s attention, and the sweet aroma of the strawberries wafted through the air. I took a bite and was immediately struck by the freshness of the ingredients. The spinach was crisp, and the strawberries were perfectly ripe. The vinaigrette dressing added a tangy kick that brought the dish together.

“This is incredible. What do you think?” I asked one of the bloggers.

“I think this dressing is incredible,” she said. “It must be his own recipe.”

I nodded as I chewed. “Definitely. It’s better than anything I’ve ever had.”

I glanced over at Sampson and was surprised to see him actually enjoying the salad. Perhaps this was a dish that even he couldn’t find fault with.

But my moment of hope was short-lived. Sampson’s expression quickly turned sour again when the third dish arrived. It was a seared scallop dish, beautifully presented on a bed of seasoned rice and garnished with fresh herbs.

Sampson poked at the scallops with his fork, examining them closely. “These are tiny,” he muttered.

I bit back a retort and instead focused on savoring the scallops. They were perfectly cooked, with a golden sear on the outside and a tender, juicy center. The seasoning on the rice complemented the delicate flavor of the scallops, and I couldn’t resist taking another bite.

“This is amazing,” I said, turning to the blogger next to me. “What do you think?”

She nodded in agreement. “The scallops are cooked to perfection. And the seasoning on the rice is just right. It’s a great dish.”

I smiled, feeling a sense of relief. At least someone was enjoying the meal. But as I looked around the table, I could see that the other bloggers were growing increasingly uncomfortable with Sampson’s behavior. He had

barely touched any of the dishes and was now openly criticizing the chef's skills.

Dane emerged from the kitchen. "Ladies and gentlemen, I hope you've enjoyed the sampling of our appetizers and first courses. We're going to be moving on to the main courses. As I mentioned earlier, we're serving small portions to make sure you're not stuffed. I know you're probably dying for more, but we want to keep you hungry."

Sampson muttered something under his breath, but I didn't think Dane heard. Dane looked at me. He didn't smile but I could tell he was happy. Things were going very well for him, and he knew it.

"We're looking forward to your next courses," someone said.

"We will be bringing out a variety of wine that will accompany each dish. And because we don't want you hammered before we reach dessert, the wine portions will be relatively moderate as well."

As Dane retreated back into the kitchen, I felt a sense of excitement for the upcoming main courses. If they were anything like the scallops, I knew I was in for a treat. But as the waitstaff began to bring out the plates, my excitement turned into confusion.

On my plate sat a single, small slice of meat—barely enough to qualify as an entrée. The dish was garnished with a few sprigs of parsley, but other than that, it was bare. I looked around the table and saw that everyone had gotten a similarly meager portion.

"What is this?" Sampson bellowed, his voice echoing off the walls. "I could fit this entire entrée in my mouth in one bite!"

The other bloggers were starting to whisper amongst themselves, clearly unhappy with the portion sizes. But I felt a sense of understanding for Dane and his team. They were trying to create something new and unique, something that went against the traditional notions of a full-course meal.

I took a bite of my meat, savoring the flavors that exploded in my mouth. The meat was perfectly cooked, tender and juicy. It was unlike anything I had ever tasted before. I looked up to see Dane watching me, a small smile playing on his lips.

I took a drink from the wine glass they had delivered with the meat dish, the bold flavor of the wine complementing the meat perfectly. As I savored the flavors, I wondered what was in store for the next course.

"Now *that*, I could have eaten twenty of," I said, laughing.

"No kidding. That was a heavenly experience."

But as the waitstaff cleared our plates, I noticed the tension in the air. Sampson was still muttering under his breath, and the other bloggers were exchanging annoyed looks.

I didn't think Sampson was ruining the meal, but he was certainly making the experience a little unpleasant.

CHAPTER 19



DANE

The tasting event was going amazing. I listened to the satisfied hum of the critics and bloggers who chatted enthusiastically amongst themselves. I couldn't quite hear the words, but the expressions I saw were all very positive. They were looking forward to what was coming next. I was about to shake things up.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I told you we were going to be serving micro portions, and we are, but the next course coming out just wouldn't be right if you only got one bite. We want to make sure you get the full experience. I hope you'll still have room in your bellies for what comes after this next dish.”

A line of servers carrying two plates each came out of the kitchen. They expertly timed the delivery and placed the plates in front of the guests at the same time. I saw the looks on their faces. They looked very excited.

“Here you have a pan-seared filet mignon with a tantalizing spiced wine glaze, accompanied by a medley of perfectly roasted vegetables and creamy mashed potatoes,” I said proudly. “This dish is something I created ages ago during my early culinary experiments. I've spent a lot of time perfecting it right down to the tiniest spice addition.”

I caught Ginger's gaze. Back in the old days, I used to prepare this very dish for Ginger. It was my way of showing love and affection—through the art of cooking. I loved the simple pleasure of sharing a meal with her. In those days, I preferred preparing a special dinner for her rather than taking her out to restaurants. The joy I found in creating something extraordinary with my own hands, and watching her delight in every bite, had been some of the happiest moments of my life. I loved listening to her soft little moans as

she savored the meal I made for her. If I was being honest, it was almost better than listening to her orgasm.

Almost.

The aroma of the meal wafted through the room, mingling with the enticing scent of the spiced wine glaze, and I reminisced. I remembered the first time I made the first version of this dish for Ginger. It was pretty fancy for a couple of teenagers, but I knew it made her feel special.

Ginger's knowing smile told me she recognized the dish. The fact that she remembered, amidst the crowd of critics and bloggers, felt like a private connection between us. It reminded me of some really good times. I hoped it did the same for her.

"Enjoy," I said. "We'll be serving another dish shortly."

I went back to the kitchen and gave a few high-fives. "You guys killed it," I said. "Those plates looked amazing. No one is talking. A silent table is a good thing."

"Thanks, boss," one of the guys responsible for garnish said.

I moved around the kitchen, sampling the next dishes that were going to be making their way out soon. "More salt," I instructed.

I didn't want to hover over the critics, but I wanted to know what was being said. I was very curious to know if they liked what they were eating. I wasn't a fan of surprises. I believed we would get some good reviews, but I didn't want to get too cocky.

I made my way back out to the dining room, nodding at the servers that were hanging back but ready to jump in and accommodate whatever our guests might need.

One of the young ladies had a look on her face. "What's wrong?" I asked quietly. I assumed she heard some negative feedback. I wanted to know sooner rather than later if there was an issue. I believed I could still salvage even a shitty meal.

But her response wasn't what I was expecting. "I, uh, I think there might be a problem."

That was when I heard raised voices.

The happy atmosphere that had been present when I walked into the kitchen was gone. I felt the tension. The quiet murmurs and bobbing heads of the critics were missing. The tense silence was suddenly disrupted by the sound of a heated argument emanating from the far end of the table.

I made my way down to see what was going on. To my disbelief, I found

Ginger at the center of it, her eyes flashing with anger. She was pissed.

I quickly approached. "Is everything okay?"

She ignored me. I knew Ginger well enough to know when she was pissed. She didn't take shit from anyone, and she wasn't about to start now. I didn't know who the guy was that pissed her off, but I felt bad for him. Ginger only looked sweet and innocent. I knew she could cuss like a sailor and put someone in their place if she felt like they offended her.

"You can't possibly criticize this dish like that! It's a masterpiece. You damn well know it's good. The blending of flavors is fantastic. What you said is unfair. You're so damn obnoxious, Sampson. Seriously, what is wrong with you?"

"Everyone's entitled to their own opinion, aren't they?" The man looked like a pompous ass.

I was automatically on Ginger's side, but hearing what the argument seemed to be about, it sounded like she was defending my food.

"Yes, but when your critique is unjust, it can have far-reaching consequences. The owner has poured his heart and soul into these dishes. All of us can taste it. Maybe you're just a shitty food critic and don't know the difference between good and bad food. Maybe you should consider getting another job. This one is clearly way too much for you to handle. If you think this is bad food, you need to get your head checked."

Everyone in the room stayed quiet. It was like they were all afraid to move. I didn't blame them. It felt like we were in a powder keg. One wrong move and things would explode. I was genuinely surprised to hear her defending me. It was definitely an ego boost. She didn't hate me. That made me hopeful there might be a chance for us.

I approached the man, attempting to be the consummate professional. "I appreciate diverse opinions, and I welcome honest criticism," I stated, maintaining a calm demeanor despite the underlying tension.

"My readers know I have a sophisticated palate," the man spat. "This food is boring, plain, and barely edible."

I raised my brow in shock.

"Your readers only read your garbage because they are amused by your nasty attitude," Ginger shot back. "Your readers are just like you. A bunch of angry, bitter, lonely internet trolls that get off on making people miserable. It's disgusting. I bet you go home and eat cheap ramen noodles. That's probably your idea of gourmet."

I could see things were only going to get worse. The man tossed a napkin on the table. “I will not sit here and listen to you insult me.”

He started to storm out. I didn’t want the man to leave with a really bad taste in his mouth. I understood he didn’t like the food and there was little I could do about that.

“I’m sorry our food wasn’t your cup of tea,” I said. “Can you give me anything specific that you didn’t like? I’m open to honest feedback. We can always get better.”

He gave me a dirty look. “Do you know who I am?”

“No, sir, I don’t.”

“My name is Sampson Prewet,” he announced proudly. “I write for some of the biggest culinary magazines in the country. Despite what that classless bitch says, my readership is extremely high.”

He had crossed a line when he insulted Ginger directly. “That’s a step too far,” I growled. My protective instincts flared, and I couldn’t stand idly by. I looked directly into Sampson’s eyes. “Get off my property.”

Sampson seemed taken aback for a moment but quickly recovered, taking out his notepad and exaggerating his notetaking for theatrical effect. “A sensitive business owner who can’t handle criticism,” he mumbled loudly. “Noted. Shitty, boring food with little flavor. This just might be the easiest review I’ve ever written.”

“I’m beginning to understand why Ginger said what she did,” I muttered. “You and I both know the food was not bland. You might call it boring and that’s perfectly fine, but I think you should be honest with what you write.”

“Trust me, that was one of the worst meals I’ve eaten in a long time.”

I tried not to let the insults bother me, but it did sting a little. I thought the food was great, but I knew there was always going to be an outlier. Typically, even the most dissatisfied customers would have one thing they liked.

But not this guy.

“I’m sorry the meal wasn’t to your satisfaction,” I said while maintaining my temper. “Thanks for stopping by.”

“I’m going to get that woman blacklisted,” he snarled.

“Excuse me?”

“That wannabe food critic,” he hissed. “She’s ridiculous. She kisses ass just because she wants free meals. I’m going to make sure no one in the industry takes her seriously.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way,” I told him. “But I don’t think that’s fair.”

Everyone is entitled to their opinions. What works for you might not work for her. We only invited the top bloggers and critics in the city. She was in that category.”

Ginger was right. The guy was rude.

He scoffed. “Let me guess, you’re banging her.”

I stepped closer to him. “You’re going to want to leave now.”

He laughed. “Oh great, you’re one of those.”

“One of what?”

“A guy who gets off on sleeping with all the bloggers. You’re just like the bitch that you’re sleeping with to get a good review.”

“I’m warning you,” I said in a low voice. He was pissing me off and ruining what was supposed to be a nice night.

“You don’t scare me,” he said with a knowing smile. “I’ve been threatened by a lot worse than you.”

“Listen to me, pal. I don’t know who you think you are, but I’ll make sure you regret this.”

“I’m sure you will,” he said condescendingly. “It’s not my fault she’s not up to the standards of the big bloggers.”

My patience had reached its limit, and I stepped closer to Sampson, my gaze unwavering. “You heard me,” I stated firmly, the weight of authority in my voice. “Leave. You are officially trespassing.”

Sampson glared at me. “You’re making a huge mistake.”

“Leave.”

“This is going in my review,” he sneered.

I laughed. “Good. Because I’m not about to let anyone talk about a woman the way you were talking about her. I will not tolerate disrespect.”

He shook his head. “Good luck with your restaurant,” he said with a laugh. “After my review goes viral, you won’t be here for long.”

“We’ll see.”

He pushed open the door and walked out.

I turned around and saw my hostess smiling.

“Thank god,” she said. “He was awful.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Because he wasn’t really saying anything to me. He was just so damn negative.”

“There’s always one in every crowd,” I said, sighing.

“Do you think he’s going to destroy us in his write-up?”

“Yep,” I said, nodding. “Which means we need to make sure we impress the rest of them.”

“We are,” she said. “I’ve heard nothing but positive comments coming from the table.”

I looked back at the remaining guests, who had gone back to their meals. I was glad the incident hadn’t ruined their dinner.

“I’m going to step outside for a minute,” I said. “Can you let the servers know it’s time to serve the next dish?”

“I will,” she said, smiling. “Don’t chase him down.”

“Wouldn’t think of it,” I said, laughing.

I stepped out into the cold night and took a deep breath. I knew there were assholes everywhere, and usually I could let it roll off my shoulders, but the guy really pissed me off.

CHAPTER 20



GINGER

“Are you leaving?” a waitress asked. “We still have dessert.”

“Thank you, but I’ve eaten about all I can. The dishes were amazing. Very, very good. I’m impressed. You all did a great job. The service was perfect. Thank you all so much for inviting me.”

I slipped into my coat and adjusted my hair. I felt bad. I hoped I didn’t mess up his night. I probably should have just kept my mouth shut, but Sampson’s constant bickering was too much. He ruined the meal. The food was damn good and everyone at the table knew it. I didn’t know where Dane had gone off to, but he never came back to the table. I understood why.

He was probably furious with me for ruining what was clearly a very important night for him. I truly had not meant to make a scene, but Sampson was so damn obnoxious. He got the best of me. I knew better than to let him get under my skin. I was a professional. Thankfully, everyone at the table agreed the man deserved everything I said to him. I was glad he left, but I would have to apologize to Dane. I had his number. I would take the coward’s way out and send him a text later.

As I stepped outside, I found Dane pacing on the front steps, his expression a mix of frustration and annoyance. I knew how infuriating Sampson could be. The man possessed an uncanny ability to push everyone’s buttons.

Dane glanced at me, and for a moment, our eyes locked in a silent understanding. I knew what he was feeling. It was how I usually felt after dealing with Sampson.

“How about we go for a drink?” I asked him. “You look like you could use a drink. Unless you have to stay here and cleanup or whatever.”

“Are they done in there?”

I shook my head. “No. I think they were serving another dish, but after that nonsense, I thought I should leave.”

“You’re missing dessert,” he said with a smile.

“I’m sure I’ll survive.”

He nodded but didn’t immediately agree. I could see the frustration on his face. I did that. I had no business raining on his parade. He probably thought it was some kind of strange payback. I would never stoop that low.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“For what?”

“For causing a scene,” I said.

“Fuck that guy. Let’s go.”

“Do you need to tell them you’re leaving?”

He shook his head. “They’ll figure it out.

“There’s a bar across the street,” I offered. “It’s quiet.”

“Let’s go.”

Together, we walked across the street. The chill in the air bit at my ears and nose. Dane pulled open the door and gestured for me to walk inside. The hotel bar was the kind of place that catered to those on date night. Couples that just wanted to get a drink before going home to the kids without the music and the pickup scene. I had only been in the place once before while on a date that wasn’t really a date.

The swanky bar was warm, inviting, and quiet. A marble fireplace crackled in the background, casting a warm and cozy ambiance. Small round tables were positioned around the area with plenty of space between them to allow for privacy. A beautiful Christmas tree sparkled nearby, adding to the festive atmosphere.

We found a table and quietly moved through the bar. Dane helped me take off my coat before I sat down. I inhaled deeply, picking up what smelled like pine. It was all very festive, but not in your face. The comfortable leather chairs added to the elegance of the place. It was cozy.

A waiter came by and took our drink orders. I wanted to get a margarita, but it was cold, and this place felt way too classy for that. I went with a glass of white wine. Dane an old scotch. It was kind of strange to be doing something so grownup with Dane. We did the bar thing back when we were teenagers, but it was a loud, youthful setting. In Canada, when kids turned nineteen, it was like the kids in the US turning twenty-one.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“I’m fine.”

“What did he say to you?” I asked.

He looked at me and then the glass in his hand. “He doesn’t like you.”

I laughed. “No kidding.”

“He’s not a nice guy.”

“Sampson is a dick,” I said, not mincing words. “But trust me, everyone knows it.”

“What was he doing?” he asked. “What started the argument?”

“He is just so damn negative,” I said. “I’ve had the misfortune of dealing with him more than once. He’s this guy that thinks everything sucks. I don’t think he’s ever eaten anything he likes. He constantly belittles and nitpicks everyone and every dish. The food was good. Really good. Everyone agreed except for him. He was just so damn bitchy. I recently had a tasting, and he was there. It was the same thing. He complains about everything. It’s so obnoxious. You can’t even enjoy your meal!”

He was smiling as I talked. “You have some pretty strong opinions.”

“I’m sorry. I really wanted to enjoy the meal. We all did. It’s so hard to enjoy what you’re eating when someone is constantly complaining.”

“Did he have any specific comments?”

“No!” I realized I was getting loud. “No. He was just complaining. That’s the thing. If he would have said it wasn’t salty enough or lacked a specific flavor, I could have had some respect. But it wasn’t a review, it was a bitchfest.”

He nodded. “I figured as much. I guess I’ll have to wait for his review to see exactly what it was he hated so much. I think threatening to kick his ass might have further soured his opinion.”

I laughed. “You did?”

“He had a lot to say, and I was really not interested in hearing it,” he muttered. “I told him not to come back. I can’t have that man around me. I was so close to knocking him on his ass. The guy is a dick.”

“Yes, he is,” I said, nodding. “But his review won’t ruin you. I honestly cannot imagine anyone actually giving his reviews any real weight. He always complains.”

He leaned back in his chair, his shoulders relaxing as he sipped his drink. A relieved smile tugged at his lips. “Thank you.”

While we were chatting, I noticed the waitress carrying a tray of drinks.

“Excuse me, what is that?” I asked her.

“Cranberry cocktails,” she said, grinning. “It’s a house specialty.”

“Can we get two?” Dane asked.

“Of course.”

“Dane, I have only good things to say about today,” I said. “The restaurant was beautiful, the effort put into the table setting took my breath away, and the food was the star of the show, as it should be. I enjoyed every bite and every minute. Everyone did. You really outdid yourself. Despite what that asshole said, everyone loved it. It’s going to be a huge success.”

Our fresh drinks arrived. We clinked our glasses together. “To a great launch,” he said.

“What are you planning to do once the restaurant is open and running?” I asked casually.

“I’d like to open more,” he replied. “All over the world.”

“Are your other restaurants like this one?”

He shook his head. “No. They’re similar, but Edge is the dream. This has always been the restaurant I was aiming for. I want to make it into a global sensation.”

“I’m sure you’ll make it happen,” I said.

“Have you done any traveling?” he asked. “You used to talk about it a lot.”

I took a sip of my drink, the cranberry flavor bursting on my tongue. “I’ve been to a few places,” I replied. “But not as many as I’d like.”

“Where have you been?”

“Oh, just the usual spots,” I said, shrugging. “Paris, London, Tokyo. But I’ve always wanted to go to Italy.”

“Ah, Italy,” he said, nodding. “The food is incredible there.”

“I know,” I said, sighing dreamily. “I’ve always wanted to try authentic Italian pizza.”

“I can make that happen,” he said, a glint in his eye.

It was tempting, but I had to protect my heart. “Have you been doing a lot of travel?”

“Not as much as I would like,” he said, smiling. “I’ve been busy with the restaurant business.”

“Do you like the traveling?” I asked him.

“There are many great cities in the world, and I like seeing them,” he explained. “But I always want to return home. I guess I’m still a homebody.”

“I understand,” I said, smiling. “I miss Vancouver. I try to visit when I can.”

“I’ve never seen you there,” he said.

“It’s a big place,” I said, smiling.

“Do you ever think about where you are now?”

“What?” I asked with confusion.

“Do you ever wonder if you are where you’re supposed to be?”

“How much have you had to drink?” I teased.

“I guess I woke up and realized I’m in my thirties and I’ve only accomplished about half of what I wanted to,” he said.

“As in?”

“I’m still very single,” he said with a slow smile.

“I’m surprised.”

“You’re surprised I’m single?” he said, laughing.

“A little.” I nodded as I sipped my cocktail. “I would have thought you were going to be chased by every young woman looking for your wealth or connections, and of course, you’re not too hard to look at.”

He grinned. “I didn’t say I wasn’t chased. I just never found myself all that interested.” He shook his head. “I guess I’ve been looking for the wrong type of woman.”

“What’s the right type?”

He leaned forward. “I want a woman who is interested in being with me because of me. Not because of my money or situation. You know that. You and I had something special. You were never impressed by my family or the big house or any of that. I guess I’ve been trying to find someone like that.”

It was hard not to think of what could have been. We *did* have a good relationship. “I’m sure there are plenty of women who would want to be with you.”

“It’s not that they don’t want to be with me, but I guess I’m not very trusting,” he said, shrugging. “I’ve dated and I’ve realized most of the women are more interested in who my father is or what kind of connections I have.”

I nodded with understanding. “I’m sure there is someone out there.”

“I know there is,” he said.

I thought he was referring to me, but I didn’t know for certain. “They say there is someone for everyone.”

“Do you still want one?”

“One?”

“A husband. A family. Remember, we both talked about what our future would look like. We both wanted to travel, eat good food, and have a family. Do you still want one?”

I paused, uncertain of my response. The world had changed, and so had I. “I’m not the same person I used to be when we were younger. Back then, I thought I had my entire life figured out.”

His smile was reassuring, his eyes locked onto mine as he responded. “You seem the same to me. Confident. Bold. Gorgeous.”

I chuckled, feeling a faint blush rise to my cheeks. “Drink your cocktail,” I teased, playfully nudging his glass. I didn’t have the bandwidth to have that conversation. We had broken up fifteen years ago when we were basically children.

“I’m serious,” Dane said. “Don’t you ever think about what could have been? What should have been?”

“I know you’re serious,” I said with a sigh. “But I don’t think about that much these days. It’s in the past. There’s no point dwelling on what was and is now gone.”

“I haven’t changed,” he said. “I’m the same guy.”

“No, you’re a man that has achieved his dreams. You still have time to get those other dreams.”

CHAPTER 21



DANE

We sat in the cozy hotel bar, our frosted cranberry cocktails glistening with condensation as we talked like we were still best friends. The gentle flicker of the fireplace helped put us at ease. It was like we were sitting in my living room back home, listening to music and talking like we used to. I really missed those days. Life had been so easy back then. Some days, I wished I could go back.

“Your family has been busy,” she said. “I can’t imagine how you guys even connect with each other with all the traveling and careers.”

“We don’t,” I said, laughing. “We tried to get together a couple of weeks ago, but only a few of us were there. We keep saying we want to be around more for Dad, but even he’s busy.”

“He’s seeing your Aunt Kathy, right?”

“I’m not sure how you would describe it, but yes. They’re not getting any younger, but they both have busy families. Add in the distance and it complicates things.”

“We really need a teleporter,” she joked.

“No kidding,” I said, grinning. “It sure as hell would make things easier.”

“Isn’t that the truth.”

“What about your parents?” I asked. “How have they been?”

“Good,” she said, nodding.

“Does your dad still do the woodworking thing?”

I remembered he used to be a passionate woodworker. He was always making stuff and showing it off. It was a hobby, but he always talked about going into business.

Her face lit up. “Now that he’s retired, he’s turned his hobby into a side

business. He builds custom pieces and also restores items that customers bring him. He's created a small niche market, but he's making a great side income from it. I think my mom is glad he isn't completely retired. I think they would both go stir crazy. It's given them more time together, which is what they both wanted. But they aren't on top of each other."

I smiled at the image she painted. Her father managed to achieve the dream. I knew it was what he wanted. Their family unit was something I always admired. They didn't have a lot, but they were happy. They were close and they did a lot with a little. They were a middle-class family that worked hard for every penny. I loved hanging out at their house. Her mom would cook dinner and we would all sit around the table eating simple food off mismatched plates. I got some of my recipes from her as well.

"That's awesome," I said. "I'll have to look him up when I get back. I've always wondered how they were doing, but I had a feeling I was probably the last guy they wanted to see."

"They still ask about you," she said, smiling. "At least, they used to until I told them it would be better if they didn't. They stopped telling me about the gossip around town years ago."

I nodded with understanding. I imagined it would be difficult to hear about me dating anyone or moving on with my life, just like I didn't want to know she was moving on and happy. It still hurt to know she had this whole life, and I wasn't a part of it.

"Gossip isn't worth it," I said. "Just causes more hurt. I would like to check in on your parents if you're okay with it."

"Of course," she said, nodding. "My mom would love to see you again. Don't think I didn't notice her influence in your cooking."

I laughed. "Busted."

"I wish I could have inherited her ability to cook," she said, laughing. "I know good food when I taste it, but I apparently have some kind of disconnect between my brain and my hands. I still haven't figured out how to put the two together. Those who can't cook, critique."

I laughed at the idea. "I'm sure you can."

"Not like you," she said, smiling.

"Are you going home for the holidays?" I asked. "I remember your mom always made one hell of a feast."

Ginger's expression grew sad. "They're using the money from my dad's side business to pay for a two-week trip to the Cook Islands this Christmas

with my mom, Aunt Cherise, and Uncle Ed.” Her eyes shone with excitement. “I’m so happy for them. They’ve always worked so hard and they did everything they could to give me a good life. They have been saving up for this vacation for a while.”

“They’re going for Christmas?”

She nodded. “Yep. This will be my first Christmas away from my parents and Vancouver. They offered to take me with them or plan their trip for another time, but I can’t do that to them. I’m a big girl. They’ve given me thirty-four Christmases.”

Ginger’s eyes started to water. I reached across the table and squeezed her hand. “I think it’s very cool you have such a close relationship with them.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, her voice shaky.

“Don’t be sorry,” I replied softly. “You’re allowed to feel sad. It’s okay. It means you love them.”

“I just don’t want them to worry about me,” she said. “I know this is just as hard on them as it is on me. I want them to be excited and enjoy their trip. This is their first time really getting to take a real vacation. I don’t want them to feel guilty for going, which I know they do.”

“You’ll have to send them lots of selfies proving you’re just fine,” I said, laughing. “Show them how much fun you’re having.”

She smirked. “By going to restaurants?”

“Christmas in New York is magical,” I offered, hoping to lift her spirits. “There’s a lot you can do to have fun.”

“Yes, I suppose there is,” she said with a sigh.

“I’ve spent the holiday season here a handful of times, and there are so many cool things to do.”

“I know.”

“But it’s not as cool as a sandy beach,” I said knowingly.

She smiled. “No, but when you think about it, I’m not sure I could really feel festive if it’s ninety degrees out and people are wearing bikinis.”

I laughed at the idea. “You can still have a Christmas tree and all the usual stuff.”

“Yes, but I think the snow and the cold are what really make it feel like Christmas.”

“So, no island vacations for you,” I said.

“Oh no.” She shook her head. “I think I’ll get there one day, but I’m not sure I would do it in December. But I’m going to miss them. It’s not going to

be the same. I won't get to see them Christmas morning or have my mom's famous rolls and her pumpkin pie."

"I would be happy to make you those foods," I offered.

She looked at me with a grateful smile. "You would do that?"

"Of course," I replied. "I can't replace your family, but I can try to make your holiday a little bit better."

"Thank you," she said, her voice thick with emotion. "That means a lot to me, but I'll be okay. I'm just being a little melancholy. I'll get over it."

"You're allowed to be melancholy," I said.

I could see the sadness in her eyes, and I wanted to do more to help her feel better. "Maybe we can do a little something," I suggested. "Something that's just for us."

She looked at me, intrigued. "Like what?"

"Well, we could go ice skating at Rockefeller Center, see the Rockettes, or even just walk around and look at all the holiday decorations."

"I don't know."

"If you stay busy, you won't feel like you're missing out on much. In fact, I know a lot of people come here just to see all the cool stuff."

"True," she said, nodding. "But it's not really the same."

"No, but it can be something new and exciting. There's this fantastic Broadway show that does a Christmas special—it's really cool. And you won't believe how beautiful the Christmas Boat walking tour on Staten Island is. It's so much better than it sounds." I tried to sound enthusiastic, hoping to pique her interest.

"How do you know all this?"

"My family came here a few times when we were younger," I explained. "Looking back, I think my dad was probably checking up on Kathy and checking in with some of the illegitimate offspring my uncle sired. But it was one of the places my mother used to love to visit. And we had a house in the Hamptons."

She laughed. "Of course, you did."

I shrugged. There was no point in downplaying my family's wealth. "We were here last year with my father for a quick visit. James, my cousin, took me to a few things. We should go on the walking tour. I think you would really enjoy it."

"Aren't you going home?" she asked.

"No. My dad will likely be here. Honestly, my family isn't like yours. We

rarely have a chance to get together.”

She eyed me skeptically. I didn't understand why she was so reluctant to hang out with me. It wasn't like we were strangers. “I'm sure you'll be spending time with your cousins.”

“My cousin and his family are going out of town,” I told her. “I'll be in their house.”

She sipped her drink. “I see.”

“What's on your mind, Ginger? You don't seem too convinced.”

“What's the real reason you want to show me all these Christmas sights?” she asked. There was a hint of playfulness in her voice, but I was also picking up the skepticism. She was searching for an ulterior motive.

“Honestly, Ginger, I want you to experience the magic of New York during the holiday season.”

“I live here,” she said. “I've experienced New York during Christmas. Many times. Many, many times.”

“We've never experienced it together,” I said, smiling.

She rolled her eyes. “I don't know if that's a good idea.”

“I'm not saying we should get married,” I joked. “I'm here alone. You're going to be here alone. Why not be alone together doing something fun?”

“How do you know I'm alone?”

I had never considered she might have a boyfriend. I didn't think there was a man in her life, considering she let me into her house—and had sex with me.

“Are you alone?” I asked.

She slowly smiled. “I don't have a boyfriend, but I'm not alone. I have friends.”

“Then you can have another one,” I said. “Besides, I'm sure you have plenty of holiday traditions in Vancouver. This is my way of creating new memories with you.”

“Dane,” she said and looked away.

I worried I was pushing too hard. She was going to cut and run if I pushed. “It's just fun,” I said softly. “Nothing serious.”

“I feel like you're trying to do something that I'm not entirely sure I'm interested in,” she said.

“I promise, no hidden agendas. You would be doing me a favor. I want to get out there and experience this stuff with someone. I don't want to be the dork going on the walking tour by myself or meandering around Times

Square alone. Pity me. Consider it an act of goodwill.”

She chuckled and took another sip of her cocktail, her mood seeming to lighten. “Alright. I have heard of a few things, but no Radio City Music Hall. That’s just a little too cliché for me.”

I grinned, relieved that she was willing to give it a chance. “Great! You won’t regret it.”

She fell quiet once again. I could see her mulling something over. I just didn’t know what it was. I wished she would talk to me.

“What is it?” I asked.

CHAPTER 22



GINGER

I stared at him and debated over what to tell him. My first tendency was to lie. It was so much easier to keep things buried but that seemed pointless. There was a good chance I wouldn't ever get to see him again. I needed to get all of this off my chest. I had some unanswered questions.

We'd always been honest with each other back in the old days. I could tell him anything and I never felt like he was going to judge me. I missed having someone I could talk to the way I talked to him. Carmen and Dez were my friends, and I did tell them everything, but not like I used to talk to Dane. He was the one person I felt knew my soul. I took a deep breath and looked into his eyes.

"I'm wondering why you think we broke up," I said. It was easier to just be blunt and straight to the point.

The question hung in the air for a moment. I'd always wondered why we'd never had closure, why things had ended so abruptly. I'd loved him more than I'd loved anyone. We never got a proper goodbye. I used to think about seeing him and asking why. I was certain that was why it was so difficult to get over him. It left a wound in my heart that had yet to heal.

Dane's gaze softened. He leaned in a little closer. "Ginger, I've asked myself the same thing countless times. But the truth is, it felt impossible because you were gone."

I nodded slowly, letting his words sink in. His explanation made sense, and part of me had always understood that. But still, I couldn't help but think back to that younger version of myself—the woman who had been so deeply in love, the woman who had left without the closure she'd needed.

"I wish we could have been able to talk things out," I said.

“Me too,” he said, nodding. “We were both left hanging. You were there one day and gone the next.”

“I know,” I said, nodding.

We both fell quiet, spacing out and lost in our own thoughts. Memories of those days flooded my mind. The excitement of our first date, the nervousness that had come before the first kiss, the countless hours of laughter and stolen kisses that we shared. We were young and wildly in love. We thought we were going to be together forever.

And then came the day when I’d boarded the plane to New York and left my heart in Vancouver.

My voice trembled as I spoke. “We were so young, Dane. I wish we could have talked before I left. I wish we could have had that closure.”

Dane reached out and placed his hand on mine, a comforting gesture that spoke of shared understanding. Neither of us said anything.

I drifted back to the moment my life changed.

As I stepped onto the lush grounds of Dane’s family estate, the vivid colors of late summer surrounded me. The smell of freshly cut grass and the last of the blooming flowers enveloped me. The September air was still warm, and a light breeze played with my hair as I walked up to the front door.

Dane was waiting for me at the door, grinning from ear to ear. He was always smiling. He always looked so happy. I could be having the worst day and see him and feel better. He made me feel like everything was going to be okay. I knew he did the same for other people too. He just made the room a little brighter when he walked into it. He was always making jokes and found a way to lighten the mood.

I was sure part of the reason he was so adept at making people smile had a little something to do with his handsomeness. I was certain he was the most handsome guy I had ever seen. At nineteen, he was a tall and lean young man, with lots of boyish charm. I knew that boyish smile was easily replaced by a ravenous man. When it was just me and him and he was turned on, that innocent smile turned into all hot passion.

“Welcome, Ginger,” he exclaimed, playing the role of a suave maître d’. He bowed his head and spoke with a French accent. “I’ve got a special surprise for you today.”

With a flourish, he guided me to a table set for two on his father’s back patio. The patio was surrounded by flourishing flower planters and lights neatly hung overhead. The backyard was like a private park with a huge pool

and a rose garden with a concrete bench. The garden was a memorial of sorts for Dane's late grandmother. Dane and I spent many hours sitting on that hard, cool bench talking about her and his childhood.

He pulled out a chair. "My lady."

I laughed, feeling very special. "Thank you, sir."

Dane poured a glass of bubbly for me, a nod to our newfound legal drinking age of nineteen.

"I have prepared a meal for you that you won't soon forget," he announced.

He went into the kitchen and quickly returned with two plates. "Tonight, you will be dining on seared filet mignon in a luscious wine glaze. I have paired the meat with a side of creamy potatoes and perfectly roasted vegetables. Your tastebuds are going to be singing."

"I can't wait," I said as he took his seat across from me. "It certainly smells good."

"Go ahead," he said. "I want to see your reaction."

I took the first bite and groaned. "It's so good! Dane, this is amazing. You really nailed it."

"Thank you. Moan again. I like hearing you moan."

I laughed, my cheeks blushing a little. "Stop."

"I've only heard you moan like that when we're—"

"Stop!" I laughed. "Where's your dad?"

"Not here," he said. "It's just us."

I took another bite, but I refused to moan, despite it being so damn good. He was an amazing cook.

"I've got something to share with you," I said, unable to contain my excitement any longer. I got up and grabbed the letter. Then I handed the envelope with the New York Culinary Institute emblem on it to Dane.

"What's this?" he asked.

"Just open it," I said, barely able to contain my excitement. I watched as he opened it, his handsome face showing his curiosity.

As he read the acceptance letter aloud, I beamed with pride. It had been my dream for as long as I could remember, and now it was becoming a reality. "I'm going to the culinary program at the New York Culinary Institute," I announced, my voice trembling with joy.

At first, Dane's eyes reflected my own excitement. "Ginger, this is incredible!" he exclaimed. "I'm so proud of you." He got up from the table

and leaned over to kiss me on the cheek, sending shivers down my spine.

“Thank you! I couldn’t wait to show you.”

“I didn’t know you applied,” he said as he sat down again.

“My parents surprised me,” I said. “I didn’t even know they did it, but apparently they’ve been saving money for my college education. They kept it secret for years. They were absolutely determined to give me this chance. They’ve given me enough to cover my room and board!”

When they told me what they had done, he was the first person I wanted to tell. I knew he was going to be excited for me.

“Wow, Ginny,” he said, smiling. “That is so cool. They really did that?”

I nodded. “Yes! My dreams are within reach. I’m going to become a food critic and a blogger. The journalism program I’m in will help me hone my writing skills.”

“I’m so proud of you, babe,” he said, smiling. “I really am. I have no doubt you’re going to kick ass.”

“My campus housing is really close to all my classes, and I’ll continue my journalism classes online. It’s a two-year program, so I’ll be able to start my career at twenty-one. Before, I thought it was just a dream. I thought it would take me years to get my degree, but now, it’s happening! This is going to change my life.”

“And mine,” Dane said in a soft voice. He was pushing veggies around his plate. The initial excitement was gone. I had been too absorbed in my own excitement to give his change in demeanor much thought, but I saw it now.

I chalked it up to jealousy. “I’ll come home for the holidays,” I said. “And as often as I can, if it doesn’t interfere with my studies. And you can visit me in New York.”

“Yeah,” he muttered.

I realized it wasn’t our original plan, but this was my chance to fulfill my dream. “You’re going to France to chase your dream. We were always going to be apart, but if I’m in New York, I’ll be closer. I checked the flight times. It’s a little over seven hours from New York versus the ten hours from Vancouver. So, technically, we’ll be closer.”

He didn’t look appeased. He took another bite and chewed while looking away from me. I was hurt. I really thought he would have been happy for me. We were both getting to chase our dreams. He was going to culinary school in Paris.

I could feel the tension rise between us. It was as if my excitement was a

threat to him. But I decided not to let it get to me. I downed the rest of my wine and leaned back in my chair.

“Dane, are you angry?”

“Nope.”

“I didn’t know I was going to get this chance,” I said. “This really is the chance of a lifetime. For people like me, this doesn’t happen. My family doesn’t have the money to send me to New York. The fact they did this for me means a lot. They’ve been saving for this. There is no way I would let them down by rejecting their offer. You’re going to France. Your family can afford to send you to the best cooking schools in the world. New York has always been my dream. I thought it was our dream.”

Dane looked up at me, his eyes filled with a mixture of anger and sadness. “Of course, it’s our dream, but it feels like you’re leaving me behind,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

I reached across the table and took his hand. “I know it’s hard, but we’ll make it work. We’ll talk every day, and when we have breaks, we’ll visit each other. It’s not going to be easy, but I believe in us.”

We ate in silence, but the food that had once been amazing now felt like cardboard. It was clear Dane wasn’t happy with me. It was disappointing.

Suddenly, Dane began clearing our dishes, his movements more deliberate, less carefree than before. I watched him, realizing that something had shifted in him. It was hard not to be angry right back at him. I was thrilled for him when he announced he was going to Paris.

“When do you leave?” he asked angrily.

“Two days.”

He stopped moving. He was stunned. The look on his face was devastating. I could feel the weight of his unspoken thoughts. I knew that we were both at a crossroads, each of us pursuing our passions and dreams. I saw the hint of sadness in his eyes, and I wished I could take it away, but this was my calling, and I had to follow it. My parents worked too hard to give me this gift. I couldn’t disappoint them, and dammit, I didn’t want to. I wanted the dream. I wanted to go to New York. It was one of the most exciting places in the world and I was given a gift that would allow me to be submerged in culinary heaven.

CHAPTER 23



DANE

As the scene from that fateful night played out in my mind, I could feel the weight of our past pressing down on me.

The walls of the kitchen seemed to close in, and my frustration simmered, threatening to boil over as I tossed the remnants of the meal I spent so much time cooking into the trash. I felt betrayed. I felt like the rug had been pulled from under my feet.

“Dane.” Ginger followed me into the kitchen. “Talk to me.”

She was excited, ready to celebrate her big move, but I couldn’t share her enthusiasm. Not like this. I caught a glimpse of our future. She was going to go to New York, and I knew I would not see her again. I lost her.

“I need to clean this up,” I muttered.

“Why aren’t you happy for me?” Her eyes shimmered with emotion. “We both get to chase our dreams now, Dane. Isn’t that amazing? Don’t you want me to be happy?”

My heart ached as I looked at her. “We could be together,” I said, my voice low, filled with longing.

A frown creased her forehead as she tried to understand my words. “We are together.”

I felt like she was bulldozing through our relationship. She had big dreams, bigger than me. Bigger than what Vancouver could offer. I couldn’t compete with the culinary program of her dreams, and the future she envisioned in New York felt worlds apart from the one I yearned for in Vancouver. I didn’t want the big city and bright lights. She knew that. How were we ever going to be happy together when we both aspired to lead lives on opposite ends of the continent?

"You don't get it," I said.

"No, you don't get it," she said. "I've been given a huge gift. This is amazing. I don't understand why you're not happy for me."

I shook my head. "What's your plan after school?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said, shrugging.

"Do you know what my plan is?"

"I know you want to open a restaurant," she said.

She still wasn't getting it. "Here! I want to open a restaurant here! This is our home! This is where we live. Our families are here!"

"Why are you so angry?" she asked, her voice tinged with hurt. "I thought you'd understand. I've supported you all these years. You can't actually be doing this right now, Dane. Seriously? Are you jealous? Did you expect me to just follow you around for the rest of my days?"

"No! That's not it at all. But we talked about a life here."

"No, you talked about it," she shot back. "I want to chase my dreams. This is my one chance to get out of here and see the world. I will never get the chance to experience life in New York."

"You and I could do it together," I said. "Once I'm back from school and establish the restaurant, we can take trips together."

She shook her head. "You're missing the point. I don't want to spend the rest of my days being your plus-one. Am I supposed to be the little lady sitting at home while you're achieving all the success you could ever want?"

"No," I said as calmly as possible. "It would be us together."

"Then come to New York."

"What?"

"If it's us together, you come to New York with me," she said defiantly.

"What do you want to do in New York?" I asked.

"Go to school. Live. Work."

"Don't you get it?" I asked. "You want to live like you're a young, single person. I want to start a career and set up a future. After this first restaurant is established, I want to start another."

"Listen to yourself. It's all about what you want. I'm just supposed to be the woman standing in the shadows behind you while you go and get all the success you've ever dreamed of. Do you even hear yourself right now? You're setting yourself up for an amazing life and I'm supposed to just fall in line. I'm supposed to just go along with whatever you want to do and not consider my own life. You're being a jerk. You're being selfish."

I could feel the divide deepening, the gulf between our dreams growing wider. As she made me out to be the villain, my defensiveness flared. I didn't want to be the one holding her back.

"I have always supported you," I said.

"Because I've never done anything," she shot back. "I've just gone with the flow. You have the world at your fingertips. You don't understand what this opportunity means to me. This is a big deal."

I took a deep breath, trying to gather my thoughts. I could see the hurt in her eyes, and it pained me to be the cause of it. "I don't want to hold you back," I said softly. "But I also don't want to give up on my dreams. We can find a way to make this work. Maybe we can compromise."

She shook her head. "I don't want to compromise. I want to live my life, too."

"I know," I said. "But we can't just throw everything away."

"I'm not asking you to throw everything away," she said. "I'm asking you to understand where I'm coming from. I'm asking you to support me and my dreams, too. It's not fair for you to expect me to put my life on hold for yours."

A knot formed in my stomach. She was right. It wasn't fair for me to expect her to always stand by my side without me doing the same for her. I wanted to make things right between us. I wanted to find a solution that would work for both of us, but New York was not my dream. I had no desire to live in the city. We were at a crossroads.

"I can't live there," I said softly.

"And I can't not live there."

We were quiet for several seconds. "Long-distance relationships don't work."

"What are you saying?" she asked.

"I'm saying you're leaving. I'm not. I'll be right here just like we planned. You're walking away."

"You're leaving!" She threw her hands up. "It's okay for you to go to France but I'm supposed to sit here and twiddle my thumbs. I'm supposed to keep working as a waitress and waiting for you. When you come back, are you going to hire me to work in your restaurant? Is that your plan?"

"No! That's not my plan. My plan is for us to both pursue our dreams and find a way to make it work. I don't want you to feel like you have to wait around for me."

She sighed and looked away. I could tell she was getting frustrated.

“It’s just not that easy,” she said.

“I know it’s not. But we can figure it out together. Maybe we can take turns visiting each other. Or we can find a way to make our schedules work so we can see each other more often.” I was grasping at straws at this point, but I didn’t want to lose her.

The pain in her eyes said I already had. I handled everything wrong.

“You’re going to be living your life and I’m going to be living mine,” she said with a sigh. “How are we going to make time to see each other?”

“If it’s important, we’ll do it,” I said.

“What if you decide you like France?” she asked.

“What if you decide you like New York?” I shot back.

Our relationship was going up in smoke. Years of loving her were imploding. She had painted me as the bad guy. She was going to blame me if she didn’t achieve her dreams, which were actually news to me. I thought we were both on the same track. I tried to get her to come to France with me, but she didn’t want to leave her family. She wanted to keep up on her online classes.

“So, you can’t come to France with me, but you can go to New York?” I said with frustration.

She looked at me with a mix of hurt and anger in her eyes. “You’re twisting my words,” she said. “I didn’t know I would ever have the chance to go to New York. I’m not like you, Dane. My daddy can’t give me a million dollars to chase my dreams. I didn’t even know it was a possibility, so I never allowed myself to think about it.”

“Don’t you dare throw my father’s wealth in my face,” I hissed. “I have never done anything to make you feel like you’re less than.”

Her eyes widened. “I never said I was less than! I guess all kinds of truths are coming out. You’re pissed I have a backbone. You’re shocked I actually have my own hopes and dreams. Is that why you’re with me? I’m malleable. I’m the poor girl with no means, so I’m at your mercy.”

“Don’t you dare,” I growled.

“No, Dane, don’t you dare! Don’t you dare try to reduce me to the chick on your arm. Don’t you dare try to make it seem like you’re driving this train and I should just be glad I’m on it because you’re magnanimous to let me ride your coattails.”

I took a deep breath, trying to calm down. We were going back and forth,

and we were only going to end up saying things that really hurt. I loved her. I didn't want to hurt her. "We should end it now," I whispered.

"What?" she gasped.

"I can't handle a long-distance relationship, and if you truly believe I'm holding you back, you should find someone who can give you more."

The pain on her face hurt me, but it was inevitable. "I see." She gathered her things. "I'll go then."

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak without saying something cruel. I couldn't look at the pain on her face. I walked to the door to see her out.

She followed me to the front door, tears in her eyes, a plea for reconsideration. "It doesn't have to be this way," she whispered, her voice quivering.

"Yes, it does," I replied, closing the door behind her.

"Dane," she said softly, pulling me from the depths of my own thoughts. I blinked, momentarily lost in the memories that had resurfaced so vividly. I had loved her so deeply back then. That love weighed heavily on me.

I met her gaze, the ghost of a smile tugging at the corners of my lips, but it didn't quite reach my eyes. What a rollercoaster our lives had been. I was about to open my flagship restaurant in New York City. It was a goal I had been working toward since the day she left me. I wanted this restaurant, but my heart still belonged in Vancouver, or at least I hoped it did.

I was aware of the dangerous path I was treading. Our reunion had stirred up long-buried emotions. I found myself falling a little too easily. I could fall in love with her all over again. Maybe I never stopped loving her. But I wasn't that guy anymore, or at least, I didn't want to be.

I took a deep breath, trying to shake off the memories that threatened to consume me. I couldn't afford to get lost in the past. Not now. I had put too much into the new restaurant to let it slip away.

"Yes?" I asked.

"Everything okay?"

I forced a smile. "Yes. Do you want another drink?"

She looked at her empty glass. "Yes, please."

I quickly signaled the waitress and ordered two more of the festive cocktails.

CHAPTER 24



GINGER

I stared at Dane, an assortment of emotions churning within me. What was I doing? Why had I brought up our breakup, something that had happened fifteen years ago? I wanted to backtrack, to dismiss the past as unimportant and long gone, but he shook his head, his eyes locked onto mine, and I knew he intended to tell me the truth. I wished I could take back the stupid question. I was opening Pandora's box. Some things belonged in the past.

"I ended things with you because it felt like I was in your way," he said with a shrug. "I didn't want to be the one to get in the way of your career. I didn't want to play second fiddle."

I listened to him and was both glad he was being honest, but I also felt bad because he felt that way. "I get it."

"I was immature," he said. "It was selfish. I let my emotions get in the way. I was angry and felt blindsided. I couldn't believe how quickly it was all unraveling. You were leaving. I guess I panicked a little. In my eyes, breaking it off then and there was easier than letting the relationship fizzle out painfully while we were worlds apart. I guess I wanted to rip the band-aid off."

A whirlwind of emotions engulfed me. My heart ached, and I could feel the tears threatening to spill over. It was silly. We broke up so long ago. It was in the distant past. I had moved on, built a successful life, and achieved my dreams. He did as well. So why did it feel like I was transported right back to that moment when he walked me out and ended our relationship?

I felt that pain in my heart. That feeling of losing half of myself.

I had been content in my own world and busy life. I hadn't thought about that painful breakup in years. Now, here I was, staring at the man who had

once been the love of my life, listening to him pour his heart out about the reasons he had left me, and I was right back there.

It tugged at my heart. Pain, anger, and frustration simmered within me, not at him, but at the circumstances that had driven us apart. What if we had just communicated better? What if we had faced those challenges together instead of letting them tear us apart? We were young and didn't know any better. We didn't know how special that relationship was. It had been so easy for us to be together. We didn't understand just how hard relationships could be.

Dane watched me closely, his eyes filled with a mixture of vulnerability and remorse. "What about you?" he asked. "Do you have any thoughts, looking back with the benefit of hindsight?"

I needed to be honest with him. It was the only way to find closure and move forward, fifteen years after the fact. I took a deep breath. "Dane, I appreciate your honesty. It's a lot to process, but I have to admit that the breakup affected me more than I ever let on. I loved you deeply, and our sudden separation was like losing a part of myself. It crushed me."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I do know the feeling, though."

"I've grown since then. I've worked hard to build the life I have now. I've gotten to chase my dreams and to find happiness. It's strange to revisit that pain from so long ago. It feels like we're rewinding the clock. I don't know if that's such a good idea."

"I understand what you mean. It's almost like we've stepped into a time machine, back to a place we thought was behind us."

"Maybe a place that should stay behind us," I cautioned.

We had both evolved and matured. Our lives had taken different paths. But the connection that had once bound us still held its power.

Dane reached out, his hand taking mine. "Ginger, I never wanted it to end like that. I never wanted to be the one to break your heart."

"I know," I said, smiling. "I didn't want to hurt you either."

"It was a bad time."

"Dane, it felt like you didn't trust me enough to make the move to NYC and still maintain our relationship. I believed we could have balanced both. It wasn't about choosing work over you. It was about embracing both. I wanted to chase my dreams and be with you. I loved you with every fiber of my being."

Dane's eyes softened as he listened to my words. "From where I was

standing, it seemed like you were so excited about the prospect of going to New York that you were willing to leave everything behind. It felt like I couldn't compete with your dreams. You had gotten this amazing opportunity and never considered my feelings."

I sighed and took another sip from my glass. "I understand what you're saying, but I wanted to include you in my dreams, just as I thought you'd include me in yours. For me, you were always a priority, and I thought we could have an exciting life together, even if it meant we had homes in both Vancouver and New York. I wouldn't have picked work over you."

"From where I was standing, that's exactly what you did," he said quietly. "You were leaving and that was that."

We lapsed into silence, the weight of our words hanging in the air. I did understand what he was saying, but if he had given me the chance, we could have talked through all of it. I imagined what our lives could have been like if we had been mature enough to talk through it. Instead, we got our hackles up and walked away without ever looking back.

I lifted my glass and broke the silence. "To what could have been."

Dane raised his glass, tapping it gently against mine, and a warmth washed over me. This, I realized, was the closure I had always yearned for but never received. After fifteen years, I finally felt a sense of peace. It was something I never expected I would get.

We talked a bit more and ordered another round of cocktails. I didn't want to leave. It was nice getting to catch up with him. He was such a huge part of my life that had been missing for too long. We laughed, we drank, and we eventually ordered some appetizers to take care of the munchies that always came with drinking.

"It's late," I said. "I should call for a ride. I won't be driving anywhere. You got me drunk."

He laughed. "Me too. Why don't we share an Uber?"

I nodded, finishing my drink while he ordered us a ride. The cold air outside did little to sober me up. I leaned against him while we waited for the car that fortunately arrived within minutes. We were quiet in the backseat on the way to my place. There was tension between us, but the good kind.

"I'll walk you up," he offered when the car stopped at my place.

"Why don't you just stay for a while?" I whispered.

The tension between us was palpable. "As much as I'd love to go inside with you, Ginny, we should call it a night. We've both had quite a bit to

drink, and we've been really vulnerable tonight. I don't want to do this wrong. I don't want any regrets. I think you remember the last time I went inside. You made it clear it was a mistake and was never going to happen again."

He was right, and his concern was evident. I couldn't deny that I had been the one to insist that our night of passion was a mistake. With a bittersweet smile, I nodded in agreement, silently aching for him like old times. "You're right," I said.

Dane walked me to the door. I looked at him, giving him one last chance to take me up on my offer that was probably a mistake, but a mistake I wanted to make. He gave me a quick kiss on the cheek. "Goodnight, Ginny."

"Goodnight, Dane."

I walked into my apartment and closed the door. My heart was pounding in my chest. What the hell was happening?

I knew I wanted him, but I also knew that things were complicated. Dane was my ex-boyfriend. There were a million sayings about not going back to what failed. The definition of insanity was doing the same thing and hoping for a different outcome. We both had lives, more so than we did fifteen years ago. I was not moving back to Vancouver, and he wasn't moving here. A long-distance relationship was still a bad idea.

But tonight, something had changed. We had both let our guard down and had shared things that we had never shared before. We had been vulnerable with each other, and it had felt good.

I walked into my bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed, feeling a mix of emotions. I was still in love with him, but I knew that getting back together would be complicated. However, something about tonight made me think maybe we could make it work.

Maybe it was the alcohol talking, or maybe it was the fact that we had both matured since our last breakup. Either way, I knew that I needed to think this through before doing anything rash.

I lay down on my bed, staring at the ceiling. The memories of our past relationship flooded my mind. The good times, the bad times, and everything in between. I smiled at the thought of how silly we were when we were younger. Our fights over who had the best taste in music or who had the better fashion sense. It all seemed so trivial now. But at the same time, those moments had shaped us into the people we were today.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. This was not the time to be

sentimental. I needed to be practical and think about what I wanted. Did I want Dane back in my life? And if so, what would that mean for me?

If I was being honest, there had never been another man that came close to making me as happy as he did. I didn't date because after the first ten minutes with a man, I had a mental list of all the reasons why he wasn't going to be right for me. Usually, the biggest strike against any man I dated was the fact he wasn't Dane.

I groaned and rolled over, pulling my pillow over my head as if that would block out the thoughts. It didn't work. It just made me think about him more. Hooking up with him last week had been a mistake for more than one reason.

I couldn't deny the fact that the passion and chemistry between us was still there. But what did that mean for us moving forward? Could we really make it work after all the hurt and pain we had caused each other?

I thought about calling him but dismissed it. We were both drunk and things might be said. Things we couldn't take back in the bright light of a sober day. We'd had enough revelations for one night. I needed to get some sleep.

Tomorrow, I would think about what it all meant, if it meant anything at all. It might just be the closure I needed to move on for real. Maybe I could actually go out with a man and not think about Dane.

CHAPTER 25



DANE

I walked into Grayson's massive house, which was eerily quiet with the family gone. Usually, the house was noisy with various TVs on, music, and the kids running amuck. I walked to the guest wing and into my room where I stripped, leaving a trail of clothing in my wake. I jerked back the blanket and fell face first into bed.

I couldn't get her face out of my mind. What the hell? I was acting like a teen boy that just got home from his first date. I was so fucking turned on.

I could have gone inside with her and had amazing sex. I had a feeling she probably would have let me stay the night this time. Mostly because we would have passed out.

But the morning after would have been awkward. We were going to be hungover and full of regret. I didn't want to take advantage of her when she was wasted. I wasn't drunk enough to make that mistake.

But damn. Ginger was always going to be the only woman I ever loved with my whole heart. I had resigned myself to that fact a long time ago. I hoped I would love again, but Ginny held my whole heart.

I closed my eyes with memories from the past and present mingling together.

"Come in," she whispered. Her lips brushed along my jawline. "Let's have a nightcap."

"Baby, we've had at least three nightcaps," I said, laughing.

"Then one more won't hurt."

"You're bad."

She wrapped her hand around my tie and pulled me forward like a dog on a leash. I didn't resist. I followed her inside the apartment and closed the

door behind us.

“You know why I didn’t want to come in,” I said.

She flashed a sexy smile. “That’s not true. You did want to come in. You’re just so used to being a noble man, you don’t know how to be bad. I’m telling you it’s okay to be bad. I want this. I want you.”

Her words were like a matchstick, igniting something deep within me. I leaned down to kiss her, hard and passionate. Our tongues battled for dominance, and I could feel her hands exploring my body, sending shivers down my spine.

“Last time you said it was a mistake,” I reminded her.

“Do we have to talk about that?”

I smiled and brushed her hair back from her face. “No. I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you,” she whispered. “Do you know how many dreams I’ve had about you?”

I grinned. “Naughty dreams?”

“I wouldn’t call them naughty, but they were very, very hot.”

“Did you touch yourself thinking about me?” I asked in a husky voice.

“Dane,” she said, giggling.

“You can tell me,” I said and slid my hands down her body. “I’ve used memories of our time together to get off. You better believe you are in my spank bank.”

She laughed again. “You’re so bad.”

I pushed her back onto the couch. “I’m going to show you how bad I can be.”

She giggled. The sound sent a thrill through me. She looked up at me with those beautiful hazel eyes, and I was lost. I couldn’t resist her. I didn’t want to resist her.

I reached under her to unzip her dress, my fingers trembling with anticipation. Her skin was soft and warm beneath my touch. I let out a low moan as I pulled her dress off her shoulders. She was wearing a lacy purple bra and matching panties. Her hard nipples poked through the fabric and my mouth watered to taste them. I leaned down and kissed one, then the other.

I looked up to see her watching me, her eyes half-lidded. She gave me a coy smile and reached for my belt. “Be my guest,” she said.

I smiled and popped open the button on my pants. I slid the zipper down and slipped off my shoes. Her hand slipped under the waistband of my briefs and circled around my cock. I groaned, my hips jerking at the feel of her soft

touch.

“Dammit, I want you,” I groaned and kissed her again.

She responded with a moan, her hand pumping my cock. I reached down and slid her panties off, my mouth going dry at the sight of her. I was so hard, it hurt.

I woke with a start to the sound of my phone buzzing. I looked around the room, trying to remember where I was. “Shit.”

I closed my eyes and tried to go back into the dream. I wanted to cross the finish line, even if it was just a dream. Unfortunately, it eluded me.

When I finally got out of bed, I was enjoying the peace and solitude of Grayson’s home. I had the place all to myself. It was a big house, much like mine back home. I was used to spending a lot of time alone. I was in the kitchen, preparing a cup of coffee and contemplating what the day held for me, when the doorbell rang. I assumed it was the housekeeper or some other hired help.

I opened the door, and to my astonishment, I found my father, standing there with a big grin on his face. His eyes twinkled and he looked like he was in high spirits. He embraced me in a warm hug, and I smiled back.

“Dad,” I said with a laugh and stepped back to let him in. “What are you doing here? I thought you said you got held up and couldn’t make it.”

“Things changed,” he said, shrugging. “I hope you don’t mind the surprise.”

“Of course not,” I said.

I was happy to see him, especially over the holidays. After nearly losing him, I promised myself I would never be inconvenienced to spend time with him again. “Not at all, Dad. I’m thrilled you’re here. Do you want some coffee?”

“Sure,” he said, smiling, leaving his suitcase in the foyer. “Did Grayson and the family leave already?”

“Yesterday,” I answered. “Are you going to be staying?”

“I’d like to,” he said. “Do you think they’d mind?”

I laughed and gestured around the spacious house. “No, they aren’t going to mind. There’s plenty of room. You can keep me company. I’ll take your suitcase to one of the other guest bedrooms.”

“I can do it,” he said. “I’m not old and decrepit. I can still get around.”

“Of course,” I said, smiling.

We got his suitcase and I led him to one of the guest rooms. I helped him

quickly make the bed. Afterward, we headed to the kitchen to make coffee and breakfast. I found myself spacing out a bit. It was a combination of a mild hangover and thoughts of Ginny. I couldn't shake the feelings that she stirred up.

We sat down with our plates and cups of coffee at the table in the corner of the kitchen flooded with morning light.

"How's everything going with the flagship?" he asked.

"Good," I said, nodding. "Really good. We served local food bloggers and critics last night."

"How did it go?"

"I think it went pretty well," I said. "We had a little hiccup, but it was fine."

"There are always hiccups," he said, laughing. "That's why you have those dry runs."

I smiled and took a drink of my coffee. My eyes gazed out the window. "I'm sure it will all be okay."

We both sipped our coffee and ate the bacon and eggs I made for us. My thoughts kept going back to last night. Telling Ginger how I felt had been freeing. I wished we had said it all years ago. I kicked myself in the ass for letting the time get away from me. We could have had an amazing life together but neither of us had been mature enough to acknowledge we might have jumped to conclusions.

"You seem a bit off today," Dad said, cutting through my musings. "Are you sure everything is okay with the restaurant?"

I sighed, getting up from the table to pour myself another cup of coffee. "It's going well, Dad. We're gearing up for the grand opening, and I've got a fantastic team. Things are good. The menu is perfect. My staff has the recipes nailed down."

"But?" he prompted.

"But there's something else on my mind," I said with a small smile.

My father's eyebrows lifted in concern. "What's troubling you?"

"Ginger Rowley is here," I confessed.

"Ginny? Ah, now that's a name I haven't heard in a long time. I always thought she was the one who got away."

I smiled at the memory. My father had always believed that Ginger was the right one for me, while I had previously disagreed. Now, as I stood in the kitchen, I had to admit that my father had been right all along.

“I guess I know what you mean,” I said.

“How is she doing?” he asked.

“Good,” I said, smiling. “She’s a food blogger. She was one of my invited guests last night.”

He cringed. “Ah, is that a good or bad thing? Do you think she harbors some negative feelings toward you after the breakup?”

“I don’t think so,” I said, shrugging. “No, she doesn’t. She did, but I don’t think she does now.”

He laughed. “You sound just as confused now as you did back then.”

“I am,” I said, sighing.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

I let out another sigh. “I don’t know that there is anything to talk about. When I first saw her, it was fireworks. She was still mad at me. We saw each other again and talked a bit. I thought we were good, but then she told me to leave.”

I didn’t have to fill in the details. My dad had a lot of sons, and he knew none of us were saints.

He smiled. “You should know sex does not heal old wounds.”

“No, but I thought it was an understanding.”

“And it wasn’t?”

“No. Because she’s a blogger, I invited her to the event last night. Things were cool. We went out for a drink afterward and had a chance to talk. Like really talk. There were a lot of misunderstandings fifteen years ago.”

“And now?”

“I’m not sure,” I admitted.

“You still love her,” he said.

“I don’t know if I do,” I replied. “It might just be residual feelings.”

“Did you guys talk about trying to make it work again?” he asked.

“No.” I shook my head. “It’s not that I don’t want to. I don’t think I can.”

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t think I can have a relationship with her again. Not with her. She deserves more than I can give.”

“I see.”

“I don’t mean to sound like a jerk,” I said. “But we broke up because she thought I was trying to hold her back. Nothing has changed. My life is in Vancouver and her life is here. It’s still the same problem, just fifteen years later.”

“Did you tell her that?”

“No,” I said, sighing. “I don’t even know if it’s an option. It’s just something that I thought about. I think we’re both of the same mindset. What we had was good, but that doesn’t erase the obstacles.”

“Do you think you will see her again?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know,” I said, sighing. “I just don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Because you’re worried you’ll fall back into old habits,” he said with a knowing smile.

“Yes,” I said. “And then we’ll both be hurt again. I’m glad we talked things out and it did give us some closure, but it just opened that door again. If we walk through it, I think we’ll suffer the same outcome.”

“Sometimes, walking away from the woman you love is the best thing you can do.”

He walked away from Kathy decades ago to give her the room she needed to have a relationship with his brother. I had a better understanding of what he went through back then. I understood why he was back in New York now. They were both free to love each other again.

CHAPTER 26



GINGER

I peeked out the window and saw a fresh layer of snow had fallen. I was in desperate need of coffee and sugar. I could make myself a cup, but I was lazy. I wanted a quick breakfast that didn't require me to actually cook it myself.

I put my hair up, pulled on a beanie, and grabbed my coat. I wasn't going to win any fashion awards in my gray joggers and hoodie, but I didn't care. It was Saturday morning and I wasn't up for getting dressed and doing the whole hair and makeup thing.

The moment I stepped outside, the chilly air nipped at my cheeks. I hurried to Frothed to get my quick breakfast and all the coffee I could drink. I wasn't one to usually stop by the café on the weekends, but today was different. My head was pounding. I was hungover and this was a bit of an emergency situation.

Carmen was busy behind the counter, making coffee orders and basically directing traffic for customers and crew alike. Dez was working the register. They were a dynamic duo, running the café like a well-oiled machine.

"What were you up to last night, Ginger?" Dez asked with a laugh. "You're looking a little rough."

"You don't say that to a woman," Carmen scolded.

"Thank you," I said with a small laugh. "I wasn't planning on entering any beauty contests."

I ordered a coffee and one of the breakfast burritos they sold, along with a Danish. This was one of those situations that required sugar, protein, and caffeine in copious amounts.

"You're hungover," Dez said.

“A little.”

“Did you go out?” Carmen asked.

“Not exactly.”

“Spill,” she said.

I sighed, knowing they were going to lecture me. “I was up late with Dane,” I confessed.

Carmen and Dez exchanged a look before springing into action. They swiftly delegated tasks to their staff. Carmen grabbed my hand while Dez put my order on a tray. Carmen led me to the small table way out of the way they sat at when they wanted to keep an eye on things while enjoying something to eat.

“Alright, spill,” Carmen said.

I took a drink of coffee. “There’s not much to say.”

“How late were you up? What exactly were you and Dane up to?” he asked with a cheesy grin.

I shook my head as I swallowed more coffee. “Not each other,” I assured them, though the thought had crossed my mind.

“No sex?” Carmen asked with disappointment.

“No sex.”

“Then what were you doing?” Dez asked, as if there was nothing else two people could do late into the night.

“Talk.”

He snorted. “Yeah, right.”

“We had a deep conversation about our past, and I guess I got a bit too emotional. I propositioned him, but he turned me down.”

Carmen’s eyes widened. “The scumbag!”

Dez grimaced. “Ouch. That sucks.”

“It wasn’t bad,” I said. “Dane was right to reject my advances. I was drunk and needy. I was totally vulnerable. The old wound of our breakup from fifteen years ago had been ripped open. I was feeling somewhat adrift. I was already in a bit of an emotional turmoil with the Christmas stuff. Not getting to go home has left me feeling a little bummed. I really was not in any place to be propositioning anyone. I’m just glad he didn’t take advantage.”

“Are you?” Carmen asked.

“Yes,” I said, nodding resolutely. “It would have been a mistake.”

“I’m sorry you’re feeling down,” Carmen said.

“I’m not really feeling down,” I said. “It’s just been a weird week.”

“How was the tasting last night?” Dez asked.

“Really good,” I said, smiling. “Except for the part when that asshole showed up and ruined it.”

“Is the asshole Dane?” Carmen asked with confusion.

I laughed. “No, Sampson.”

They both groaned. They knew all about the blogger from hell.

“What happened?” Carmen asked.

“We were all enjoying a really, really good meal,” I said. “Which by the way, you guys have got to go there when he opens. That food was damn good.”

“You might be a little biased,” Dez teased.

“Not at all. It really is that good. Anyway, Sampson was being such a dick. He complained about everything as usual. Nothing was right. Everything was horrible. He hated the décor, the food, the seasoning, everything. The rest of us had nothing but great things to say, but he just kept bitching. I finally had enough. I lost my cool a little.”

“Uh oh,” they said together.

“Yeah,” I groaned. “I went off on him and then Dane appeared. Dane was trying to be cool. Sampson wouldn’t shut his mouth. Dane walked him to the door, and I don’t know what was said, but it must have been pretty bad. Dane never came back in. I decided to leave early. I felt so bad for causing a scene and stealing the spotlight from the food. Dane was pacing outside. I’ve seen him pissed before, but last night he was really pissed. Anyway, we went to get a drink and that turned into many drinks.”

“And nothing happened?” Dez asked with surprise.

I shook my head. “If I wasn’t so drunk, it might have happened, but Dane said no. Or maybe it wouldn’t have. We unpacked all the drama from the past. It probably reminded him of all those bad feelings, and he doesn’t want anything to do with me. I wouldn’t blame him. I’m kind of in the same boat.”

“What did you guys come up with?” Carmen asked. “You said you talked about the past.”

I smiled. “Basically, we both hurt each other. If we had stopped for five seconds and heard each other out, we might have been able to understand where we were coming from. We were both young and a little reckless. We jumped without thinking. He thought I was walking away from him, and I thought he was being unsupportive. Both things were a little true, but neither were intentional.”

“Do you think you guys can start over?” Carmen asked.

“No. I don’t think so. I think that chapter is closed. While I do feel better after getting his side of things, it doesn’t really change anything. The problems that split us up are still there. He doesn’t want to live here, and I don’t want to live there. He doesn’t believe in long-distance relationships, and I don’t blame him.”

“You seem sad,” Dez said.

“In a way it feels like we broke up all over again,” I said. “Talking about the split brought up a lot of old memories and feelings.”

Maybe it was the fact that I was finally coming to terms with the reality that Dane and I were never going to work out. I supposed there was always a part of me that thought there might be a chance we would get together again one day. Now, I knew it wasn’t possible.

“But you still love him,” Dez said.

“I think I have old love for him,” I said, smiling.

“Love is love,” Carmen said.

“I love the boy he was. I was in love with a nineteen-year-old boy when I was nineteen. I’m not nineteen and neither is he. We had our chance.”

“You slept with him,” Dez said. “I would say that means there are still some feelings.”

“Residual,” I said. “Like when someone loses their leg and feels phantom pains. It’s not real.”

“What if he’s your guy?” Carmen asked. “What if he’s your soulmate?”

“I would think a soulmate would be willing to do anything to be with me,” I muttered.

“And vice versa,” Dez replied.

“It’s a weird feeling,” I said. “I love him but he’s also the person that hurt me. If I let myself love him again, I’m sure he will hurt me again because, like I said, nothing has changed.”

Dez and Carmen nodded in agreement.

“But that doesn’t mean you have to stop loving him,” Carmen said. “You can still love him and move on at the same time.”

“That’s easier said than done,” I replied. “It’s hard to let go of someone you once loved so deeply.”

“I know,” Dez said. “But sometimes, letting go is the best thing you can do for yourself.”

I sighed. “I know you’re right. It’s just hard to accept.”

“I understand,” Carmen said. “But you’re strong enough to do it. You’ve been through so much already.”

“You’re right,” I said.

“Unless she doesn’t,” Dez said.

“What?” I asked.

“What are you talking about?” Carmen asked her husband.

“Stop trying to predict the future and live in the present,” Dez said. “Don’t let the past dictate your future happiness. Sit back and enjoy the ride.”

“That’s a lot of philosophy in three sentences,” Carmen said, laughing.

“Remember what we talked about?” Dez said while looking at his wife.

Carmen looked at him and gave him a funny look. Dez gave her a look and then Carmen smiled.

“Stop it,” I muttered. “You guys are doing your married-people speak. What are you two plotting?”

Dez and Carmen grinned. “We know you are going to be alone for Christmas. We were going to ask you to come with us to Montreal.”

“What?”

“Come with us,” Dez said. “We were going to ask you Monday, but here we are. We already booked two rooms.”

“I’m not going to crash your party,” I said, smiling. “Thank you for thinking of me, but you two do this every year.”

“We want you to come,” Dez said. “You’re going to love it. We’ll be indulging in cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, and ice-skating. It’s a really charming French-Canadian town. There are good restaurants and some cool boutiques.”

“We told you last year we wanted you to come with us,” Carmen said. “We wanted to do this for you because we hoped this would help lift your spirits. We know you’re bummed about not getting to go home. Come with us.”

I was touched by their gesture and felt a surge of gratitude. It sounded just like what I needed. “You guys are so sweet.”

“You know, Ginger, the room has a king-sized bed,” Dez said. “Big enough for two people. It could be a fun couple’s retreat.”

“Very funny,” I said.

“That sounds like a very good idea,” Carmen said, grinning.

I blushed and looked away. “I don’t know about that. I’m not really looking for a relationship right now, old or new.”

Dez put his arm around his wife and pulled her closer. “We just want you to have a good time, Ginger. You deserve it.”

I smiled at them, feeling grateful for their kindness. “Okay, I’ll go with you. Thank you both so much. Tell me how much I owe you.”

“It’s on us,” Dez said.

“No.” I shook my head. “I’ll pay. I pay or I don’t go.”

“You won’t regret it, I promise,” Carmen said. “It’s going to be so much fun.”

“Thank you, guys. I’m going to get out of here. I need to work on the review for Dane’s restaurant.”

“I’ll get you a refill,” Carmen said and took my cup. “It looks like you could use it.”

I laughed. “Thank you.”

I finished my burrito and pastry and took my fresh coffee. I started the walk back to my place, thinking about what I was going to write about Dane’s restaurant. I wanted to be fair and unbiased. I had nothing but good things to say about the food.

When I got home, I showered and felt a little better. The hangover was pretty much gone. I was ready to start the article.

As I sat at the table, typing away, I thought about the offer Dez and Carmen had made. The idea of a couple’s retreat was tempting, but I wasn’t a couple. Dane was not my boyfriend. Pretending he was would just confuse things.

CHAPTER 27



DANE

I sat down with a cup of coffee and was sitting by the window, gazing out at the freshly fallen snow. It was a beautiful morning. Grayson's home had a calming effect on me, something I truly appreciated, especially after the last couple of days. We opened for business in less than a week. This was when everything got a little chaotic.

I was at the restaurant late last night making sure the final orders were in. I had done all I could to make sure everything was in place and ready for the grand opening.

My father walked into the kitchen looking refreshed and more at ease than when he'd arrived. He looked younger than he had in years. There was color in his cheeks, and he seemed to be smiling a lot more than he used to.

"Morning, Dad." I greeted him with a warm smile as he approached the coffeemaker.

"Good morning, son." He returned the smile and poured himself a cup. "More snow?"

"Yep," I said, nodding. "Looks like a few inches."

"It's beautiful," he said as he gazed out the window.

"Any plans for the day?" I asked.

Dad nodded, his gaze distant. "Yes, I'm meeting an old friend for lunch."

"An old friend?" I inquired, trying to sound casual despite being very curious. I was pretty sure I knew who that old friend was, but I didn't want to come right out and say it.

He shrugged, feigning nonchalance. "Just someone I used to know."

I laughed. "Of course."

Dad thought he was being discreet, but I had a feeling I knew exactly who

he was meeting for lunch. Aunt Kathy. I wasn't sure why he was hiding it. They were grownups. They were single and could do what they wanted. I knew none of us cared if our father was seeing a woman. I knew Grayson and his brothers were fine with the relationship as well.

As my father finished his coffee, I wondered what had happened between him and Aunt Kathy. They had dated briefly and then somehow Art got involved. Neither one of them were willing to tell the whole story. I couldn't say I actually wanted to know all the dirty details because that's just gross.

I didn't need to picture my father doing the nasty with my beloved Aunt Kathy.

But now, over thirty years later, they were reconnecting. I was curious to know if there was more to their reunion than just a friendly catch-up. I couldn't imagine my father remarrying, but it wasn't a horrible idea. I wanted him to be happy. I knew Grayson and his brothers wanted their mom to be happy. And it might take some of the pressure off James and Rory. They were expecting a new baby and probably would appreciate being able to focus on their growing family.

I was going to talk to Grayson when they got back. I wanted to make sure they were on the same page. If they wanted us to discourage my father, then I would have to think about doing it.

"What will you be doing today?" he asked casually.

"I'm going to stop by the restaurant and check on a few things," I said.

I pulled out my phone to check for the latest gossip about Edge. It seemed to be the best way to hear about what was happening in my own establishment. I didn't mind the rumors. It had gone a long way toward drumming up some serious publicity for the restaurant.

I smiled when I came across the article written by Ginny. I skimmed through it, eating up the words with my eyes and smiling the whole way.

"What's that?" Dad asked.

"It's a review of the restaurant," I explained. "Written by Ginger Rowley."

I gave my dad the phone, watching as he studied the screen for a moment, his brow furrowing. Then his face broke into a knowing smile. "Ah, Ginny," he said. "I remember her writing well."

I nodded, feeling a sense of nostalgia wash over me. Ginger's words had always been captivating. Her writing style was elegant and clever, with enough wit that added a unique charm to her pieces. I expected her to give

me a good review because we earned it, but she was very good at making it a fair review as well.

I began to read the article aloud, my father listening intently.

“Edge, the new culinary masterpiece in the heart of the East Village, is nothing short of an enchanting journey for the senses. From the moment you step inside, the restaurant embraces you with its ambiance—a blend of modern sophistication and timeless charm. There’s just enough holiday decor sprinkled around the dining room to remind you what time of the year it is.”

My dad chuckled softly. “Very clever.”

I continued with the article. “The menu is a symphony of flavors.” I paused. “Symphony, that’s a good word.”

“I like it,” he said, nodding.

“Symphony of flavors is a testament to the creativity and dedication of the culinary team. Each dish is an exquisite work of art, carefully crafted to surprise and delight. There is nothing boring about the dishes. It’s the dishes you remember sharing with your family but with an updated, innovative twist.”

I felt a surge of pride as I read her words. Ginger had a way of making everything sound pretty and eloquent. It was a quality I had always admired in her.

“Go on,” Dad said.

I smiled and found my place again. “In a city that prides itself on culinary innovation, Edge stands out as a true masterpiece. The passion and artistry behind each dish are palpable, and I found myself savoring every bite, reluctant to move on to the next dish.”

I lowered my phone, looking at my father. “She captured it perfectly, didn’t she?”

Dad’s eyes held a fondness as he nodded. “She has a gift, that’s for sure. Her words have always had a certain magic. I always thought she would go on to be a famous author.”

The review was a relief, especially after the drama following Sampson’s harsh critique of the restaurant. The title of his article, “Disappointed by Mediocrity at Edge,” had felt like a punch to the gut. It had left me seething with anger and frustration. It was hard to sit back and take the high road when I wanted to get out my side of the story.

But Ginger’s review, with its praise, acted as a soothing balm for my wounded pride. It was the perfect counterweight. It restored my faith in the

restaurant I worked so hard to make happen.

“That’s a good review,” Dad said. “Good job.”

“Thanks,” I said and put my phone away.

I had to find Ginger and thank her for the beautiful review.

My father watched me, a glint of understanding in his eyes. “Are you planning to visit her, Dane?”

I nodded, determination settling in my chest. “Yes, Dad. I need to thank her. She did me a huge favor.”

We finished our coffee and parted ways. I was looking forward to thanking her in person. It was a lot like playing with fire, but I wanted to do it anyway.

After answering a few emails and checking in on some of the happenings at my other restaurants, it was time to head out. It was so hard not to stop by her place. I would have loved to knock on her door and thank her in person, but I didn’t want to ambush her. I wasn’t certain she was even talking to me after the other night. On my way to my restaurant, I saw a café that I had heard served some of the best coffee in the area. I could use a little boost.

I parked my car a short distance from Frothed. It looked pretty busy. I walked inside, looking at things from my expert point of view. It had a quaint charm. It didn’t try too hard, which I liked. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee and the gentle hum of conversation washed over me. The place was very welcoming. It felt like the kind of place that was a neighborhood hangout.

It was the kind of place where regulars and locals gathered to savor their daily cup of coffee and gossip. As I walked up to the counter, I noticed the baristas behind it greeting customers by name.

I joined the line, glancing around and taking in the comfortable seating arrangements, the exposed brick walls, and the mismatched tables that gave the place a very cool vibe. My thoughts were preoccupied until I approached the counter and turned my attention to the woman in front of me.

She had her back to me, and without thinking, I found my gaze wandering for a brief second. She had a nice ass. A perfect ass. It was the kind of ass a man could squeeze as he lifted her up. It was an unfortunate coincidence that she turned around just as I was checking out her butt, catching me in the act.

“Ginger?”

“What’s the matter? Do I have something on the back of my jeans?” She was teasing me. I was so busted.

“Oh, um, no, not at all. I was just—”

My words were cut short as she interrupted me, clearly enjoying my discomfort. “Checking me out?”

I smiled. “Yes.”

She shook her head. “I guess some things never change. Are you following me?”

“Following you?” I repeated. “I didn’t know you were here.”

“Then what are you doing here?”

“Actually, I’m here to get you a coffee,” I said.

Her eyebrows lifted in surprise. “Oh, really?” She crossed her arms, clearly not believing me. It wasn’t a great story, but I had been busted and was trying to save face. “I didn’t peg you for the coffee-fetching type.”

“It was going to be a surprise.”

“Oh, trust me, it’s a surprise,” she replied.

She moved to the side. That was when I realized she had already ordered. I made my way to the register and ordered my own. She collected her coffee and pretended to be busy with her phone. I hoped she was waiting for me. A moment later, my order was ready, and I noticed that I had ordered her the exact same drink she had gotten for herself.

I flashed a grin, accepting my coffee from the barista, who was now eyeing us with curiosity. “Great minds think alike, right?”

She shook her head. “This is very stalkerish.”

“I swear, I had no idea you would be here. I heard about this place from a couple of my staff members. I wanted to check it out.”

Ginger’s eyes flashed with amusement. “What are you really doing here, Dane?”

The barista behind the counter looked at me, then Ginger. I glanced at the nametag. Carmen. Carmen was looking at me like she knew me.

“Is this the guy?” Carmen asked Ginger.

“Stop,” Ginger hissed.

I flashed a playful smile at Ginger. “Have you been talking about me when I’m not around?”

The sudden flush that spread across her cheeks made her even more endearing. I watched as she struggled for words, her composure momentarily giving way to her surprise. “No.”

I took a sip of my coffee, savoring the taste as I watched her. “Well, I have been thinking about you,” I admitted.

“Oh boy, he is a charmer,” Carmen said.

I turned my attention back to the barista. “I’m Dane, Dane Bancroft,” I said.

“It’s very nice to meet you. I’m Carmen. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

I looked at Ginger once again. I really wanted to know who this Carmen person was and just how much she knew. Judging by how red Ginger was, Carmen knew just about all there was to know about me.

CHAPTER 28



GINGER

Frothed was busy as usual. I had stopped by to grab my usual coffee before running errands. My article was picked up by one of the local papers and I wanted to write a follow-up to answer some of the questions readers were asking about Edge on my blog. I had about a million things to do before I went out of town for a few days with Carmen and Dez.

I was kicking myself in the ass for needing a coffee fix because that was why I was in this predicament.

“Carmen, don’t,” I begged.

“Dez! Take five, Dane is here!”

Dane looked at me again. “Sorry,” I muttered.

“Let’s sit down,” Carmen said and stepped out from behind the counter.

Dane looked amused. We sat down at the table we always used.

“So, this is Dane,” Dez said.

“I feel like I’m a little out of the loop here,” Dane said, laughing. “You all know me, but I don’t know you.”

I sighed, knowing the introductions were inevitable. “Fine,” I blurted out. “Dane, meet Dez and Carmen. They are two of the busiest bodies in the East Village as well as my best friends. At least, they used to be.”

Dane smiled and shook Dez’s hand. “It’s nice to meet you. Both of you. Apparently, you know all about me. I’m afraid to know just how much you know.”

“Not enough,” Carmen said with a goofy smile.

“Any friend of Ginny’s is a friend of mine,” Dane said.

“Ginny,” Carmen said and looked at me. “You call her Ginny?”

“You don’t?” Dane asked.

“No. Not usually. Sometimes.”

I wanted to crawl under the table. “Guys, please.”

“Are you ready for tomorrow?” Dez asked.

Dane raised his eyebrows as he sipped his coffee. “What’s tomorrow?”

“You didn’t ask him?” Carmen gasped.

“Guys, not now,” I groaned.

“We’re leaving tomorrow for a little getaway,” Dez said. “We’re going to Montreal. We’ve already booked a room for you and Ginger.”

Dane choked on his coffee. “You did?”

“Yes!” Carmen grinned. “It’s going to be a blast. We’re going to eat, drink, and see all the sights. There is so much to do and see. It’s all decked out for the holidays. We told Ginger all about it.”

“I see,” Dane said.

“We leave in the morning,” Dez said. “You’re going, right?”

Dane looked at me, clearly on the verge of laughter. “I wasn’t aware there was a trip,” Dane said.

“You have to come,” Carmen said. “It’s going to be a lot of fun. Have you ever been to Montreal?”

Dane chuckled and I felt my cheeks burning. “Guys, we’re from Canada. Trust me, he’s been to Montreal.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever been at Christmas,” Dane said.

“Dane, I didn’t ask because you’ve got the restaurant opening and I’m sure you’re very busy,” I said.

“We’ll be back in time for the opening,” Carmen said. “Besides, you’re not actually going to be cooking, right?”

“No,” Dane said, laughing. “I have a very capable team that will be fine without me. I don’t need to babysit their every move.”

“See,” Dez said, shrugging. “It’s all worked out.”

“I would love to go. It sounds like a good chance to relax before the opening. Is that okay with you?”

All three of them looked at me. I couldn’t say no. They put me on the spot. “I, uh—”

“Were you planning to fly?” Dane asked. “I don’t have the family jet here, but I could get it back.”

“Oh, it’s only about a six-hour drive,” Dez said.

“I have my cousin’s Navigator,” Dane offered. “I’m not sure what you had in mind, but that thing has all the bells and whistles. It’s pretty roomy.”

“Hell yeah.” Carmen jumped at the chance.

I was going to kill them both. How dare they put me on the spot? The car ride with Dane would be an experience all its own, and I had mixed feelings about that. That was going to be hell. How in the hell was I going to spend hours beside him without wanting to touch him?

“That would be great,” Dez said, nodding. “Are you sure you don’t mind? We don’t want to invite you on a trip and make you drive.”

“I don’t mind,” Dane said. “I can pick you up in the city or you can meet me at the estate.”

“The estate,” Carmen said, laughing.

“My cousin’s house,” Dane said, smiling. “Ginger knows the address.”

“Perfect,” Dez said.

The café started to pick up again. “We better help them out,” Carmen said. “It was nice to meet you, Dane. I’m looking forward to getting to know you better.”

“Me too,” Dane said, smiling.

They left me alone at the table with Dane. He looked at me with amusement. “That was interesting.”

“Don’t say it,” I groaned.

“Were you going to tell me I’d been invited on a getaway?” he asked.

“No.”

“I guess it’s a good thing I stopped by,” he said, laughing.

“I know you’re busy,” I said.

Dane tilted his head. “I can make time for you, Ginger. You know that.”

I smiled at his words. Dane always had a way of making me feel special. At least, he used to. “I know, but this is different. It’s several days away with Dez and Carmen. They are strangers to you.”

“You’re not,” he said, shrugging. “If you don’t want me to go, I won’t.”

I couldn’t tell him no. That would just be rude. And I supposed there was a little part of me that did want him to go. But I wasn’t going to tell him that. I didn’t want to make this any more awkward than it already was.

“No, it’s fine,” I said. “You’ve already got them excited for that luxury ride.”

He smiled and sipped his coffee. “What have you told them about me?”

“Nothing.”

“Liar,” he said, laughing. “They both knew who I was. Do they know me from before or as the guy you’ve recently met?”

I wrinkled my nose. "A little of both."

"They know about—" He didn't have to finish the question.

"Yes."

He nodded. "Which explains why they assumed we would be okay sharing a room."

"I'm sorry," I said again. "I'll kill them for you."

"I don't mind, Ginny. I want to go. It will be nice to get away. And I think it would be nice to spend time together."

"But it means nothing," I added.

"Old friends," he said, smiling.

"And nothing else."

"Relax," he said. "I promise you are safe from me whisking you away to Vegas for a quickie wedding. It's a few days. No big deal."

"Thank you for being so understanding," I said.

"I should go," he said. "I apparently need to pack, and I need to make sure everything is taken care of at the restaurant."

"I guess I'll see you tomorrow," I said with resignation.

He got to his feet and flashed me a sexy smile. "Don't sound too excited. I promise I'll be on my best behavior."

After he left, I turned my attention to Carmen and Dez, who were doing their best to look busy. I knew otherwise. "Get your asses over here," I hissed.

"Can't," Carmen said. "Busy."

"Me too," Dez said, laughing.

"I'm not leaving until you two get over here and answer for your crimes."

Eventually, they came back to the table and sat down with goofy grins on their faces. I frowned at each of them, prepared to properly scold them for putting me on the spot.

"Well?" I snapped. "What do you have to say for yourselves?"

Carmen held up her hands in surrender. "Okay, okay, we admit it was a little sneaky, but we just wanted to see the sparks fly between you two."

"Sparks?" I repeated, confused.

Dez nodded eagerly. "Yeah, come on, Ginny. We all know you're into him."

I rolled my eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"Don't play coy," Carmen said, leaning in closer. "I saw the way you looked at him. The way you get all flustered when he's around."

I opened my mouth to protest but then closed it again. They weren't entirely wrong.

As I thought back to the moments I had spent with him, I realized that they were right. I had been trying to deny it to myself, but I had developed feelings for him. Not developed. They were old feelings bubbling to the surface. I had tried to push them aside, telling myself that it was just a physical attraction, but it was more than that. I cared about him. I loved him.

But what about him? Did he feel the same way? I couldn't be sure. He had always been a flirt, charming and engaging with everyone he met. Maybe he was just being friendly with me.

"You guys know it's not good," I said. "He broke my heart. What are you guys trying to do to me? Do you really want to put me back in that situation?"

"He's into you," Dez said. "I saw it."

I looked at Dez skeptically. "Are you sure?"

Dez nodded confidently. "Positive. It's a guy thing. He looked at you like he wanted to drag you out of here and take you to the nearest bed he could find."

"No," Carmen scolded. "Not like that. Yes, he's obviously into you, but he's willing to hang out with your best friends. That says a lot about a man. Plus, we totally ambushed him, and he took it in stride. He could have run in the opposite direction, but he didn't."

A flutter of hope rose in my chest. "You guys are on my shit list, just so you know. I cannot believe you asked him in front of me."

"Look, Ginny," Carmen said. "We're not trying to push you into anything. We just think you should explore this. Talk to him. See what happens. There's a good chance things could be different this time."

I chewed on my bottom lip, considering their words. Maybe they were right. Maybe it was worth exploring. I looked at my friends, who were watching me with hopeful expressions. I took a deep breath.

"Okay," I said. "Not that I really have any say, considering the two of you already opened your big mouths. You guys are lucky he didn't freak out."

"That tells me he's a cool dude," Dez said, grinning.

"We're going to have a blast," Carmen said. "I'm so damn excited. Have you packed yet?"

"No," I said, sighing.

"Go home," Carmen said. "Pack. Make sure you pack a sexy bikini."

“Hello? It’s December. I have no intention of packing a bikini.”

“There’s a hot tub,” Carmen said, smiling.

I shook my head. “You guys are terrible.”

“This is for your own good,” Dez said. “We’re just trying to make sure you give yourself the chance to have fun. You’re young. We’re not saying you need to marry the man, but you should at least give yourself the opportunity to see where things go.”

I nodded slowly, still unsure. But the idea of having fun and letting loose was tempting. Maybe it was time to forget about the past and just live in the moment.

“Okay,” I said finally. “I’ll go pack.”

“Good girl,” Carmen said, smirking. “I have a feeling this is going to be an unforgettable trip.”

As I left the coffee shop, I felt a mix of excitement and nerves. What was I getting myself into? But I knew one thing for sure. I was ready to take a chance and see where this adventure would take me.

I arrived home and started packing my bags, trying to decide what to bring. Carmen’s words echoed in my mind as I reached for a skimpy bikini. What was I thinking? This was crazy. But I couldn’t deny the rush of excitement that came with the idea of exploring something new with Dane. We never got the chance to have a romantic getaway. We always talked about it, but we never actually did it. We always thought there would be time.

And then one day, I was in New York, and he was in France.

CHAPTER 29



DANE

I packed my bags into the back of the SUV and went back inside to get a few of the snacks I had picked up at the store. It had been a long time since I'd taken a road trip. I was looking forward to it. This was going to be fun. I didn't know Carmen and Dez, but our brief encounter made me think they were going to be fun to be around.

Carmen, Dez, and Ginny showed up right at seven. I had the Navigator warmed up and ready to go. "I'll load the bags," Dez offered.

"This is one hell of a house," Carmen said, looking up at Grayson's estate.

I would have offered to give them a tour, but it wasn't my place. "I think we're ready," I said.

"Let's go!" Carmen clapped her hands.

Dez and I sat in front for the first leg while the ladies sat in the back. When we stopped at the border, we switched, and Ginger sat up front with me. It was like going back in time. I remembered driving out to the beach with Ginny in the passenger seat. Usually, she had her hand in my lap or mine in hers. She would lean over and kiss my cheek while I drove. I missed those days.

"That's it." Carmen pointed ahead. "Up there on the right."

We arrived at the hotel nestled against a mountain. The snowy landscape looked amazing. The lodge was adorned with twinkling lights and festive decorations, and the entire town seemed to be in the holiday spirit. The sight of families playing in the snow with a food truck parked nearby selling hot chocolate and hot apple cider made me nostalgic. It was a winter wonderland straight out of a postcard. I understood why Carmen and Dez were so fond of

the place. They had talked about how they came here every year.

The entire town was lit up with Christmas lights. Every tree had the trunk wrapped with the bare branches covered as well. There was a huge nativity set up with soft lights aimed at it.

As we stepped out of the car, snow crunched beneath my boots. A gust of cold wind blew against my face, reminding me of the biting winter air. I zipped up my jacket and pulled my hat down over my ears.

“Wow, this is amazing,” Dez said, taking in the scenery.

“I know, right?” Carmen agreed, “It’s like something out of a storybook.”

Ginger and I exchanged a glance, both feeling the magic of the moment. I thought of all the romantic movies I had seen set in a similar snowy wonderland.

Carmen, Dez, Ginger, and I made our way into the lobby to check in. The lobby was completely decked out with Christmas décor. It was like we stepped into the North Pole.

“Excuse me,” Ginger said quietly. “Is it possible to get another room?”

I looked at her with surprise. “A third room?” I asked.

She gave me a defiant look. “Yes.”

“Ginger,” Cameron hissed.

It hurt a little. I had come along with the understanding she and I were going to be sharing a room. I couldn’t say I wanted to sleep alone.

Fortunately, the woman behind the counter shook her head. “I’m sorry, but we’re completely booked.”

It was a couple of weeks before Christmas, after all. I was secretly happy she was going to be stuck with me. That was one of the main reasons I agreed to come along. I wanted us to spend some time together. I supposed I was a glutton for punishment. She hadn’t completely broken my heart. May as well give her another shot at it.

“Why don’t we meet back down here in an hour?” Dez offered. “We’ll get dinner and check out some of the festivities.”

“That sounds good to me,” I said, nodding.

I followed Ginger to our shared room. We’d already spent more time together today than in all the years since we’d parted ways, and there was a part of me that wondered how this trip would unfold. It could be the final end of things, or it could fan the spark that had been reignited since we saw each other again after all these years apart.

We walked into our room, which was a junior suite. It looked like a small

apartment. The room itself was very comfortable, with warm wooden accents and a sliding glass door that led to a private balcony. It was late afternoon, and the snowflakes were falling gently outside, coating the landscape in a soft, powdery layer. I was drawn to the beauty of the scenery, but as I turned away from the view, my gaze fell on Ginger.

She stood by the glass door and stared outside. "It's so pretty," she said.

"It is," I said, nodding. "It's beautiful. You're beautiful."

She turned to look at me. "I think we should probably unpack."

"I want to check this place out," I said.

I meandered around the room, taking my time to inspect the room's features—peeking into the bathroom, checking out the closet, and even pretending to be intrigued by the coffeemaker. I could feel the tension. We had an hour before we could make our escape to the safety of people. Being around Dez and Carmen provided a buffer. When it was just us, it felt awkward.

When I made my way back to the living area, Ginger was back at the window looking out at the town below. For a brief moment, I was taken back to one snowy afternoon at my father's estate. We had just had sex. Everyone in the house was gone and we had taken full advantage of the privacy. She had stood at the window watching the snow fall. Back then, I'd been infatuated with her, and as I stood there beside her, I realized that not much had changed.

The girl before me was the same and yet different, just as I was. Life had taken us on separate paths, and we'd both grown and evolved. But the connection we'd shared, the memories of our past, and the chemistry between us—all of it still lingered beneath the surface, waiting to be acknowledged. Little had changed in that regard.

In that moment, I decided that the snow-covered scenery, as breathtaking as it was, paled in comparison to the woman who stood beside me. Without a word, I reached out, gently brushed a strand of hair from her face, and tucked it behind her ear. The warmth in the room seemed to intensify, and a playful spark danced in her eyes.

It was impossible to deny the pull between us. "Are you okay that I'm here?" I asked quietly.

"Don't I have to be?"

"No." I shook my head. "If you would prefer to be alone, I can try and get another room at a different hotel. If that doesn't work, I'm sure I can rent a

house. I don't want to throw my weight around, but I am a Bancroft. I can always get a room. If you're truly uncomfortable by my presence, I'll go."

"No," she said, smiling. "I'm fine."

I took a deep breath, feeling a rush of adrenaline. I wanted her more than anything, but I knew I had to tread carefully. The last thing I wanted was to make her uncomfortable.

We sat in silence for a few minutes, the air between us thick with tension. I wanted to reach out and touch her, to pull her into my arms and never let her go. But I resisted, knowing that I had to be patient.

"Are you sure you're okay with me being here?" I asked. "I don't want to crash your party."

"You're not crashing my party. Besides, Carmen and Dez really wanted you here."

"You didn't?"

She rolled her eyes. "You're not sorry."

I laughed. "I'm a little sorry, but honestly, there is nowhere I'd rather be."

"You know I'm leery," she said, smiling. "We talked about this. What we had lingers. It confuses things. It's hard to separate the past from the present. It gets fuzzy. Do you know what I mean?"

I nodded, knowing exactly what she meant. We had a past, a complicated one at that. But I was willing to try and make things work. I had never stopped thinking about her, even after all these years.

"I understand," I said softly. "But I want you to know that I'm not here to force anything. I just want a chance to be with you. I'm not asking for anything. I'm certainly not expecting anything. I know things are murky. Sometimes I feel like I'm still nineteen and nothing happened. I forget fifteen years have passed. I forget I'm not a spry kid anymore. I'm almost middle-aged."

"Don't say that," she said, giggling. "If you are, I am and I definitely don't want to think of myself as middle-aged."

"You are just as beautiful now as you were then," I said. "No, not true. You are more beautiful. You're gorgeous."

She looked at me for a long moment, her eyes searching mine. I could see the doubts and fears swirling in her head, but there was also a glimmer of hope. And that was enough for me.

"Okay," she said finally. "Let's just enjoy tonight and see where things go. We're just two single adults hanging out."

I smiled, feeling a sense of relief wash over me. "Sounds perfect."

"It really is a magical place, isn't it?" she asked and looked out the window once again. "I thought this stuff only happened in Hallmark movies."

"Does it make you homesick?" I asked her.

She looked over at me and smiled. "A little."

"I'm going to get changed," I said.

I started to walk away when she stopped me. "Dane?"

"Yes?"

"I am glad you're here," she said. "You've made me a little crazy, showing up in my life again. I thought you were out of my life for good. And then one day you're back. It's thrown me for a loop."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I never meant to cause you any distress. I wasn't planning to see you again either. It threw me for a loop as well. But now that I have, I'm not sure I can just forget it."

"I know," she said. "But right now, I look at you and I feel a little crazy."

I walked back toward her. "You know what?"

"What?" she asked with a playful smile.

I put my hands on her hips and pulled her close. "I think I like my women a little crazy. It spices things up."

She burst into laughter. "I think you might be a little crazy yourself."

"Oh, I definitely am," I said, nodding. "And I like every bit of it."

I lowered my mouth to hers and kissed her. I was prepared to take it slow. I could walk away with a single kiss if that was what she wanted. I wouldn't take more than she was willing to give. I didn't want to risk upsetting the balance we had formed.

But as soon as our lips met, electricity surged through my body. The kiss was soft and gentle at first, but it quickly intensified. Our tongues danced together, exploring every inch of each other's mouths. I pressed her body firmly against mine, feeling her curves and contours. She moaned into my mouth, and it only spurred me on.

I pulled away, needing to catch my breath. "I'm sorry," I said. "I touch you and I nearly ignite."

"Don't be sorry," she said. "I need you."

CHAPTER 30



GINGER

I knew it was bound to happen. I had told myself it wouldn't, but when I got close to him, I couldn't resist his touch. The man was an addiction I never wanted to break.

"Dammit," I moaned into his mouth.

"Do you want me to stop?" he asked.

"No."

His lips quirked. "That's what I thought you would say."

He kissed me again, with a fierceness that made me hotter than I had ever been. My hands ran through his hair. "Dane, I've missed you."

"I've missed you," he murmured with his lips against my neck. His tongue licked a trail down my throat. A moment later, he picked me up and carried me to the bedroom.

I stretched out on the bed and looked up at him. He stared down at me like he was trying to decide where he wanted to touch me first. My body shivered with anticipation.

"I want you," he said. "I want you as much now as I did the first time we made love."

I moaned as his hands slid up my legs, caressing the backs of my thighs. His lips moved against my neck.

"Oh, Dane," I moaned.

It took him very little time to strip me naked, my clothes flying left and right. My hands ran through his hair. He leaned in and kissed me again. His hands roamed my body as his lips covered mine. I shifted on the bed and my hands tugged at his shirt. He sat up and pulled the shirt over his head. I stared at him as he reached for the button on his jeans. He pulled the zipper down

and dropped his jeans to the floor. He crawled back onto the bed and pressed his body against mine.

“I’ve missed you,” he said as he kissed me again.

“I’ve missed you, too,” I said.

I ran my fingers over his chest. His skin was smooth and warm. A moment later, his lips trailed down my neck to my chest. He kissed my breasts. I ran my fingers through his hair as he kissed my skin. His lips brushed against my nipple. His tongue flicked and then slid further down my body.

“Yes,” I moaned as his tongue circled my belly button.

He kissed my stomach. My back arched as his hot tongue trailed across my skin. His hands slid down my body to my hips and then my thighs. I felt him kissing lower, and a moment later, his mouth was between my legs. I gasped with my hands sliding through his hair. He kissed my hip and then the inside of my thigh.

He licked and sucked at me with pleasure burning through my body. His fingers slid through my wet folds. I moaned as my hands clenched into fists.

“You make me so wet,” I moaned.

“You taste like heaven,” he murmured.

His tongue scraped across my clit.

“Oh, god,” I moaned.

His tongue flicked across my clit again. I felt a wave of pleasure building in my body. I squirmed with my hands sliding through his hair. He moved one of his hands and then I felt one of his fingers slide inside me. A breath of pleasure escaped my mouth. My body trembled.

“Dane,” I whispered.

He curled his finger and pressed it against my G-spot. I moaned as my body shivered. The pleasure was so intense that I was afraid I was going to explode. I was so close that I knew it was only a matter of time. I gasped and moaned, arching my back.

His lips pressed against my clit. I gripped onto his head as he sucked on me. His finger slid in and out of me faster and faster. I arched my back and then my whole body tensed.

I moaned as my orgasm crashed through me. My whole body throbbed with pleasure. A moment later, I felt my body relaxing as the pleasure faded away.

Dane lifted his face and kissed up my stomach. “Sweet, sweet Ginny,” he

whispered. "You're so delicious. I could feast on you all day."

I smiled up at him. "If only we had time."

"I'm sure we could make the time," he said, grinning.

"Well, if that's the case, then it's my turn."

"Your turn?" he asked.

I pushed at him. "Lay down."

"Ginny, I'm not sure that's a good idea," he warned.

"I know it's a good idea," I said, smiling coyly. I sat up beside him. My hands trailed over his naked chest. I ran my hand over his toned and muscular stomach, marveling at the way his muscles rippled under my touch.

I kissed down the center of his chest, feeling the hard muscles beneath my lips. I kissed across his stomach and then lower. His thick cock sprang forward. He knew what was coming and it was clear he was anxious for it.

I kissed the tip and then licked across it. He let out a soft moan. I opened my mouth and took his head inside. I let my tongue swirl around it as I sucked on him.

I looked up at him. His eyes were closed, and his mouth was open. He was enjoying this. I was going to make sure he enjoyed it even more. I slid his cock deeper into my mouth until he was nearly to the back of my throat. I slid my lips back and forth as I sucked on him.

He began to quiver and vibrate. I knew he was getting close. I wanted to make sure he came in my mouth. I sucked harder and faster, wanting to taste him the way he had tasted me.

Dane gripped my head with his hands. His body tensed up and then he let out a long moan. He exploded into my mouth. I swallowed every last drop.

I sat up and looked down at him. "Give me a minute," he said, breathing heavily. "You rocked my world."

I trailed my fingertips over his stomach and leaned down to kiss him. I loved him with my mouth, exploring every inch of his chest and stomach.

"You are insatiable." He shook his head.

I reached down and stroked his cock that was already springing to life. "Looks like I'm not the only one who's insatiable."

He chuckled. "I brought condoms."

"You did?"

"Hey, a man can hope." He chuckled. "We were going to be staying in the same room. I was going to be very ready."

I laughed as I slowly straddled him. "I brought some, too."

He reached up and grabbed my breasts. “Oh, really? Naughty, naughty.”

“I’m a red-blooded woman shacking up with a hot guy,” I said, grinning. “I wanted to make sure I was ready.”

My body moved over him, my wetness coaxing his cock back to life. He was so close. With the slightest move, I could have him slip inside me.

“I’m not wearing a condom,” he said breathlessly.

“I’m on the pill,” I whispered.

His cock was throbbing beneath me. I could feel it pulsing. I wanted to feel him inside me. I ached for him. I wanted to feel every inch of him. I leaned down, closer to his face.

“You’re sure?” he asked.

I nodded. “I am.”

He pulled me down onto him. I slid on him easily. I had been so wet for him that he slipped all the way inside me. I moaned as his cock filled me. I took a moment to appreciate the girth of him. I looked into his eyes and thought I saw the familiar look of love I remembered before.

“Damn,” he whispered. “You’re so tight. So wet. I’m glad I already came once because I would have never lasted more than a few seconds. I would have embarrassed myself.”

I smiled and kissed him. “I’m glad you’re going to last a little longer.”

I rode him slowly, my hips rising and falling. His lips tugged at my nipples and his hands slid up and down my back. His hands grabbed my ass, and he urged me to move faster. I rocked on him, my body rising and falling over him. His cock slid in and out of me, filling me with every stroke.

I leaned down and kissed him. “I—” I stopped myself from saying it.

He nodded. “I missed you.”

His cock was buried deep inside me, and I needed him. I needed him so badly. Only he could ever make me feel like I was soaring through the clouds.

I gasped as my body tensed and I felt that familiar ache. I moaned and concentrated on nothing but the pleasure and the feeling of him inside me. I gripped his shoulders and squeezed as I felt my orgasm wash over me. He groaned and thrust into me. I cried out as the feeling of him exploding inside me was even more than I remembered.

I collapsed on top of him, my chest against his. I could feel his heart beating against my breasts. I kissed his chest and allowed myself a moment to breathe.

“We are going to be so late,” I said with a laugh.

“I’m going to need to shower before I go down there.” He chuckled. “If I’m wearing your scent, I’m going to be walking around hard all night. That might start a few rumors.”

I rolled off him and hopped off the bed. “Last one in is a rotten egg,” I said, giggling, and rushed to the bathroom.

I turned on the shower but didn’t get a foot inside before he wrapped his arm around me. He pulled me under the shower spray. Our naked bodies slid together.

“I can’t explain how much I missed you,” he whispered. “Your body. Your scent. Your kisses.”

“I missed you too,” I said with a smile.

His lips brushed against mine. His hands ran down my back and grabbed my ass. He pulled me against him. To my surprise, I felt him growing hard again.

“Did you take a little blue pill?” I asked him.

He chuckled. “No. It’s you. You’re the best aphrodisiac. I could do this all day. I feel like I’m seventeen. Remember that time we went to the beach? We ended up getting a hotel room after getting caught in the bushes.”

I groaned at the memory. “Oh, I do.”

“We had sex all day and all night.”

“I know,” I said, smiling. “I was walking funny the next day.”

He groaned, his cock jerking to life. “Just a quickie,” he whispered against my lips.

His fingers slid between my legs. I moaned as his cock slid against my already wet pussy.

I leaned back and braced myself on the wall of the shower. He thrust into me hard and forceful. I cried out and grabbed his shoulders. His hand grabbed my breast as he thrust again and again. His fingers tugged at my nipple. I was already close. I dug my nails into his forearms and moaned.

I arched my back and ground against him. I felt his cock twitching inside me. He thrust into me one last time. I came apart in his arms, with him following right behind me. I collapsed against him and bit down on his shoulder.

I panted, trying to catch my breath. He kissed me softly. I pulled away from him and stepped out of the shower. He looked at me with water cascading down his naked body.

“We are so late,” I said, laughing.

I grabbed a towel and quickly dried off. “You left a mark,” I complained when I noticed a hickey on my neck.

“Sorry,” he said, smiling.

“You are so not sorry,” I said, laughing.

“I like that you’re wearing my mark.”

“Such a man.”

We both got dressed in jeans for our outing around the town. I put on one of my favorite blue sweaters and just a little makeup.

“You’re beautiful,” he said.

“Thank you.”

CHAPTER 31



DANE

We rushed downstairs, both of us giggling like kids. Dez and Carmen were waiting in the lobby, sipping cocktails in front of the fire.

“We’re so sorry,” Ginger gushed as we approached them. “We totally lost track of time.”

Carmen looked me up and down and then Ginger. “Yes, it’s hard to watch the clock when you’re busy doing other things.”

I smiled while poor Ginger turned as red as one of the ornaments on the tree. “I hope you weren’t waiting long,” I said.

“Oh, just long enough,” Carmen joked. “I hope you two are feeling better.”

“Better?” Ginger asked.

“I know I always feel better after—”

“A nap,” Dez cut her off. “Carmen, let’s go.”

“Do you want to walk to the restaurant, or would you prefer to drive?” Carmen asked.

“I want to walk,” Ginger replied. “It’s so beautiful out there.”

I nodded. “Me too.”

As we strolled through the snow-covered streets of the town, a sense of nostalgia crept in. It reminded me so much of Whistler back in Vancouver, a place where I’d spent countless winters skiing and hanging out with my family. It was meant to look like a legit Christmas village. It was truly magical. Families and couples, young and old, strolled through town ignoring the cold. There were warming stations everywhere for those that wanted to stay outside a little longer.

“We have to get a picture!” Carmen exclaimed when we came across a

holiday scene made to look like Santa's workshop.

A kind stranger offered to take our photo. We all clustered together, posing in front of the festive display. As the camera flashed, contentment washed over me. This trip was just what I needed after the chaos of the past few months.

We continued our walk toward the restaurant, and the snow began to fall faster. We had to huddle together to keep warm. But even in the midst of the cold, I felt warm. The outing felt like an actual date. Ginny's hand was in mine. Dez and Carmen were holding hands as well.

"Check it out!" Ginny exclaimed.

A horse-drawn carriage draped in Christmas lights was moving down the road.

"We should go for a carriage ride," Carmen said, smiling.

I agreed. We walked over to the carriage and hopped on board as the driver welcomed us with a warm smile.

We started our ride. The snow continued to fall, but the carriage was surprisingly cozy. Each couple got a red plaid wool blanket to put over our laps. The only sounds were the gentle clip-clop of the horse's hooves as we took in the beautiful winter scenery.

Ginger snuggled closer to me, her head resting on my shoulder. We watched the town pass us by. The lights twinkled in the falling snow, casting a soft, warm glow on everything around us. People sat on benches. Two groups were having a snowball fight in an area that was every little boy's dream snow fort.

The carriage dropped us off at the restaurant, and when we finally walked in, warmth hit us like a wave. The cozy interior was decorated with twinkling lights and fragrant pine garlands. We were shown to our table, and as we settled in, our waiter brought us warm rolls and butter. The menu was filled with delicious holiday dishes, and we all decided to share a few appetizers before our entrees.

As we ate and chatted, I felt grateful I had been invited. I was even more grateful that I stopped at the coffee shop yesterday. I wasn't sure Ginny would have invited me on her own. I owed Carmen and Dez a huge thank you. I would have to do something for them.

"Look at this menu," Ginny commented. "It reminds me a bit of your place."

I nodded as I read over the food they had on offer. "I'm anxious to taste

it.”

“It’s all comfort food,” Carmen said, smiling. “I could eat all of it.”

“Why don’t we each order something different and we can share?” Ginny asked.

“That sounds good,” I agreed. “What’ll we have to drink? Wine? Beer? Cocktails?”

Carmen grinned. “How about we start with some champagne to celebrate the holidays?”

“Perfect,” Ginny agreed. “And then we can move onto wine with our meal.”

Our waiter arrived with the champagne, and we raised our glasses in a toast. As we sipped our drinks, the conversation turned to our plans for the rest of the trip.

“Shopping,” Carmen said. “I want to check out some of those boutiques we passed. They always have such cool things.”

“And ice-skating,” Dez added.

“I’m up for anything,” I replied. “What about you, Ginny?”

“I want to sample all the food,” she said, laughing.

As we continued to chat, the waiter brought out our appetizers. I reached for one of the small pieces of toasted bread when Ginny slapped my hand away.

“I need to get a picture,” she said. “I’m so writing this place up. I’m going to do a holiday special.”

“Hurry,” Carmen complained. “That looks so good.”

We waited for Ginny to give the green light. The moment she did, we dug in.

We savored each bite of the crispy calamari and the creamy spinach and artichoke dip. The conversation turned to our past holiday memories and traditions.

“I used to love making gingerbread houses with my family,” I chimed in. “It was always a fun challenge to see who could make the most creative one. My brothers and I are very, very competitive. I have a brother that builds tiny homes for a living. His gingerbread houses looked like freaking mansions.”

We ordered a variety of cozy meals, each one more tempting than the last. Chicken pot pie, savory stew, hearty chili, and warm risotto.

Once again, Ginger refused to let us eat until she got plenty of pictures. We all sat back and watched her wield her phone like a digital artist as she

captured each dish from a variety of angles. She meticulously crafted the perfect image of our meal, adjusting the cutlery and napkins with precision. She paid careful attention to every detail, curating an Instagram-worthy spread.

She used the poinsettias and the candle on our table to create an ambiance that would draw readers in. It was all part of her craft. Every detail was thoughtfully staged and rearranged, making each dish a visual masterpiece.

“Now, I’m really hungry,” Carmen complained. “Can we eat now? It’s going to get cold.”

I loved watching her in action. Her dedication was obvious. It was no wonder she had made a name for herself as a respected writer. She put in a lot of time giving her readers a very real-life idea of what they could expect.

“Can I just take a bite of the chili?” Dez asked. “You’re killing me here. We have all this food, and we can’t touch it.”

“Just a second,” Ginny said and turned the bowl to take another picture.

“It looks the same as it did turned the other way,” Carmen said.

Ginny ignored them and kept doing her thing. I had a feeling she was probably used to their complaints.

“Okay,” Ginny said and took her seat again. “Let’s eat.”

“Finally,” Carmen muttered. “I swear, we can’t take you anywhere.”

As we began to dig in, Ginny’s eyes sparkled as she ate. It was as if she was experiencing every flavor and texture as if it were her first time.

“So good,” she murmured as she ate her share of the chicken pot pie.

I turned my attention to the savory stew in front of me. It was warm and comforting, with chunks of tender beef and root vegetables in a rich, flavorful broth. Each spoonful was like a hug from my mom, who used to make a similar dish on cold winter nights.

“What do you think?” Ginny asked me.

“Good.”

“Uh oh,” Dez said, laughing. “Is it good or is it acceptable? You’re the expert.”

“It’s really good,” I said, nodding. “Good flavor. Nice and thick.”

Ginny smiled, her eyes crinkling at the corners. “I’m so glad you like it.”

I continued to eat, savoring each bite. The warmth of the stew filled me up, and I felt content. We each tried a little of each of the main dishes. It was really good food, but I might have been a little biased. I thought mine was better. My recipes added a touch of elegance to comfort food.

After we finished our main dishes, the waitress brought out a tray of miniature desserts. There were tiny cheesecakes, chocolate truffles, and an assortment of colorful macarons.

“One picture,” Carmen warned Ginny. “I am not going to watch the chocolate melt.”

Ginny laughed. “Fine. But it’s plated so pretty. It’s worth a few pictures.”

“You really don’t want to get between Carmen and chocolate,” Dez warned. “You could lose an arm.”

“Now this is some serious dessert,” I said with a nod.

Ginny was quick with her pictures. We all filled our little plates with an assortment of dessert offerings.

“These are amazing,” Carmen said between bites of a raspberry macaron. “How did they make these so small?”

Ginny grinned. “It’s all about the presentation. Plus, they’re easier to eat this way.”

Dez licked the crumbs from a mini cheesecake off his fingers and leaned back in his chair, patting his stomach. “I think I’m officially in a food coma,” he joked.

I laughed. “Me too. I might need a wheelchair to get out of here.”

Ginny looked pleased with herself. “This was so much fun.”

“It really was,” Carmen agreed. “Really good food.”

“Do you guys want to go ice-skating?” Dez asked. “We could work off some of that feast.”

“That sounds good to me,” I said.

We walked to the rink that had become relatively empty since we went into the restaurant. It was late and I imagined parents and kids were exhausted after a long day.

“Is it open?” Ginger asked.

“Says it is.” I pointed at a sign. “Up until midnight.”

We made our way to the kiosk to pay for skates. On our way, Carmen tripped.

“Ow, ow, ow,” she whined. “I think I rolled my ankle.”

“Oh no,” Dez said and quickly wrapped an arm around her waist. “Can you walk?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think I should try and skate. I’ll end up falling on my ass.”

I looked around, trying to come up with an alternative activity. “We could

always go back to the hotel and watch a movie. Or get a drink in the lounge.”

“No,” Carmen quickly said. “You guys shouldn’t have to have your night ruined because I can’t walk.”

“I don’t mind,” I said. “Right, Ginny.”

“It’s fine, guys,” Dez said. “I’ll get her back to the hotel. You guys stay and have fun.”

“Are you sure?” Ginny asked. “We can skate tomorrow.”

“We’re sure,” Carmen said with a smile. “You two enjoy yourselves. We’ll catch up with you tomorrow morning.”

“Do you need help getting her back?” I asked.

“I’ve got it,” Dez said.

As Dez helped Carmen hobble toward the exit, I felt a pang of disappointment. I had been looking forward to skating. “That sucks,” I said to Ginny.

“Don’t worry, we can still have fun,” she said as we walked toward the rink. “I have a feeling they are going to go back to the room and Dez is going to pamper her.”

I glanced over my shoulder and saw Carmen walking—actually walking. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out we’d been duped. It was all a setup.

I shook my head and whipped out my wallet to pay for the rental. We took our skates and sat down to put them on.

“It appears that we have the ice rink all to ourselves,” I said. “This should be fun.”

CHAPTER 32



GINGER

Dane reached down and helped me to my feet.

“Okay, it’s been about a million years since I did this,” I said, laughing.

“Me too.” He chuckled. “I guess if one of us goes down, the other one is going down too.”

We carefully made our way onto the ice and gripped the side while we got used to the feel of the ice under our feet.

“Do you play hockey anymore?” I asked him as we slowly pushed away from the wall.

He shook his head. “I haven’t had the time. But I used to love it. I think I’m going to make it a point to do it again.”

“You were really good,” I said.

“I was okay,” he said, shrugging. “What about you? You did figure skating for a while, didn’t you?”

I laughed. “Not really. I used to take classes when I was younger, but that’s about it. I’m not graceful.”

We continued to skate, occasionally holding on to each other for balance. The ice rink was dimly lit, with only a few overhead lights. Christmas trees were all around the outside of the rink, decorated in different colors. All blue, all green, and so on.

“Ready to go for it?” Dane asked. “I think I’ve got my ice legs back.”

I laughed and let go of his hand. “You go ahead. I’m going to take another lap and make sure I don’t fall on my ass.”

I watched Dane skate away, admiring the way his body moved fluidly across the ice. He was still good, despite not having done it in years. I was a

little envious of his natural ability.

As I made my way around the rink, I thought about the last time Dane and I had gone ice skating. We must have been sixteen. We had such a good time. We always did.

I pushed the memories aside and focused on the present, trying to keep my balance as I skated. My mind wandered as I circled the rink, my thoughts drifting to the past and the present.

I slowed down as I approached the side of the rink. Dane skated backward, his eyes locked on me. I felt a flutter in my chest, and my heart pounded in my ears. Suddenly, he reached out and grabbed my hand, pulling me toward him. I stumbled, my body crashed into his, and we both fell to the ice.

We lay there for a moment, laughing, our bodies intertwined. I noticed the heat emanating from his body, the way his breath ghosted across my neck.

“Dane,” I said, my voice barely a whisper.

He looked up at me, his eyes dark with desire. “Yeah?”

Before I could answer, his lips were on mine, his tongue probing between my lips. I moaned, my body responding to his touch. We were both panting when we finally pulled away, our foreheads resting against each other’s.

“I’ve wanted to do that for the last hour,” he admitted, his voice husky.

I smiled. “Me too.”

We lay there for a few more moments, catching our breaths. As we got up, I noticed the ice had melted beneath us, leaving a small puddle. We laughed and held hands as we started skating again. We had both found our groove, gliding across the ice in perfect harmony. It was peaceful and quiet. In the distance, I could hear music coming from one of the bars, but on the ice, it was just the two of us.

After a few more laps, I decided to call it quits, even though I could have skated for hours. I was breathing heavily, and my heart beat hard in my chest. I noticed Dane was breathing heavily too. He skated over to me, his hand reaching for mine. I took it, and he pulled me toward him.

We skated back to the kiosk, quickly took off our skates, and put our boots back on. “Do you want to go back to the hotel?” Dane asked.

“Not yet, unless you do.”

“I’m good,” he said. “I’m in my element here.”

“Me too.”

We strolled around the park that was empty now, but the remnants of the many people that had flocked to the place earlier remained.

I was warm, even though it was getting late. The sky was dark, with a few twinkling stars scattered throughout. The snow had stopped, leaving a clear sky. A cool breeze had picked up, the air crisp and clean. It was intoxicating being so close to him in such a beautiful place.

We walked for a while, holding hands and talking about nothing in particular. I loved being with him, feeling his hand in mine.

A man looked to be closing up his little stand. He spotted us and smiled. "Hey, do you folks want some hot cocoa? It's free."

"Sure," Dane said and stepped forward. He gave the guy a twenty.

"No, no, it's free," the man said.

"Consider it a tip," Dane said, smiling.

We came to a small park with a pond in the middle. The water was calm, the reflection of the moon shining off of the surface. There were a few benches around it. We sat down on one of them. The silence between us was comfortable, and we sat there for a while, looking at the pond and the surrounding trees.

"Dane," I said, breaking the silence.

"Yes?" he replied, turning his head to look at me.

"I don't want this night to end."

"Neither do I," he said, scooting closer to me. "Let's pick up where we left off at the skating rink."

"What's that?" I asked, feeling my heart rate pick up.

"This." He leaned in and kissed me softly on the lips.

His hand wrapped around my waist and pulled me closer to him. Our kiss deepened. His lips were warm and tasted like hot chocolate. I ran my fingers through his hair, feeling the soft texture. It was like time had stopped, and there was only him and I in that moment.

He pulled back, his eyes locking onto mine. "I would've enjoyed doing that all night long," he said, a hint of a smile on his lips.

"Me too," I said, blushing.

He leaned in again and kissed me with more urgency this time. Our tongues danced together, exploring every inch of each other's mouths. His hands roamed over my body, feeling my curves through my clothes. I slid my hands up and down his back. His muscles flexed as he moved.

"Let's get out of here," Dane said, his voice husky.

I nodded, and he grabbed my hand. As we walked back toward the hotel, I couldn't stop the intruding thoughts. The last few days were illuminating. I had been looking for reasons why I shouldn't be with Dane. An excuse not to let him back into my life.

All the time I spent trying to guard my heart and protect myself, but I never considered how good it could be for me. Dane was the same and different at the same time. We were both in better places and could handle a relationship.

We both had a lot of baggage, and we weren't perfect, but that was one of the things that made us so right for each other. He was normal and he was human. I liked that he was such a strong man but not afraid to show his sensitive side.

I felt like I could be myself with him, even though he still scared me a little. I felt like I could be more open with him, and a little vulnerable. I was ready to take that leap of faith and let him back in.

"Are you okay?" he asked, looking at me.

"Yeah," I said, smiling. "But I think I'm in trouble."

He stopped walking. "What's wrong?" His hands took mine as he looked into my eyes. "What is it? Whatever it is, I'll help. I'm here."

I smiled and shook my head. "That's exactly why I'm in trouble."

"I don't understand."

"You," I said, smiling.

He frowned. "Me? I don't get it."

I let out a sigh and shook my head. "You. You're trouble and I'm sucked into that trouble. With our history, I know it's dangerous."

"Why would it be dangerous?" He brushed his knuckles across my cheek.

"Because the first time around didn't exactly end well," I said. "I think we were both left with some damage."

"I've been healed," he said. "I have no problem trying to heal you as well. Trouble isn't always a bad thing. It can be very good. Let me show you how good it can be."

His lips closed over mine. His tongue pushed deep into my mouth and my body automatically pressed against his. Every muscle in my body hardened and quivered at the same time. My breasts ached and my pussy grew wet. I wanted to feel him everywhere on my body.

He led me to a bench, and we sat down. I was desperate for him to be inside me. I knew that once we were alone, I would have him and it would be

beyond anything I had ever experienced before.

“We should get back to the room before we land in real trouble,” he said, laughing. “I’d rather not spend the night in a jail cell with Bubba.”

“Agreed, I don’t want you to be anyone’s bitch,” I said, smiling as I stood up.

My legs were weak from the passion that was growing inside me. By the time I got back to the room, I would be so ready to be with him I’d probably attack him.

“We better hurry,” I said.

We walked through the park, a little faster than the leisurely pace we had enjoyed before. Dane had to keep stopping and adjusting himself.

“Sorry, the jeans are a little tight,” he muttered. “I’m not sure I can walk into that lobby sporting the wood that is currently occupying my pants.”

I giggled. “Maybe you should unzip the jeans.”

“Are you trying to get me thrown in jail?”

“I was thinking the cold air might be a quick remedy to your little problem,” I said, laughing.

“Just don’t look at me, or touch me,” he said. “In fact, you go ahead, and I’ll follow behind in a bit.”

“I can wait.”

“Baby, please,” he begged. “This is never going to go away if you’re within reach. You have to give me a minute.”

I leaned up on my toes and gave him a quick kiss. “Fine. I’ll wait inside.”

It was very powerful knowing I had that kind of effect on him. I liked that he wanted me that badly.

I waited inside the lobby, checking out the ornaments on the tree and admiring the beauty of the place.

I felt him come in behind me. “Let’s go,” he said in a low voice. “You have about thirty seconds before we cause a scandal.”

We were laughing as we rushed to the elevator. He had me pressed against the wall of the elevator before the doors even closed.

“I’m not going to be able to wait,” he whispered.

I was so ready for him, and I didn’t even have to look down to know he was already hard for me. I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled him close.

“Aren’t you supposed to wait until we get to the room?” I asked, teasing him.

“I can’t wait,” he growled, slid his hand over my ass, and pulled me tightly against him.

I moaned as my pussy responded to his every move. I had never felt so hot or so wet in my entire life.

“Oh, fuck, baby,” he groaned, and he wrapped his hand around the back of my neck and pulled me in for a kiss.

The elevator dinged and his body tensed as he quickly pulled back.

He straightened his shirt and tried to hide the bulge in his pants. An older man stood outside the elevator. He looked from me to Dane and then shook his head.

It took all my self-control not to burst into a fit of giggles.

“Let’s go.” Dane grabbed my hand and dragged me down the hall to our room.

I couldn’t wait to get him alone. I needed to feel his body against mine and I needed him inside me now.

CHAPTER 33



DANE

I watched Ginger sleep peacefully. Her chest rose and fell in a slow, rhythmic pattern. Her presence in my life had stirred something within me that had long been dormant. I wondered where this was going, or more importantly, where I wanted it to go.

I understood we both had our own reservations. We had both been hurt pretty badly before, but this time felt different. How could something that felt so right be risky?

Things were good between us. The breakup fifteen years earlier seemed like a blip on the screen. I knew I had to make a decision. I couldn't continue to be just friends with her. As I looked at her peaceful sleeping form, I made up my mind. I wanted more of her.

We had screwed up fifteen years ago. We were getting a second chance. I didn't want to squander it. It wasn't like I was having any luck finding a woman that made me as happy as she did. I tried. That woman didn't exist.

It was only Ginger. She was the only woman I could ever see myself settling down with and having a family with. It was her face I saw wrinkled with gray hair framing her face when I looked far into my future. She was who I was supposed to walk beside into our golden years.

As I contemplated the future, I reluctantly rolled out of bed and grabbed my phone from the bedside table. With eyes that weren't totally focused, I stared at the screen.

"Oh shit," I murmured.

There were a barrage of missed calls and text messages from my managers in New York City, all of them urgent. I sighed and rubbed my temples, realizing that this couldn't wait. I needed to find out what the hell

was going on.

I tiptoed to the bathroom and closed the door behind me to keep from waking Ginger up. I dialed my main manager's number and waited for her to answer.

"Cara, it's Dane," I said with a yawn. "What's going on?"

"Dane, thank God," she said. "Have you seen the latest article by Sampson Prewet?"

I groaned inwardly, knowing it wasn't going to be good. The fact she was close to panic told me it was bad. "No," I said.

"You need to read it," she said.

"Give me a second."

I pulled up the article online. The headline was brutal: "Dane Bancroft: A Temperamental Titan or a Terrible Tyrant?"

I began reading the article, and my frustration grew with each word. It portrayed me as a monster during the tasting for the critics and bloggers, claiming that I was abrasive and on the verge of violence when confronted by Sampson for the poor quality of food. Sampson had a way of sensationalizing things for the sake of drama and attention, but it seemed that he had struck a nerve with his latest piece.

As I scrolled through the comments section, it was evident that the article was stirring up emotions. People were quick to label me as an out-of-touch billionaire, criticizing my inability to interact with others, and vowing never to set foot in any restaurant I owned. The backlash was growing, and I felt the weight of it pressing down on me.

"Okay, I've read it," I finally replied to my manager. "Let's get ahead of this. I want a statement released immediately. Apologize for any perceived behavior and reiterate that we're committed to providing an exceptional dining experience."

"I'll do that," she said. "What about the opening? Do we dare push ahead? I have a feeling we're going to get raked over the coals."

"We're not going to put off opening because of one bad review," I said.

"This isn't just a bad review," she replied. "This is a hatchet job."

"We've dealt with bad reviews before," I assured her. "I went back and read some of this guy's stuff. He does this all the time. Well, I don't know that he's ever insulted the owner quite like he did to me, but he's a negative guy."

"He's a negative guy with a lot of friends," she said.

“What do you mean?”

She let out a long sigh. “We’ve been getting phone calls nonstop since the piece was published. We’ve had a lot of cancellations.”

That sucked, but I wasn’t going to let it get me down.

“I understand that it’s frustrating, but we need to stay focused. We’re not going to let one bad review, or a few cancellations, ruin our opening. We’re going to make sure that every guest who steps into our restaurant on Saturday has an amazing experience. That’s what we’re here for. We can’t please them all. If we had nothing but rave reviews, it would look fake.”

“There’s more,” she said.

“More?”

“We were vandalized last night,” she blurted out.

“What the hell does that mean?”

“Someone kicked over the trees out front. They stomped them and smashed every last light. When I came in today, there was a mess outside. It looks like they smeared something on the windows. I don’t want to know what it was. I just had them clean it all up.”

My temper sizzled at the thought of someone deliberately targeting my establishment. Still, I needed to stay level-headed. They were looking to me to steer the ship that was taking on water.

“Thank you for letting me know. I’ll handle it.”

“Should I scale back the staff?” she asked.

“No. We’re going to be fine.”

“Dane, there’s more.”

My head dropped down. “What?”

“There’s talk a few people are going to quit,” she said. “They’re worried the restaurant is going to fail and they’ll be out of a job. They took the job here because they’re expecting big tips.”

“Tell everyone to calm the fuck down,” I growled. “It’s one dude. I’ll handle it.”

“I’m sorry to dump all of this on you,” she said, sighing.

“Don’t worry about it. Keep your head up. We’ve been through rough stuff before.”

I ended the call and took a second to breathe through my anger and frustration. My knee-jerk reaction was to hunt down Sampson and beat the shit out of him for lying. But I couldn’t do that. I put down my phone and splashed a little water on my face.

Two seconds later the phone rang again. I didn't want to know. I glanced at the caller ID and saw my brother Kameron's name. With a sigh, I answered. "Hey, what's up?"

"Are you in New York?" he asked.

"Not at the moment. Why? What's up?"

"I read that article by Sampson. Is everything okay?" Kameron's voice was laced with concern.

I rubbed my temples, trying to ease the building headache. "Everything's just great," I replied with a hint of sarcasm. "You saw the article?"

"Uh yeah," he said with a small laugh. "I've gotten a bunch of texts and keep getting tagged. That thing is spreading like wildfire."

"Fuck, fuck, fuck!"

"Dude, what happened?" he asked. "Did you really beat the guy up?"

"No! Shit no. If I would have beat his ass he wouldn't be writing about it. The guy was a dick. I didn't threaten him. I might have been abrasive, but I didn't lay a finger on him. He was running his mouth and being incredibly crass and disrespectful. I told him to leave."

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"I can't afford any negative press right before the grand opening of the restaurant," I said.

Kameron let out a sympathetic sigh. "I'm sorry," he said. "I know it's bullshit. People that know you know it's bullshit."

I appreciated Kameron's support, but the weight of the situation pressed down on me. "I need to do something about this, and I need to do it quickly. I don't have time for this shit."

I had an ace up my sleeve, and she was asleep in the next room. Ginger had a way with words, and she'd already proven her ability to handle a situation like this. She was a talented writer, and her positive article had the potential to counteract the negative buzz created by Sampson.

Kameron seemed to sense my hesitation. "Is there something you're not telling me?"

I ran a hand through my hair. "I've got a secret weapon, Kameron. Someone who can help me turn the tide of this situation. But it's not that simple."

My brother didn't push, knowing that if I was hesitant to share the details, there was a good reason. "I trust your judgment, Dane. Is there anything I can do to help?"

“Thanks, but I don’t think so,” I said. “Not yet. If I go belly up, then there’s not much I can do about it.”

“It might be a rocky start, but you’ll pull through.”

“This is a little different than a rocky start,” I said. “I’ve only read one article. Are there more?”

“It looks like it’s the same article getting reposted, retweeted, and smeared all over social media. The guy that wrote it has been replying to comments.”

“Seriously?” I asked with surprise.

Kameron sighed. “Yeah, he’s not doing himself any favors. Seems like he’s just trying to stir up drama and attention. But I wouldn’t worry too much about it, Dane. You have always done well. People will see who you are once they try it.”

I appreciated Kameron’s positivity, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that I needed to take action. “They might not get the chance to meet me if they don’t show up.”

“Put out your own article,” he said.

“That wouldn’t work,” I said. “It’s going to be me denying I did anything wrong. How credible is that?”

“You should have a right to deny the accusations,” he said. “Shit, I’ll comment on some of the pieces.”

“No,” I said. “I need something stronger than that. Something that will make them realize they’re wrong. If you get into an internet fight, it’s not going to make me look any better. It’s just going to make us all look like a bunch of thugs. This is not something that’s going to go away if we keep fueling the fire.”

“You’ve got to do something,” he said. “This guy is smearing your name. I read in one comment thread other people were saying they had run-ins with you and you were a dick.”

“I might be a dick, but I don’t go around beating up innocent people,” I muttered.

Kameron raised an eyebrow. “What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking I’m going to ask someone for a favor,” I said.

“What does that mean?”

“Nothing,” I said. “I’ve got to go. I need to see how much damage I’m dealing with. I’ll talk to you later.”

“If you need anything, let me know,” he said.

“Thanks.”

I ended the call and sat down on the closed toilet with my phone. I made the mistake of looking through social media.

“Son of a bitch,” I muttered as I read through the comments.

I knew better than to let it get to me. It was the internet. People were always a little braver when they could hide behind their screens. I had never beat anyone up. I had never served shitty food. But this was the way this shit worked. It only took one person to start a rumor, and suddenly everyone was jumping on the bandwagon.

But I couldn't just sit back and let this happen. I had worked too hard to build my reputation, and I refused to let some keyboard warrior tear it all down. I needed to take action.

CHAPTER 34



GINGER

I woke up to the delicious aroma of breakfast in bed, the scent of coffee, waffles, and crispy bacon making me smile before I even opened my eyes. As I blinked sleep from my eyes, I found Dane standing beside the bed, a warm smile on his face.

“Good morning,” he said.

I sat up and rubbed my eyes. “What’s all this?”

“I ordered breakfast for us,” he answered.

“Did you eat?”

“I did,” he said, nodding.

I propped myself up on some pillows and took a bite of the bacon. “Thank you,” I said, smiling. “This is amazing.” I felt spoiled by his thoughtfulness. “I could get used to this.”

Dane chuckled. “I’m glad you like it. You need a good breakfast before we hit the slopes.”

I laughed. “It’s been a while since I’ve skied. I hope I can still do it without breaking a leg or faceplanting in the snow.”

“It’s like riding a bike,” he joked.

“Do you still go up to Whistler a lot?”

He nodded. “Usually a couple of times a year.”

I took a sip of coffee and savored the warmth of the liquid. “It’s so beautiful up there. I can see why you love it. I miss going.”

“It’s my happy place,” he admitted. “I’m surprised you don’t go when you visit home. You always loved going there.”

I shrugged. “I’m usually so busy with work and catching up with family that I don’t get the chance. Plus, I always thought skiing was more your thing

than mine.”

Dane leaned in closer to me, his gaze intense. “I loved going with you. We always had so much fun together.”

I felt like we had been robbed of fifteen years of happiness. I thought about all the fun we had and could have had if things had turned out differently. But I pushed those thoughts aside and focused on the present. “Well, we’ll have to make up for lost time then. Let’s make today a day to remember.”

He smiled, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“Is everything okay?” I asked.

“It’s nothing. Eat your breakfast before it gets cold.”

I was savoring a crispy strip of bacon when I noticed Dane seemed a bit on edge, his gaze frequently flicking toward his phone. After another quick glance at the screen, he let out a frustrated sigh. He was not the kind of guy who focused on his phone.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

Dane looked at me. I could see the stress in his eyes. Clearly, everything was not okay. “It’s Sampson. He published another article about me and the restaurant. Mostly about me.”

My heart sank. “What’s he saying now?”

“Lots,” Dane muttered. “I think he called me a tyrant. Said I was violent. There was very little written about the food. It was just about me. Now, it’s an internet pile-on. The article has gone viral. People I supposedly met twenty years ago are adding their two cents. Called me arrogant, obnoxious, and I forget the other adjectives. Oh, a pompous asshole.”

The amazing breakfast was no longer so amazing. “I’m sorry.”

“Why does this guy take pleasure in targeting people’s businesses like this?” he asked. “He doesn’t know me. We interacted less than five minutes. He was a disgusting pig. No man would ever talk about a woman like that.”

That piqued my interest. “What do you mean?”

He shook his head. “Nothing.”

“Dane, what exactly did Sampson say that night?” I asked.

“He doesn’t like you,” he replied.

I smiled. “No shit, but what did he say?”

“He was very disrespectful,” he said again. “Called you a bitch and stuff. It was just out of line. He’s supposed to be a professional. He was crass and rude, and I don’t want people like him in my restaurant.”

I shook my head in disbelief. “Sampson is nothing more than a troll, Dane. The people who read and believe his nonsense are trolls, too. They want to wallow in the negativity and can’t stand seeing someone thrive and succeed, especially someone as—well, wealthy as you.”

Dane tilted his head inquisitively. “What do you mean by someone as wealthy as me?”

I shrugged and took a sip of my coffee. “You know, people prefer an underdog story. They like rooting for someone who’s overcome challenges and adversity. But that doesn’t matter in your case. Your food and service will speak for themselves, and those who read Sampson’s articles aren’t your target demographic anyway.”

He looked at me for several seconds before nodding and getting up from the bed. He walked to the window and pulled open the curtains, keeping his back to me.

The morning sun cast a warm glow over the hotel room, which would have been nice if the sudden chill in the air wasn’t so noticeable. It was clear my words had triggered a reaction. I quietly put aside my breakfast tray and got up from the bed. He had taken offense to what I said.

It came off harsh. I knew he was a little sensitive about his family’s wealth. He was one of the least arrogant men I had met. He could buy anything he wanted and still have money left over, but he never acted that way. He didn’t flaunt his money. He didn’t wear ostentatious jewelry or look down on anyone. I doubted that had changed since I knew him fifteen years ago. I saw him with his staff. He wasn’t a pompous asshole.

“Dane,” I said softly as I approached him. I wrapped my arms around him in a gentle hug. My cheek rested against his back, and I could hear his uneven breathing. “You can’t let this get to you. Your restaurant will have a successful launch. You know who you are. I know who you are. Your staff and the other people that have spent time with you know the truth. You can’t control what people write. You can’t make people like you. You shouldn’t have to.”

He turned to me, his eyes reflecting a mixture of frustration and desperation. “Ginger, I need your help. Run another article for me, something that can tip the scales back in my favor, drown out Sampson’s negativity. He did a lot of damage with this one. Cara is dealing with the fallout.”

“What do you mean?”

“There was some vandalism at the restaurant,” he said. “Employees are

threatening to quit.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Then you’ll help me?” he asked, searching my eyes for the answer I couldn’t give.

I frowned and had to look away. I had reservations about his solution to his problems. “Dane, I don’t think that’s the best way to handle this. Running an article that looks desperate to defend you, especially with us being... involved.”

“What do you mean?” he asked with surprise.

“It could harm my reputation. I can’t appear biased.”

His expression changed from shock to anger. “Your reputation? What do you mean, Ginger? You don’t want to help me out in case my restaurant fails? You don’t want to hitch your wagon to me? I don’t remember you being such a coward.”

My eyes narrowed and my own defensiveness rose. “That’s not what I said, and you know it,” I snapped. “Don’t put words in my mouth. I don’t want to run an article that looks desperate, trying to defend you, especially if ___”

Dane interrupted. “Especially if what? If people find out about us? Is that what you’re worried about?”

I shook my head, trying to explain my perspective. “No, I just don’t want to seem biased. You need to trust that people will draw their own conclusions. Running another article isn’t the way to change people’s minds. I have never allowed anyone to sway my opinions. I write my honest opinion. I can’t change that now.”

“I’m not trying to persuade you to do anything,” he said, scoffing. “You said the food was good. You liked the restaurant. I’m not asking you to write anything you haven’t already written.”

“I’ve never done a follow-up piece,” I said. “What exactly are you expecting me to write? Am I supposed to praise you, the man, or your restaurant?”

“I’m getting killed in the media! They’re calling me some pretty nasty names. You don’t feel any kind of loyalty?”

“It’s not about loyalty,” I said. “It’s about integrity. You want me to write a piece singing your praises?”

“No, I want you to use your flair for writing to shut down Sampson’s hit piece,” he shot back. “I’m saying be honest.”

“I wrote an honest opinion,” I said softly. “I have nothing more to add. I haven’t eaten at the restaurant again.”

Dane was shaking his head in disbelief. “I shouldn’t have asked. This is just like last time.”

My heart sank. “What do you mean?”

He let out a heavy sigh, his frustration apparent. “Just like fifteen years ago, you’re protecting your career instead of me.”

I swallowed hard, his words piercing my heart. I had always regretted the fight and thought we had both moved past it. Last night was perfect. I thought we had come to an understanding.

“Dane, it’s not about my career versus you. I care about you. I care about us. Running an article isn’t the right way to fix this. You have to trust that we’ll find a better solution together, just like you trust your staff to run your restaurant when you’re not there. If people know about us or find out who we are, they are going to figure out why I wrote the article. It will look disingenuous. Am I supposed to sacrifice everything I worked for to argue against a man no one is actually listening to?”

“Oh no,” he said with sarcasm. “I wouldn’t want you to do anything to jeopardize your reputation. I mean, who cares if my restaurant crashes and burns before it ever gets started?”

“Dane!”

His eyes met mine, and I could see the turmoil within him. We had come so far from where we had been fifteen years ago. And now, it was all going up in smoke.

It was all my fault.

“I can’t do this again,” he said. “I can’t.”

“Dane,” I pleaded. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think it would come to this. I didn’t mean to hurt you. But I just can’t do this. I can’t. Please try and understand. I want to help, but this isn’t the way to do it.”

“Well, there’s not much to be done now, is there?” he said, his cold eyes meeting mine again.

“Dane, don’t do this. Please. Don’t do this.”

“If you’ll excuse me, I need to get some work done,” he said.

The last couple of days felt like they didn’t matter. We were right back to square one. I understood he was upset. He was having a rough day.

“I’m going to shower and get ready,” I said softly. “Do you want to join me?”

I knew sex wasn't the answer, but it felt like it might help ease the tension. He was stressed out. If I could relieve the stress, it might give him a fresh perspective. Then we could work together to come up with a better way to resolve the problems Sampson was causing.

But Dane didn't even look at me. He just walked away without a word, leaving me feeling more alone than ever. I let out a long sigh and headed to the bathroom alone, feeling defeated.

As I stepped under the hot water, I let the tears fall down my face. I had messed up everything. I had put Dane's dreams in jeopardy, and now I had even ruined our relationship.

I tried to wash away my guilt and shame, but the water couldn't cleanse my broken heart. I felt a sense of despair wash over me, wondering if things could ever be fixed between us.

CHAPTER 35



DANE

I walked back to the hotel room with my new laptop in hand. My eyes were crossing trying to read and write emails on my phone. I hadn't brought my laptop on the trip because I intended to spend every waking moment with Ginger. Turned out, Ginger wasn't really in my corner.

She had gone skiing with Carmen and Dez. The weight of the article and the reputation of my restaurant weighed heavily on my shoulders. I couldn't go with them. I was pissed and hurt. And I had a shitload of work on my plate. I was putting out as many fires as I could to save my restaurant. While Ginger was off enjoying a day on the slopes, I was trying to calm Cara down. My whole staff was rethinking their employment. Some suddenly viewed me as the enemy.

It pissed me off. It hurt my feelings. One man should not have this much power. I picked up my phone and called the restaurant again. Part of me worried no one was going to pick up at all. I wouldn't be shocked to find they all quit on me.

"Hello," she answered with frustration in her voice.

"Hey, it's me," I said. "Did the delivery show up?"

"Yes."

"Was everything on it?" I asked.

"Yes, I was just checking it all," she said. "It's fine."

"Any more employees express their opinions?" I asked sarcastically.

"No, but I'm worried," she said. "I'm not sure how this is going to go. What are you doing to shut it all down?"

I didn't have an answer. "I'm working on it. I'll have my phone. Call me if anything else comes up."

“I would say try not to stress, but I guess that’s not an option,” she said, laughing.

“I’ll stop stressing when I find a way through this,” I said. “Talk soon.”

I put my phone down and stared at the screen. I had read Sampson’s article at least twenty times. I knew every nasty word. I was still pissed Ginger left me hanging. She tried to soothe things over and tell me everything would be fine. She was convinced Sampson’s article would quickly be forgotten. I wasn’t so sure. The damage only seemed to be intensifying. I was stuck in a fucking shitstorm and the one person in the world I thought I could count on had left me hanging once again. I wasn’t sure how I felt about it. It made me feel like everything I believed yesterday was nothing but a lie.

I thought Ginger and I had come to an understanding. I thought we were on the same page. To have her deny me the second I needed a little help was fucking with my head.

I took a deep breath and tried to focus on the task at hand. I couldn’t worry about what was happening with Ginger. I couldn’t change the way she felt. I wasn’t going to let the woman break my heart again. Not in the exact same way.

I had to find a way to shut down the rumors and put an end to this shitstorm. But how? I had already tried to talk to Sampson, but he wasn’t taking my calls. He was convinced that he had uncovered a story that would make him famous. I couldn’t let that happen. My reputation was on the line. I had worked too hard to let some asshole journalist ruin it all for me.

I was trying to put together some kind of statement that both squashed Sampson’s accusations while maintaining dignity. I didn’t want to come out swinging, but I needed to stop the damage.

I heard the door open and barely looked up from the screen.

“Hey,” Ginger said. “Still working?”

“Yep.”

“Dane, talk to me.”

I looked up, finding her cheeks rosy from her day on the slopes. “What?”

She sighed. “We were going to get dinner. Have you eaten?”

“I haven’t had time,” I said. “I’ve been working.”

“Let’s get dinner,” she said. “You look like you need a break.”

I glared at her. “I do need a break, but unfortunately, I can’t take one. I’m trying to handle my business.”

She nodded. "I'm going to take a shower. I would like to have dinner with you. It's our last night here. I think you need to take a step away from this. It will help clear your head."

I said nothing. She thought clearing my head would make the problem disappear. It was about the most ridiculous thing I had ever heard.

She walked into the room, and I went back to work. I heard the shower come on, and despite the hurt and anger, I was tempted to join her. I couldn't stop wanting her.

Ginger came back into the room wearing a pretty blue dress and heels. "Please, Dane. Please have dinner with me."

Despite everything, I didn't want to be a dick to Carmen and Dez. They had been kind enough to invite me on the trip. I didn't want to disrespect them by hiding out in the room all night.

"Fine," I muttered. "I'll go."

The tension between us simmered beneath the surface as we sat down for dinner in the hotel's restaurant. We sat at a corner table, trying to mask the tension with polite conversation and forced smiles. Every glance, every gesture felt forced.

I knew Carmen and Dez noticed. It was impossible not to feel it.

"I was bummed to hear you couldn't make it today," Dez said. "I was the lone man."

"Sorry," I said. "Had a work emergency."

"I wouldn't worry about that Sampson guy," Carmen said. "He's always writing hit pieces. No one takes him seriously."

"Seems like they are this time," I muttered.

Our first round of drinks was delivered. I eagerly sucked mine down. I needed many stiff drinks.

As the evening wore on, the atmosphere became more relaxed. I was sure it had a little to do with the alcohol that was flowing. Even though I wasn't as angry, my mind continued to churn with frustration. I felt torn between my anger and the undeniable attraction I still held for her.

"We should go out to the hot springs," Carmen said.

"I should get back to work," I said.

"All work and no play is just dumb," Dez said, laughing. "You've got one day here. Let's make the most of it. Soaking in hot water is a good way to get your head straight."

"The bathtub is where I do some of my best thinking," Carmen added. "I

bet you'll come up with a new plan of attack."

"If it would make you feel better, you can sit far away from me," Ginny chimed in.

I chuckled at Ginny's comment. She always knew how to break the tension. I looked at Carmen and Dez, who were both looking at me with hopeful expressions. I knew it wouldn't hurt to let loose for a little while and take my mind off things.

"Alright, let's go," I said, finally giving in.

"We'll meet you back down here in thirty minutes," Carmen said.

Ginny and I made our way back to our room without saying a word. She went into the bathroom to get changed while I stripped in the room. I didn't really want to sit around and pretend everything was fine, but a long soak might be nice. It wasn't like I could actually do anything from here anyway.

Ginger emerged from the bathroom wearing one of the robes from the hotel. "Ready?" she asked.

I shrugged. "I suppose."

"Dane, please," she whispered. "Please, I want to have a good time with you. We can enjoy the rest of the night."

"I'm fine," I said. "Let's go."

I didn't want to be a dick, but I was still pissed. I felt betrayed. I couldn't just shut that off.

We slipped into the warm, soothing water, the steam rising around us and, with it, a lot of my tension. I tried to focus on the pleasant sensation of the hot water against my skin, but Ginger's presence beside me was an electric undercurrent, impossible to ignore.

She had stripped off her bathrobe and revealed a tiny black bikini. No matter how pissed I was, there was an attraction I could not deny. I reached for her, pulling her to sit next to me. Carmen and Dez sat across from us, smiling and leaning into each other. We sipped champagne and talked about anything and everything, laughing and enjoying the moment.

As the conversation turned more flirtatious, Ginger started running her fingers through my hair, sending shivers down my spine.

Carmen and Dez were doing a poor job keeping their hands to themselves. I had a feeling they were going to end up doing the nasty five feet in front of us.

"Um, we're going to go," Carmen said with a laugh and climbed out of the water.

“See you guys tomorrow,” Dez said and quickly followed behind her.

“Bye!” Ginger called out with a laugh.

“That was subtle,” I said sarcastically.

“I guess when nature calls, you have to answer,” I replied.

She reached up and gently pulled my face to look at her. Her eyes searched mine for any sign of forgiveness. Her voice was soft, filled with sincerity. “I’m sorry, Dane. Is there any way I can make it up to you?”

I closed my eyes, struggling to resist the pull of desire mingled with frustration. “I am mad, Ginger. I wish I wasn’t.”

She sighed, her breath warm against my skin. “I hate that we’re fighting, especially here in this beautiful place.”

My fingers traced circles on the small of her back, the touch both comforting and torturous. “I hate it too, Ginger. But I can’t ignore the fact that you won’t support me when I need it the most.”

Her eyes searched mine, pleading for understanding. “I am supporting you, Dane. Just not in the way you want me to. I believe in you, in your restaurant. I just think there are better ways to handle this situation.”

I sighed, the tension in my muscles slowly dissipating. “I just don’t know, Ginger. I’m terrified of failing, of losing everything I’ve worked so hard for.”

She cupped my face in her hands, her touch gentle yet firm. “You won’t fail, Dane. You’re too talented, too passionate. Believe in yourself, and others will follow. Besides, don’t you have other restaurants?”

“Yes, but this is the one I want. This is the dream. This is the one I’ve spent years developing from the concept to every single item on the menu. The location, everything. This is the one that I’ve dreamt about.”

“And it’s going to be fine,” she whispered with her mouth close to mine.

I wanted to believe her words, to let go of my anger and embrace her support. Yet, doubt still lingered in the corners of my mind. Ginger’s eyes held a mixture of frustration and love.

“I don’t want to lose you over this, Ginger,” I confessed, my voice raw with vulnerability.

Her expression softened, and she pressed her forehead against mine. “You won’t, Dane.”

I closed my eyes, taking a shaky breath. I wanted to believe her. But the fear of failure still clung to me.

Ginger’s lips brushed against mine, soft and gentle at first, then growing more insistent. I felt her fingers tangle in my hair as she deepened the kiss,

her body pressing against mine. In that moment, all my doubts and fears melted away, replaced by a fierce desire for her.

She climbed into my lap, straddling me as the water sloshed around us. “Maybe we should go back to our room,” she whispered.

“Are you trying to soothe things over with sex?”

She giggled softly. “I might be.”

“I’m still mad at you,” I murmured.

She kissed the side of my neck. “I know and that’s okay. Angry sex is pretty fucking hot.”

I rose up out of the water with her still clinging to my body. “Let’s go.”

CHAPTER 36



GINGER

I laughed, barely getting the chance to grab my robe and pull it on before he was dragging me toward the back entrance of the hotel. I felt his desperation. I felt the same way.

We made it into the elevator. I expected him to pounce on me, but he leaned against the wall and glared at me. I smiled and opened my robe. I pushed my bikini bottoms down just a little with my eyes locked on his. He glanced down and then looked at me.

“You think I’m really going to just stop being mad at you because you fuck me?” he growled.

I pushed the bottoms lower. “I think I’m going to do everything in my power to do exactly that.”

He grabbed my waist and pushed me against the elevator wall. “You’re a fucking tease.”

He mumbled something incoherent and then he was kissing me. I went with it, wrapping my arms around him and kissing him back. The elevator dinged and the doors slid open, but we didn’t care. We were too wrapped up in each other.

“Go,” he ordered. One strong arm reached out and stopped the doors before they could close. “I want you naked. Don’t make me strip you.”

I laughed. “We’ll see.”

I strutted down the hall, letting the robe fall off one shoulder. “It’s going to take more than that,” he growled.

“Oh, trust me, I’ve got a lot more.”

We barely made it through the door of our room before he shoved me against the wall, face first.

“You have no idea how much I want to fuck you right now,” he said, jerking the robe off.

I gasped and pushed off the wall, then spun around and shoved him away. “I thought you were mad.”

“I am.”

I quickly took off my top and let it fall to the floor. His nostrils flared.

“Still mad?” I teased.

“You’re going to get fucked hard,” he said and lunged for me.

“It sounds like you’re making a promise,” I said, smiling.

“Want to find out?”

I raised my chin. “Yes.”

He dropped to his knees in front of me, grabbed my hips, and pushed his face between my legs. I cried out, stumbled, and barely managed to catch myself by reaching out to brace myself against the wall.

“I thought you said you’re going to fuck me,” I gasped out.

“I am,” he replied, lifting his head. “With my tongue.”

He pushed my legs apart and pressed his mouth against my pussy. He licked me, opening my folds and thrusting his tongue inside me. I fisted his hair and moaned.

I spread my legs wider, giving him more room to work. “You taste so fucking good,” he said before he plunged his tongue inside me.

He reached up and pinched my clit, hard, as he continued to lick me. I gasped and tried to close my legs. He held them open and slid his tongue down, circling my entrance.

I cried out and tried to jerk away. He moaned against my clit. The vibrations nearly undid me.

I started to pant and rub my clit against his tongue. He slipped a finger inside me, pushing hard before another slid inside.

I cried out, my legs shaking. I was going to fall any second. His finger slipped out of me as he ran his tongue up to my clit. He sucked it into his mouth and tugged on it.

“Oh, fuck,” I groaned, my legs trembling.

“More,” he demanded. “Give me more.”

I nearly wept as the orgasm rolled through me, wave after wave threatening to topple me.

“I’m going to fall,” I cried out. He pulled his mouth away and caught me seconds before I dropped. I crumbled into a naked heap on the floor.

“Just like that,” he said in a gruff voice.

I watched him strip off his swim shorts, passion and anger written all over his face.

“Dane.”

“I’m not finished with you yet,” he said. “I’m just getting started. When I tell you you’re going to be walking funny tomorrow, I mean it.”

I rolled to my back, spread my legs, and arched my back. “Then, by all means, get started,” I said.

He fell to his knees and moved between my legs. His hand reached out and grabbed my breast. He massaged softly at first before he was tugging and pinching my nipples. I groaned and rolled my head back and forth.

He continued to play with my breasts while his other hand slid between my legs. I was too sensitive. The moment his fingers slid across my folds, I violently jerked.

“I can’t,” I murmured.

“Oh, trust me, you can,” he said. “You will.”

“Just fuck me, Dane.”

“No. I’m not done torturing you. You are going to be begging me for mercy.”

I turned to my side. He grabbed my hips and yanked me back. I looked up at him. “How about you take it easy until I recover my strength?” I said.

I wanted to see what he’d do. He fought back a smile and shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

He leaned forward and kissed my belly. His hands slid up to my breasts. He gently bit my belly. I giggled.

“Two-minute recovery,” I whispered. “Stop.”

“Stop what?” he said. “I’m not doing anything.”

He bit me again, plunging two fingers inside me. I cried out and slid across the floor. He showed no mercy.

I squealed and gasped as he continued to tease me. I was so sensitive that every touch made me jerk and buck. I groaned and whimpered as I tried to roll away from him. He was relentless. He didn’t stop until I was moaning and writhing beneath him.

“It stops when you come,” he said as he worked over my clit.

“Dane,” I moaned.

He didn’t stop until my body was arching and twitching with another violent orgasm. I was completely spent. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t even talk.

I lay there panting, trying to catch my breath. He moved between my legs, and I jerked.

“Not yet,” I gasped.

“Oh yes,” he said, bending down to kiss my belly. “Roll over.”

“Dane.”

He pulled at my arm, rolling me to my stomach. The cool tile floor felt good against my heated skin. Dane kissed my shoulders and the back of my neck.

“You are gorgeous,” he whispered.

He ran his hands over my hips, sliding them down until they covered my ass. He spread my legs, and his fingers slid across my pussy. He cupped my right cheek and squeezed. I moaned as his fingers glided across my sensitive skin.

His tongue trailed down my spine, sending shivers of pleasure through my body. Heat emanated from his body as he stretched out over me.

“I want you,” I whispered.

“You’ll have me, but I think you owe me one more.”

“Dane, I couldn’t possibly,” I groaned, even as I felt my body responding to the gentle touch of his fingers on the backs of my legs. Every touch felt like he was hitting me with electricity. My body was humming with desire.

“Oh, I think you can,” he murmured. “And you will.”

“Don’t you want me?”

“I do.”

“I’m ready,” I said and wiggled my hips.

He chuckled softly and rolled away from me. “Get up. This floor is killing my knees.”

“I don’t think I can walk.”

He chuckled, reached down, and lifted me to my feet. Before I knew what he was going to do, he threw me over his shoulder in a fireman hold. He slapped my ass.

“Hey!” I squealed.

He carried me through the room and into the bedroom. He dropped me onto the bed and loomed over me. “Open your legs.”

“Only if you promise to fuck me,” I said coyly.

He grabbed my ankles and jerked them open. “This isn’t your rodeo. This is mine. I’m in control.”

I didn’t know if it was the knowledge that I was at his mercy or the

thought of him fucking me into oblivion, but I was insanely wet.

“You’re so fucking ready.” He smiled as he palmed between my legs.

“I’ve never been wetter,” I whispered.

His fingers slid up my thighs, parted my pussy lips, and slid inside. I moaned softly, but he didn’t hesitate. He began finger-fucking me slowly.

“You’re so fucking wet,” he said. “You want it badly, don’t you?”

“Yes,” I moaned. “I want your cock so badly.”

“I bet you do. I bet you like the way my fingers feel inside of you.”

“Feels so good,” I moaned.

He drove his fingers in and out of me. “I bet you’re thinking about my cock. Thinking about the way it’s going to feel when I slide it inside you.”

“Oh, God, yes,” I moaned.

“Do you want me to fuck you?”

“God, yes.”

“Do you want me to fuck you hard?”

“Please, baby, please fuck me hard.”

A second later, his fingers were gone, and his cock was pushing inside me. Every nerve ending was on fire.

I’d never been filled so completely. I didn’t think it could get any better—and then he began to fuck me.

He didn’t stop when I came. He didn’t stop when he came. And then he didn’t stop after that. Over and over, he fucked me until I lost count of how many times I had orgasmed.

We stretched out on the bed, neither of us moving. I couldn’t even say for certain my limbs were still attached. The man had fucked me eight ways to Sunday. I was beyond satiated.

The hot springs had relaxed me, but the sex had lulled me into a state of complete submission. I would do anything—anything—he asked of me.

I was in no condition to consider the ramifications, but I knew I’d be lost without him by my side.

“Dane, what’s going to happen between us when we get home?” I asked softly.

He didn’t answer. “I need to clean up,” he said and rolled away from me.

He walked into the bathroom and closed the door.

The words stung. The room went from hot to cold in an instant. I thought the sex meant we were okay. It was apparent that Dane was still grappling with his anger over my unwillingness to write another article. The mixed

signals were confusing, and my feelings were in turmoil.

I curled up in the warm, cozy bed, gazing at the soft glow of the bedside lamp. My instincts told me that running another article to help Dane's restaurant might be a solution, but it felt wrong. It felt fake.

Did I put my career on the line to save his restaurant? I had worked hard to build my reputation, and while I wanted to help Dane, it was a risk I wasn't sure I was willing to take. The conflict within me was evident, and I knew that I couldn't make a hasty decision.

But what I did know, without a doubt, was that I didn't want to lose Dane again. Our connection was as potent as ever.

Dane came back into the room and jerked his hand. "I want to pull down the blankets," he said.

I got up and slid between the sheets with him. "I was thinking we could do that boat thing when we get back," I said in the darkness.

"Yeah, maybe," he muttered. His arm was around me and we were going through the motions of cuddling, but the feeling wasn't there.

"You're still mad at me."

"You really thought sex was going to change that?" he asked.

"I guess I did."

"Ginny, I'm not going to say I'm not attracted to you, but that doesn't change my feelings. Yes, I want you. Yes, we have amazing sex. But I still have some shit to deal with. Just give me time."

I sighed, resigned to the situation. I was damned if I did and damned if I didn't.

CHAPTER 37



DANE

The drive back to the city felt like a never-ending battle. My mind was consumed by the stress of the relentless attacks on my restaurant and my reputation. His latest article had not only taken aim at me but had dragged some of my loyal employees into the fray. Sampson apparently knew of a couple of my waiters from their jobs at other local restaurants. The man was relentless. I was livid that this man could use my hardworking staff to try and get to me.

“Thank you guys for inviting me,” I said to Dez and Carmen as we unloaded their bags. “It was a lot of fun.”

“I hope things work out with the restaurant,” Dez said. “We’ve endured the wrath of Sampson.”

“Really?” I asked with surprise.

“There is no place in Manhattan that has been untouched by that’s man’s dangerous pen,” Carmen said. “Fuck him.”

“Thank you,” I said, smiling. “I hope it goes away quickly.”

“I guess I’ll talk to you later?” Ginny said.

“Yeah.”

I gave her a very brotherly kiss on the cheek and walked away. She got into the car with Dez and Carmen. I watched them drive away before taking my bags inside Grayson’s place. I quickly changed and headed into the city to my restaurant. I went in the back after Cara warned me there was some press circulating out front.

“Did you see it?” Cara asked.

“See what?”

“He published another article,” she said. “And I’ve had two more people

quit, bringing it to six total.”

“What the fuck did he write now?” I asked as I pulled out my phone. “Seriously, how long is he going to milk this damn thing? Shit. He was an asshole and I called him out. Has no one called him out before?”

“Judging by his reaction, I would say no,” she said, sighing. “The man is a troll. An ogre. A fucking asshole.”

I read through the short article with disgust. “This is a regurgitation of what he wrote the first two times,” I said.

“He’s riding this horse for as long as he can,” she said.

“Did you call everyone?” I asked.

She nodded. “Now let’s see who actually shows up.”

“You told them it was mandatory?”

“I did, but that doesn’t mean much.”

“They’ll be here,” I said. “They have to.”

“Let’s hope so,” she said. “Can you sue Sampson for defamation? It seems like he is crossing some lines at this point. He’s using his platform to defame you. That should be illegal.”

The mere mention of a legal battle brought an unsettling feeling. I didn’t want to go down that path, as it would be time-consuming, expensive, and would only fuel the fire of negative publicity further. It wasn’t the solution I was looking for. “I think that would be opening a can of worms,” I said. “I don’t want to stoop to his level. He’s gone low. I’m not going to go there with him. We have to rise above.”

The back door buzzed. “Showtime,” Cara said.

While she let in the staff, I wandered into the dining room. Everything was perfect. It was a beautiful place. Sampson’s constant complaints were unwarranted. I knew that. It wasn’t just because it was mine. It was as good as I thought it was. It wasn’t a biased opinion. It was fact.

My staff filtered into the dining room, grabbing coffee or hot chocolate and taking a seat.

“Thank you all for coming,” I said. “I know things have been rough the last couple of days. I’m sorry I wasn’t here. But I just want to say, we’re going to be okay. It’s rough waters, but once we get people through the doors and into those seats, we’re going to be fine. Our menu is spectacular. Our chefs are top notch. It’s all about getting them to eat and experience it firsthand. Once that happens, we’re good.”

“Why don’t we write our own article?” one of the waiters said in a joking

tone.

A few raised eyebrows and nervous chuckles rippled through the group. The idea seemed outlandish at first, but as I glanced around the room, I could see that some of my employees were genuinely considering it. The notion of taking control of the narrative appealed to them, as it did to me. Unfortunately, I wasn't a writer. I didn't know who would take me seriously. I would have to use my name and money to get a publication to pick it up.

"Guys, trust me, there is nothing more I would love to do than blast that guy in a public article," I said. "But we can't. I need to keep a level head. We're a day away from opening. I am not going to give the man the satisfaction of replying. I'm not going to take the bait. The relentless attacks from Sampson are infuriating, but we have to stay professional and not stoop to his level."

They nodded and I hoped they understood why I wasn't fighting back.

"It's important we keep our heads held high," I said. "While it's tempting to lash out or respond to the slander with petty remarks, that's counterproductive. Instead, I encourage everyone to channel your frustration into your work and maintain the level of excellence we are known for. Success is the best revenge."

Luckily, only a few people canceled their reservations for the grand opening and the subsequent evenings. The canceled reservations had already been replaced by the list of people that were hoping just such a thing would happen. That was a relief.

"Guys, all we need to do is do our jobs like we've trained for," I said. "Sampson's inflammatory crap will soon be old news. The key is to stay focused on the task at hand and prove the quality of our service and our amazing food."

"We will, boss," someone said.

I nodded and looked around at them. "I am asking you guys to stand with me. Losing more of you at this juncture would be disastrous. I will take care of you if you take care of me. We are a team. I can't do this without any of you."

I didn't want to beg, but I also needed them to know they were valuable. If they bailed, I was screwed. Sampson would win.

"Any questions?" I asked.

"We got you."

I smiled. "Thank you. Now, with that said, the prep staff is here for a few

hours. The rest of you, I'll see you all tomorrow. Let's show this city what we do."

After everyone had left, I sat down at a table and took a deep breath. The stress of the past few days had been overwhelming. I needed to unwind, to release all the tension that had accumulated within me.

"That was good," Cara said.

"Do you think it worked?" I asked.

Cara nodded. "It did. You rallied the troops, boss. I think they're ready for battle."

I chuckled. "I hope it doesn't come to that."

Cara leaned across the table, a mischievous glint in her eye. "If it does, I'm ready to fight by your side."

I raised an eyebrow. "Oh really?"

She grinned. "Absolutely. I may be small, but I'm mighty."

I laughed, feeling the tension slowly dissipating. "I have no doubt about that."

We sat in comfortable silence for a few moments, enjoying the calm before the storm. "I'm going to take a minute," I said. "Do you need me for anything?"

She shook her head. "Go. I'm going to check on the kitchen and make sure everyone has what they need."

"Cara."

"Yes?"

"Thank you," I said. "Truly, you are my rock. You are a total badass."

She flashed me a grin. "That's why you pay me the big bucks. It's going to take a lot more than a nasty troll to scare me away. I've got a retirement to plan for. I'm not about to walk away from this kind of money."

"And that's why I'll keep paying you the big bucks. If money buys loyalty, I'll do it every time."

I retreated to the back patio, a swanky glass-enclosed space that was ideal for special events. It was going to be one of the hottest spots in the village for bachelorette parties, tea parties, and business meetings. Assuming Sampson's stupid article didn't blow it all up.

I turned on one of the patio heaters and sat down. I knew I shouldn't do it, but I did it anyway. I Googled my own damn name.

I scrolled through a few pages of search results, most of them glowing reviews of my restaurant or articles about my rise to culinary stardom. But

then, there it was. Sampson's latest piece, titled "Celebrity Chef's Shady Past: Is He Hiding Something?" My blood boiled as I skimmed the article, filled with baseless accusations and half-truths.

I shook my head. It was more bullshit about me being a spoiled rich kid. I hadn't paid my dues, which meant I didn't deserve my success. He implied I bought my success. It was all bullshit and I wanted to scream it from the mountaintops, but no one was going to listen to me. It was exactly what Ginger had tried to tell me. I wasn't appealing to the right demographic. Because I was rich, I was supposed to only cater to the wealthy. That seemed like bullshit to me.

While I was holding my phone, Grayson texted. *Ignore all the negativity and concentrate on what matters most. When we get back, we're going to have a huge family dinner. Invite anyone you want. We're going to put all that nonsense behind you and you're going to kick ass. Fuck that guy.*

It was a nice gesture. I quickly replied and told him thank you. It was nice to have someone in my corner. Another someone. But it also sucked because it meant that even though Grayson was off the grid, he was aware of the drama. He knew I was getting raked over the coals, which meant the story was pretty big. My dad would know, along with my aunt and the rest of my brothers. It was a little embarrassing.

I took a deep breath and stood up from the patio chair. My mind was racing, filled with thoughts of vengeance. I needed to clear my name, to prove Sampson wrong, and show the world that I wasn't some spoiled rich kid who bought his way into success. No, I had worked damn hard to get where I was, and I wasn't going to let some hack journalist tear me down.

I walked back into the restaurant and made my way to the kitchen. The place was buzzing with activity, the clanging of pots and pans, the hiss of steam from the ovens, and the chatter of the prep cooks.

"Is there anything I can do?" I asked the team. "Put me to work. I'll dice onions, peel potatoes, whatever you need."

There was some laughter, which I took as a challenge.

One of the staff looked me over, taking in my expensive suit and shoes. "You sure about that, bud? You don't exactly look like you've handled a knife before."

I grinned. "Try me."

The chef shrugged and handed me a stack of onions. "Have at it, then."

I got to work, my hands moving quickly and efficiently as I diced the

onions into small, uniform pieces. It was a familiar task, one that I had done countless times before. As I worked, I felt the tension in my shoulders start to ease. This was where I belonged, in a kitchen, surrounded by food and people who shared my passion.

“Now what?” I grinned.

There was a round of applause. I took a bow and got back to work. I wasn't just some rich dude that pretended to know about food. I did know about it. It was what I lived for. Sampson wasn't going to take that away.

CHAPTER 38



GINGER

I was sitting on my couch, the glow of my laptop casting a faint, bluish hue on my face. The blank document in front of me taunted my writer's block. I'd started writing this article multiple times, only to erase it entirely every time. The cursor was a writer's biggest enemy. I swore I could hear it shouting at me sometimes. Teasing me about my lack of words. Usually, I would get up and go for a walk or clean the house.

I had done that.

Several times.

I still couldn't find the words. That was because it didn't feel natural. This was more of a demand than a desire. I was doing this for Dane.

No, I was doing this because I was trying to prove something to Dane. He was pissed at me that I hadn't immediately jumped to help him. I understood it. I tried putting myself in his shoes, and while I understood the feeling of betrayal, it didn't make it any easier for me to write the damn thing. I had every intention of coming to his aid. But something didn't feel right, and I couldn't put my finger on it.

I took another sip of wine, then swirled the red liquid in the glass as I contemplated my dilemma. I wanted to stand up for Dane, to support him through this difficult time. He was facing an unjust media onslaught, and my writing could potentially serve as a lifeline to steer the narrative in his favor. But with every attempt to write an opening sentence, the words felt inauthentic, forced, and insincere.

It wasn't how I did things. This was personal. Anything I wrote would be an attack on someone else. My readers would know I was coming out against Sampson. That was drama. No one gave a shit about the drama. They wanted

to read about my experience at a restaurant. There was too much drama in the world already.

The pressure to help him was ridiculous. Part of me was willing to take my chances. He would forgive me eventually. I just needed to give him some time. But there was a part of me that worried he wouldn't forgive me and this relationship we had just put back together would fall apart once again.

I knew the impact my words could have. I could counter Sampson's negative publicity, but I couldn't compromise my integrity, even for someone as important as Dane. My work was something I held dear. It would be like asking him to use plant-based steak in place of the real deal.

It felt fake.

"Dammit!" I closed the laptop in frustration. It was an attempt to get away from that damn judgmental cursor.

I drained my wine glass in one go. I walked back to the kitchen for a refill. Pouring another glass of red, I contemplated my predicament. It was all I had done since Dane asked me to write the thing. I sipped my wine and tried to blank out. I wiped the slate clean, dismissing all the preconceived notions and ideas. I needed to look at this from a fresh perspective.

Why did this feel so inauthentic to me? I thought about Dane's request. I was eager to help him. It wasn't about a lack of wanting to help or a sense of disloyalty. It was that my words needed to come from the heart. They needed to be a true reflection of my thoughts and feelings. I couldn't write what I was told to write. It would sound canned and generic. Anyone that followed my work would think I'd been taken over by a cyborg.

My loyalty to Dane was solid. I would support him through thick and thin, but that support had to be sincere. I couldn't just be his cheerleader. That wasn't what he wanted. Not really. Dane hated inauthenticity. He would know I was just writing shit to make him happy. Then he would question everything I said and wrote.

I realized that the pressure I placed on myself was the issue. I didn't need to write an article that defended Dane against Sampson's articles point by point. Instead, I needed to write about my personal experiences with Dane. I needed to show the connection we'd shared over the years, and the impact he had on my life. My genuine story would serve as a better tribute to the man behind the restaurant.

He was being attacked for his wealth. People saw him as this spoiled rich kid. They didn't realize he was a caring, funny, humble man. He wasn't fake.

He was a little cocky, but he wasn't arrogant. He was just like everyone else. And I happened to know he could cook his ass off. That was something money couldn't buy.

With my glass refilled and my mind clearer, I decided to sit down once again. This time, my fingers flew across the keyboard. I started typing, not with the intention of trying to disprove Sampson, but with the intention of sharing my perspective, my experiences, and my truth. People could love it or hate it, but it was the truth.

While writing, I glanced at the clock. It was already eleven in New York. Back home in Vancouver, it was eight. My parents would be getting ready for their trip to the Cook Islands tomorrow. I needed their advice. And I needed to wish them a happy trip. I called their number, hoping they would pick up despite it being a little late.

After a few rings, my mother's voice came through the phone. I smiled and felt a wave of relief wash over me. "Ginger! It's late. Is everything okay?"

"Everything's fine," I assured her. "Are you excited about tomorrow?"

"I am," she gushed. "I can't wait. Are you sure you're going to be okay?"

"I'm fine," I said. "I'm a big girl. You guys deserve this."

"Is everything okay?" she asked again. "You usually only call this late when you've got something on your mind."

I sighed, smiling as I shook my head. My mother knew me very, very well. "Actually, I would love your advice," I said.

"What is it?"

"Do you remember Dane Bancroft?"

She burst into laughter. "I'm not that old and I'm certainly not senile. Of course, I remember him."

"He's in town. He's opening a restaurant. I ate there the other night, and it was amazing."

"Why do I have a feeling this is about a lot more than good food?"

"Dane and I... well, we've been spending time together," I confessed.

"Oh, wow. How do you feel about that?"

"I'm not sure. I thought I was happy, but now, I'm not so sure. I'm a little torn."

"Why?"

I explained how Dane had asked me to write an article to counteract the negative pieces written by Sampson. I shared my conflicting emotions and

how it didn't sit right with me. I told her how upset Dane had been as well.

"I don't know what to do," I said. "I want to support him, but I feel like I'm not being true to myself."

"Trust your gut," she said. "Stay true to your principles as a writer and a person. You have to remain authentic in whatever you do. You're never going to live with yourself if you trade your integrity for what might not even work."

My dad, who had been listening in to the conversation, added his two cents. "It's not your responsibility to ensure Dane's restaurant opening is successful. He is a capable and intelligent man who can navigate the challenges without you sacrificing anything. He's a big boy. I'm sure this isn't the first time he's dealt with a little bad press. In fact, I know that family has faced their fair share of difficulties. He can hire a PR team if he wants someone to spin fairytales."

"Thank you, Dad," I said. "And Mom. I knew you guys would have some good advice."

"You know you can call us for anything," Mom said.

"Call me before you board your flight," I said. "And then you have to call me when you land. Then you better not call me until you get back. Turn off your phones and relax. Don't worry about me. I'm going to be just fine. I love you guys."

I felt better after my talk with them. I had figured I would. The article I wrote stayed on the screen, but it was no longer my focus.

Turning my attention to my phone, I opened Instagram and selected several photos from old albums on my Facebook page. They were snapshots from a time when Dane and I had shared countless memories, from our playful escapades to our private moments that had only been shared with our friends and family. The albums had been locked and out of sight for a very long time. Looking back through them, I could remember exactly when each photo was taken. I remembered how I felt in the moments. Mostly, I remembered the love we felt. With each photo I uploaded, I aimed to show the man. It was a silent promise that no matter what, I would be there for him. I hoped he would understand.

As I scrolled through the old pictures, I felt a little nostalgic. Dane and I had shared so many good memories together, and it was hard to believe that it had all ended so suddenly. But as I looked at the photos, I could see the love that we had shared. It was evident in the way that we looked at each other,

the way that we held hands, and the way that we smiled.

I selected a few of my favorite photos and began to upload them to Instagram. As I did, I wrote a caption that spoke from my heart. I talked about how much Dane had meant to me and how much I missed him. I spoke about the love that we shared and how it would always be a part of me. It was a bittersweet moment as I hit the share button, knowing that Dane would never see these photos, never read my words, but my followers would.

I hoped I could change their opinions with my opinion of him. They said a picture spoke a thousand words. I hoped my pictures spoke volumes.

Satisfied I had done my part, I put the phone away and leaned back against the couch. The pictures had stirred up a lot of old memories.

As I let my mind wander through the memories, I felt a pang of sadness in my chest. Dane and I had been so in love, so happy together. But something had changed, and it all fell apart. I wished I could go back in time and fix things, make it so that we never drifted apart.

But I couldn't change the past. All I could do was hold on to the memories and keep moving forward.

If Dane and I were going to be together, it would be different. We weren't the same kids anymore. We had both gone through some things and grown. There was definitely something between us, but was it enough? I just couldn't say for sure.

Only time would tell.

CHAPTER 39



DANE

I woke up an hour before I needed to. I was up late the night before. I couldn't sleep. I was a nervous wreck. Tonight was the night. I was either going to prove Sampson right or show the city and his readers the man was a fraud.

It was a lot of pressure. I rolled over to check my phone, hoping there would be a text from Ginger. There was nothing from her, but my brothers, my dad, and Grayson had all sent me messages wishing me luck on my grand opening.

It had taken so much work to get here. To turn my dream into reality. But now, as I lay in bed, I felt like a fraud. How could I possibly live up to the expectations of everyone who had supported me along the way?

I got out of bed and went to the kitchen to make some coffee. As I waited for the machine to brew, I looked out the window, taking in the tranquil sight of Grayson's large backyard.

It made me think of my house back home. The house I was rarely in. I traveled a lot and never took a lot of time to live in the moment. I liked being busy. I liked staying on the move. That kept me from thinking about everything I didn't have in my life—like a girlfriend, a wife, or a family.

But now, with my coffee in hand, I felt a pang of loneliness. The grand opening was a big moment, but it was also a reminder of what I didn't have.

The last couple of days with Ginger were more of a reminder of what I was missing. We had gotten so close to almost having that happily ever after and then things got messy.

I took a sip of my coffee and walked over to the counter, resting my arms on it. I let out a sigh and stared out the window, the silence surrounding me.

My thoughts drifted back to Ginger and the memories we shared together. It was like we were made for each other, but somehow, we always managed to mess things up.

I closed my eyes and took another sip of my coffee, trying to push the thoughts of Ginger to the back of my mind. I needed to focus on the grand opening tonight. It was the biggest night of my career, and I couldn't afford to let anything distract me.

I made my way back to my room to shower and get ready for what was going to be a very long day. I was tempted to look at Sampson's social media, but I didn't do it.

By the time I got to the restaurant, my nerves were twisted into a knot that had planted itself in my gut.

I was restless and paced the floor in my restaurant as the clock ticked closer to the final hour before we opened our doors for business. I had never been so nervous before an opening. Usually, I was totally calm, cool, and collected. Obviously, tonight was different. There was a lot more riding on the first few hours our doors were open. The typical hiccups could not happen tonight. The tiniest flaws would be amplified. With Sampson's articles still gaining traction, people were going to jump at the chance to add their stories about our imperfections.

I was dressed in my finest suit. I felt the tension in the air. There was a hum of excitement that buzzed through my staff. We had worked tirelessly to get to this point. The night would either cement our reputation as the hottest new thing in town or destroy us before we got a chance to disappoint customers.

Sampson hadn't published another word about us, but I worried that another scathing article might drop within the hour. He had already cast enough doubt on my name and the reputation of the restaurant. I had my phone close by, but I had decided to avoid social media and online news, just as Grayson suggested. I couldn't afford to be sucked into the whirlpool of negativity. I had to focus on doing things right.

One of my servers approached me with her phone in hand, her eyes filled with excitement. "Dane, have you seen this?"

I shook my head and held up my hand while taking a step back. "I'd rather not," I replied. "I want to focus on what we have right now. I do not want to know what they're saying."

But she was persistent, her smile unwavering. She pushed her phone into

my hands. “I think you should take a look.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s bad luck,” I said.

“Trust me, this is good luck,” she said, laughing.

I sighed and took her phone. “What the hell is this?”

“You,” she said, laughing.

I scrolled through her Instagram feed, filled with pictures of Ginger and me. Old photos. I cringed at the sight of my younger, dorkier self. In the first picture, we were both just eighteen, sitting shoulder to shoulder at the dinner table in her old family home.

I remembered the night the photo was taken—her parents had prepared a delicious meal to celebrate our upcoming high school graduation. The genuine smiles on our faces were so innocent and full of hope. We could have never imagined what would happen a year later. The smiles I saw in the picture were hopeful and full of love.

The next image was another special memory. It was a shot of the two of us at a restaurant, sharing a meal on a date night. We looked so comfortable together. She was all grace and beauty, and I was all arms and legs and lots of awkwardness. I recalled the excitement of that evening. We laughed a lot. There had been a sense we were taking the first steps toward adulthood hand in hand. We were going to do it together.

The third picture showed us at a party, side by side, creating appetizers together for our guests. I laughed remembering that night. I loved Ginger, but she was not a cook. She tried, but like she said, she didn’t inherit the cooking gene.

The connection we shared was evident in the way we seamlessly worked together. It was moments like these that made me appreciate how well we complemented each other, even if we didn’t always see it at the time. It made me nostalgic, sad, and pissed at the same time.

I wanted to go back to those days and tell myself to appreciate the little moments. I wished there was a way to go back in time and have a little chat with my younger self before that night we parted ways. I would have told myself to take a minute and consider the options. I could have suggested we try the long-distance thing. It would have been worth it.

The final image took my breath away. It was a photograph of Edge and the exquisite meal she had enjoyed. Her caption beneath the picture was heartfelt and brimming with pride. She expressed her unwavering belief in me, in Edge, and in the vision we had shared all those years ago.

The words she had written touched my heart deeply, and emotions welled up in me. Ginger's support was unwavering and pure. The bond we had way back then was still there. Her caption spoke of her belief in Edge not just as a restaurant but as a place where people from all walks of life could come together and connect over delicious food, just as she and I had done throughout our shared history.

It was a powerful reminder of our past. It was a flashback to the carefree days of our youth. Ginger's words reminded me of our connection and how it had shaped my life. Every menu item reminded me of her. She had been my guinea pig back in the day when I was developing all the recipes. I should have trusted her. She was going to do things her way whether I liked it or not. That was the way she rolled.

"Thank you," I finally said, my voice filled with gratitude and emotion.

I handed the server's phone back to her, feeling a renewed sense of energy coursing through me.

"You were quite the handsome man," she teased.

I rolled my eyes. "Nah, I was a late bloomer."

"I think it's cute," she said.

"Thanks."

She walked away, leaving me to my pacing, but I didn't feel the need to wear a hole in the floor anymore. I had the feeling everything was going to be okay. The pit of uncertainty had disappeared. Ginger's Instagram post had worked its magic. I was ready to handle it again. I had Ginny in my corner. That made me feel like Superman.

I walked through the restaurant, checking the final details. Sampson's negativity no longer seemed insurmountable. Ginny had given me a Kevlar suit. I was ready for anything the fucking troll threw my way. I was good. My restaurant was amazing, and things were going to be okay. I just had to do what I did best. I wasn't going to let him get in my head.

I took a moment to text Ginger. The gratitude I felt was overwhelming, and I had to express it. I owed her an apology and a thank you.

"Hey, Ginger," I typed, my fingers moving swiftly over the keys. *I just wanted to say thank you for your Instagram post. It meant the world to me. I know it's late notice, but if you're available, I'd love for you to come to the opening tonight as my special guest. The restaurant is fully booked, but I'll make sure there's a seat for you.*

As I hit the send button, I thought about what the future held. I wanted

her here tonight. I wanted her to be by my side. If this thing was a success, it was in large part because of her. If it was a failure, that was on me. But regardless, I wanted her there. She gave me strength. I needed all the strength I could get tonight.

“Dane!” Cara called out from the kitchen. “You need to come sample the marinara.”

I smiled and moved right back into work mode.

As I made my way to the kitchen, I couldn’t shake the feeling that something was going to happen tonight. Whether it was good or bad, I didn’t know. But I was ready for it. I was ready for anything. Sampson had no chance against me now, not with Ginny in my corner. I was invincible.

I tasted the marinara, savoring the rich flavors. It was perfect. I gave Cara a nod of approval and she smiled back at me. We were ready for the grand opening.

“It’s good, guys,” I said. “Perfect. How is everything else?”

Cara presented me with a spoonful of gravy that was offered on the side of just about everything because what didn’t taste better with gravy?

“I thought it was just a little underwhelming,” she said. “But you’re the expert.”

I tasted the gravy, my eyebrows furrowing in disappointment. Cara was right. It was a little underwhelming. I needed to fix it before the guests arrived.

“You’re right. It needs more pizzazz,” I said. “I have an idea. How about we add a touch of bourbon to it? That should give it the extra kick it needs.”

Cara looked skeptical but nodded anyway. “Sure, we can give it a try.”

I poured a generous amount of bourbon into the pot and stirred it in. The aroma was intoxicating. I dipped my spoon into the gravy and tasted it again. This time, my eyes widened in excitement. The bourbon had done the trick. It was perfect now.

“Nailed it,” I said, smiling.

“Brilliant, Dane,” Cara said, grinning at me. “I knew you’d come up with something.”

I smiled back at her, feeling a sense of pride. This was it. This was my moment. I was finally living my dream.

“I think we’re ready,” I said. “Let’s unlock the doors.”

CHAPTER 40



GINGER

I didn't know what to wear. I only had a short time to figure it out. Dane hadn't exactly given me advance notice. That meant I had to go with what was in my closet. I had already worn my little black dress. I wanted to blow Dane's socks off. I was sure there would be some photographers there. I needed to look good.

Damn good.

I rummaged through my closet, throwing clothes left and right to find the perfect outfit. As I dug deeper, I came across a red silk dress that I had bought a while ago but I had never found the right occasion to wear it. This was it. A devilish grin spread across my face as I imagined Dane's reaction when he saw me in it.

I quickly slipped into the dress, admiring myself in the mirror. The dress hugged my curves in all the right places, showing off my ample cleavage and toned legs. I paired it with some strappy heels and a clutch and headed out the door.

I stood outside the entrance to Edge, my heart pounding in my chest. A mixture of excitement and nervousness coursed through me, and I wasn't entirely sure why. After all, I had been in the place before. Dane had invited me.

But tonight was different. I was here for the grand opening. I really wasn't expecting it. I assumed Dane had dismissed me. He was pissed I didn't write the article and was never going to talk to me again. It wouldn't be the first time.

As I walked in, the host greeted me with a warm smile. "Good evening, Ginger. We've been expecting you. Right this way." With a friendly nod, she

led me deeper into the restaurant.

The interior looked just the same as it did, but with all the diners, it looked different. It was a rich, inviting atmosphere. The murmur of happy guests and clinking silverware filled the air.

I was shown to a table set for two, placed strategically at a prime location in the restaurant. From this vantage point, I had a perfect view of the entire space and the guests who filled it. I recognized a few faces. They were some of the movers and shakers in the city. I was so happy to see the place was packed. Sampson's articles didn't have the dampening effect he had hoped for.

The place was buzzing with an energy that was hard to resist. Quiet laughter echoed through the air with soft strains of holiday music barely audible in the background.

As I settled into my seat, my eyes wandered. Every detail was impeccable, from the gleaming silverware to the elegant centerpieces gracing each table. It was clear that Dane had poured his heart and soul into creating an extraordinary dining experience. Things were just a little different than the night I had been here.

I was so used to coming into a restaurant with a critical eye. I was used to taking a few pictures of the table settings and making mental notes about the ambiance.

But not tonight. I was off duty. I was here to simply be a patron. It was nice to be able to just sit back and take it all in. It was perfect. He had to be thrilled with the way things were going. Obviously, I didn't know what was happening behind the scenes, and as a diner, I wasn't supposed to, but from where I was sitting, things were good.

"Here you go." A waiter quickly delivered me water and a basket of rolls. "Can I get you started with a drink?"

"Chardonnay, please," I said, smiling.

My glass of wine was delivered minutes later. I sipped my wine and reviewed the menu. I wanted to try something different. While I was perusing the many different options, I felt him. It was weird, but I could sense his presence.

I looked up, searching the room.

And then, I saw him.

Dane Bancroft stepped into the dining room, commanding the attention of the entire room. It was impossible not to notice how incredible he looked. In

that moment, he was a far cry from the awkward, lanky teenager I'd known back in Vancouver. The transformation was remarkable. He exuded confidence and charm, and the years had been kind to him. Every aspect of him, from his well-tailored suit to the subtle swagger in his step, was all about success.

My heart skipped a beat at the sight of him.

We'd come a long way since the days when we had walked through life side by side, young and unsure of the world. Now, he was this grown man with a new restaurant under his belt. After going through all the pictures last night, it reminded me of just how far we had both come. We did all of that on our own without each other.

But I didn't want to do it alone anymore. I wanted to celebrate his success with him. I wanted to be on his arm when he opened his next restaurant. Not because I wanted to ride his coattails or share in the success. I wanted to be there to support him.

I watched as he addressed the guests. It was the Dane I knew and loved. He smiled, laughed, and easily made conversation. He had every reason to be proud of this accomplishment, and it was heartwarming to see him bask in the joy of the moment.

Dane's eyes scanned the room, and for a brief second, they locked with mine. A warm and genuine smile graced his lips, and I felt a surge of happiness. He was here, pursuing his dreams, and I was here to witness his success. I felt my heart flutter when he glanced my way.

Dane's gaze lingered on me. His intent was clear, and he began to make his way toward me. It was a little crazy that he saw me out of all the people in the place. Then again, I understood it. I was the same with him. I could spot him in a crowded room any day of the week. There was an invisible connection between us.

As he approached, the energy in the room shifted. Every guest seemed to take notice of his presence, and I couldn't blame them. Dane had always had a magnetic charisma about him. It was one of the things that had drawn me to him in the first place.

"Hey," he said, his voice low and smooth as he reached me.

"Hey, yourself," I replied, smiling.

Dane leaned in, his lips brushing against my ear. "I've missed you," he murmured, his breath hot against my skin.

My heart skipped a beat at the intimate gesture. "Thank you for inviting

me,” I said, feeling just a little breathless.

“I wanted you here,” he said. “I always want you here.”

“That’s very sweet.”

“I’m not being sweet.” He chuckled. “I’m being honest.”

I tried to shoo him away. “You need to visit with your other customers,” I said. “You don’t need to keep me company. I’m just fine sitting alone at the table, basking in the glory of your success.”

He took a seat beside me. “You’re the only one I want to spend any time with.”

I felt a mixture of emotions as he sat down across from me. “It’s packed,” I said.

He nodded with that sexy smile of his. “We had a few cancellations, but our wait list is long. People jumped at the chance to take the open reservations.”

“Good,” I said, nodding. “I knew it was going to work out. You have to let your food speak for you. You have the talent. Sampson is going to be humiliated after the first few nights of business. Everyone that gave him any oxygen is going to realize he’s an idiot. It was personal. It had nothing to do with the food or the service.”

“Thank you,” he said, nodding. “For everything. I’m sorry. I’m sorry I tried to push you into something you didn’t want to do. That was wrong. It wasn’t fair for me to ask you to write an article. I let it get under my skin. It was silly. I guess, well, I guess I have some hangups from before. I let it drag me back to that last dinner we had. I’m sorry I made you feel like I was using you.”

“I knew you weren’t using me,” I said.

“It certainly seemed that way, didn’t it?” he said. “I got into a little hot water, and I immediately went to you to save me from myself. I’m the one that pissed Sampson off. I shouldn’t have asked you to bail me out. Worse, I shouldn’t have gotten mad at you for not jumping to do my bidding.”

“Thank you,” I said, smiling. “It’s really okay. You were sinking and reaching out for help. I should have been more understanding.”

“No, you shouldn’t have.” He shook his head. “I wouldn’t want to sacrifice my quality or reputation either, not for something like that.”

“You know I would have come out swinging if I thought Sampson’s stupid nonsense was really going to hurt. I would have never allowed you to drown while I stood by. Never. But I had every confidence you were going to

do just fine. I trust your cooking.”

He leaned closer. “I’m not just a good cook, you know,” he whispered, his eyes flickering with a mischievous glint.

I felt a flush creep up my neck, and his hand brushed against mine, sending shivers down my spine. “Stop.”

“Ginny, there’s something else that’s been bothering me,” he said. “I’m sorry about the other night. I hope you know it wasn’t really anger fueling my need for you. I didn’t mean to do anything—”

“Stop,” I said with a blush staining my cheeks. “I know exactly what that was, and I loved every second of it. Feel free to get mad at me and do that again.”

He chuckled. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“You should get back to work,” I said. “You have guests.”

“Not yet,” he said. “I apologized and had to eat crow, but now I need to thank you for that Instagram post.”

“You saw that?” I laughed.

“I did,” he said. “Talk about a throwback to the past when we were just teenagers.”

I smiled. “It was quite the trip down memory lane.”

“Where are all those pictures?” he asked.

“My Facebook page, locked away in a photo album I haven’t visited in a long, long time. Those were some good times.”

“Yes, they were,” he said, laughing. “Although now the whole world has seen me in that ugly corduroy jacket. I thought it was so cool back then.”

I giggled. “It was.”

“And the haircut?” he groaned. “Man, why didn’t anyone tell me how stupid I looked?”

“I’ll admit it wasn’t my favorite look, but I overlooked it because it was on the head of my favorite person.”

He laughed again. “Good to know. I’m going to be taking a long hard look in the mirror every morning before I walk out the front door.”

Despite our past, it felt comfortable and familiar being around him. I was glad we were back on solid ground. There were still a lot of logistical details to work out, but I felt confident we could actually make this work for both of us.

“I should probably get back to schmoozing,” he said. “Although I’d rather stay right here.”

“Go,” I said. “I’m going to order something. Any recommendations?”

“It’s all good,” he said, grinning as he got to his feet.

“Of course,” I replied.

Dane leaned down and kissed my cheek. “Wait for me tonight,” he said.

“We need to talk.”

“I’ll be here,” I replied with a warm feeling in my belly.

CHAPTER 41



DANE

The restaurant buzzed as we worked through the grand opening event. Tables were filled with customers who were all smiling and chatting while they ate. The festive, but soft lighting created a perfect setting for the evening. I was proud to see my vision come to life. People were happy. My restaurant was a success. All the worrying I'd done the last week was all for naught. Things were okay.

Throughout the evening, I had been running from table to table, ensuring that everything was running smoothly, chatting with customers, and making sure their experience was exceptional. I wanted to make sure they enjoyed every last bite. If there were any complaints, I handled them quickly.

Cara called me over.

"Excuse me," I said, smiling at the man I'd been talking to about skiing. I walked into the kitchen. "What's wrong?"

Cara looked frazzled. "The dessert chef just walked out. He said he couldn't handle the pressure anymore."

"It's okay," I said. "Desserts are already made. Where's Caleb?"

"Having a panic attack," she said, laughing.

"He's up," I said. "I'll talk to him. I had a feeling this might happen."

I found Caleb in the walk-in refrigerator. He was a younger kid, fresh out of culinary school, but I knew he had talent.

"Hey, bud," I said. "How are you doing?"

"I'm freaking out," he said.

"You trained for this," I told him. "You're going to do fine. You know the recipes. You know the plating. You're going to do okay."

"I don't want to let you down," he said.

I shrugged. “You won’t. The first few solo runs might be rough, but you’ll learn, and you have all of us to help you out. Congratulations! You just got a promotion. There’s a pay raise that goes with it.”

I’d had a feeling my dessert guy was going to flake. He had been retired but came to work for me. My gut told me to be cautious, which was why I hired Caleb as an apprentice. I was glad I did.

“It’s all good,” I told Cara as I walked out of the kitchen.

I walked through the dining room that had cleared out quite a bit. There were a few stragglers and, of course, Ginger. She was talking to a couple at their table. I had watched her most of the night. She seemed to know a lot of the diners, or she was just really good at making conversation.

I struggled to keep my focus on my job as owner and host. Ginger in that red dress had me thinking about stripping her out of it and getting very hot and heavy.

But I couldn’t let my thoughts distract me. The restaurant was my life, and I had to ensure that everything ran smoothly.

Guests were leaving and my staff was busy bussing tables and cleaning up as part of their closing duties. I poured myself a drink and walked to the table where Ginger was sitting alone.

“Thank you for waiting,” I said as I took a seat.

“It wasn’t so bad,” she replied, her voice teasing. “Your staff kept a steady rotation of food coming to my table. I couldn’t complain about that.”

“I told them you were a VIP and they were to take care of you,” I said.

“Oh, they did,” she said, laughing. “Maybe a little too well.”

“Stuffed?” I joked.

“Let’s just say I’m glad I wore thigh highs and not full-length pantyhose,” she admitted with a seductive smile. “Or I might have burst right out of them. I’m so full.”

My mind immediately went blank. All the blood rushed south. I could only think about getting between those thighs.

“I’m glad you wore thigh highs too,” I admitted, my gaze locked with hers. The connection between us was undeniable.

She laughed. “Stop. There are people all around.”

“Not that many people. Besides, I can’t stop my mind from thinking about it. I’m a man. You’re wearing a dress that is fire. I think you know that. I think you came here tonight wearing that dress with one goal.”

A slow smile spread across her face. She leaned forward, flashing a bit of

cleavage. “What if I told you I’m not wearing any panties?”

I groaned, my cock jerking in my pants. “You’re pure evil.”

She leaned back and laughed, looking like sex on a stick.

I couldn’t deny the longing I felt, nor could I ignore the undeniable pull we had toward each other. There would always be something between us. It wasn’t just sex, either, although the sex was hot. She was the kind of woman that got under your skin and never went away. I would never fully be free of her. I didn’t want to be free of her. Ever.

I sipped my drink and watched the staff work.

“Congratulations,” she said. “This was clearly a success. You nailed it. I never doubted you would make it happen.”

Her praise was music to my ears, and I smiled as I acknowledged her words. “Thank you, Ginger,” I said with complete sincerity. “It means a lot to hear that from you. It’s been an incredible night, and it’s all thanks to a fantastic team. My people pulled this off. I was just the guy roaming around trying not to get in the way.”

“I’ve only heard positive things going around,” she said with a reassuring smile. “A lot of people stopped at the hostess stand on their way out, inquiring about booking for special events, reserving tables for New Year’s, and even Valentine’s. That’s a good sign. Anything Sampson wrote has been completely invalidated. You proved yourself. The food was excellent. The staff was on top of everything. The atmosphere. All of it. Everyone I talked to asked about who you were and why you’ve never opened a place here before. They feel like they’ve been missing out on the good stuff.”

“Good,” I said, feeling oddly proud of myself. “I had a lot of positive feedback as well.”

I looked around the restaurant and smiled with satisfaction.

“What’s on your mind?” she asked, tipping her glass toward me.

“I’m glad you’re here,” I said. “I was just thinking I’ve been planning and working toward this day for years. I had so many ideas about how it was going to go. I didn’t truly know what to expect.”

“Was it what you hoped for?”

“More than what I hoped for,” I said, smiling. “This night couldn’t have gone any better and that has a lot to do with you.”

She giggled again, finishing her glass of wine. “I just sat here and ate and drank.”

“I had your support and that gave me the strength to get through,” I said.

“It was more than I could have asked for. Thank you.”

“I didn’t want to be anywhere else.”

Her words filled me with a sense of relief. I had been anxious about the grand opening, particularly with the cloud of negativity Sampson had cast over the event. But her presence, her encouraging words, and the reality of the evening’s success were reassurances that I needed.

“I’m sorry I let the Sampson thing bother me,” I said. “I should have listened to you from the beginning. I should have listened to everyone. I let my ego get in the way. I took it all very personally.”

“It’s your ego that has gotten you this far,” she said. “You know you’re good. That’s not a terrible thing. You just can’t let people like Sampson get to you.”

“I’m trying,” I said. “I’m working on it. I don’t want to be a monster.”

She laughed. “You’re not a monster.”

“I’m a little bit of a monster,” I said, grinning.

She laughed. “You’re a good monster. You know what you want, and you go after it. If you’re a monster, then so am I.”

“Sampson is a fucking monster,” I muttered.

“That’s how Sampson gets reads and gets paid,” she explained, her voice tinged with frustration. “Negativity. But the people who read his crap aren’t the ones who’d come out to a restaurant like Edge, anyway. No one who matters listens to him. He’s all about clickbait.”

I admired her understanding of the dynamics in the world of media and the restaurant business. She thought it was merely a ploy to draw attention, which would ultimately benefit Sampson.

As the staff began leaving for the night, our conversation continued, and the restaurant gradually quieted down. My employees said their goodbyes, leaving us in a serene, dimly lit setting.

“It’s so quiet,” she said with a sigh. “All that craziness and it’s just gone.”

Cara came out of the back with her purse slung over her shoulder and her hair down. “I think that’s it,” she said with an exhausted sigh.

“It was an amazing night,” Ginger said. “Really, really good job. I can see why Dane thinks you’re his most valuable asset.”

Cara smiled. “Thank you. I think we’ve done four of these now. It’s always stressful until it’s not. I think we only had a few minor issues tonight.”

“Nothing the guests noticed,” I said.

“Do you need anything else?” she asked.

I shook my head. “Go home and get some rest. You deserve it. You worked your ass off this last week. I’ll lock up.”

“Enjoy the rest of your night,” Cara said, smiling. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I followed her to the door and locked up. Ginger had stood and was shutting off the last of the Christmas lights. I walked over to her and pulled her into my arms.

“I want to tell you again how much I appreciate your social media post. Those images were a throwback. It brought back a lot of memories. It reminded me of how important you were to me back then.”

“It was the same for me,” she said, smiling. “I remembered all those feelings. It’s hard to imagine how I recovered from that heartbreak. It was like half of my heart was left in Vancouver.”

Her words touched me. “Do you have any regrets?” I asked her.

She took a deep breath. “I think I wish there would have been some different choices, but I don’t regret coming to New York and getting to start a life here. Do you have any regrets?”

I smiled and nodded. “A lot.”

“But you’ve had a lot of success,” she said.

“I have, but it’s been lonely. Maybe I’ve had a lot of success because the only thing I’ve had in my life is work. It would have been so much better if I had someone by my side. Someone to support me while I supported her.”

“We were so young, Dane. We didn’t have the maturity to understand what we had and what we stood to lose.”

“No, definitely not,” I said with a shake of my head. “But I see it now.”

She squeezed my hand. “I’m glad you do.”

I pulled her into a hug and kissed the top of her head. “Do you want to raid the kitchen?”

She laughed. “I will explode. I could not eat another bite.”

“I could eat you,” I offered. “Or vice versa.”

“We’re in your restaurant,” she said, laughing.

She wasn’t actually protesting. I saw the look in her eyes. She was thinking about it.

“I want you,” I said. “Right here, right now.”

CHAPTER 42



GINGER

“Dane,” I breathed. “What if we get caught?”

“By who?” he asked, running his hand down my arm.

“I don’t know. Cara might come back.”

“Why would she come back?” he whispered with his lips against my ear.

“We’re going to get in trouble.” I groaned softly when his lips caressed my ear.

“I own the place,” he said, laughing. “Who’s going to bust us?”

“Good point.”

He kissed me and all thoughts about getting into trouble were forgotten. The kiss was long and slow. I could feel the passion behind it. It was enough to melt my knees. I could also feel his arousal as he pressed against my hip.

“Are you really not wearing panties?” he asked.

“Nope.”

“Dammit,” he groaned. “You turn me inside out.”

“I want you,” I said. “Take me.”

“Baby, those are the sweetest words I’ve ever heard.”

His hands tugged me against him while his mouth covered mine. He kissed me hungrily. I felt his passion burning through him and into me. My heart raced. I loved that I turned him on so much.

“You’re so beautiful,” he groaned into my mouth. His hands slid down my sides and around my ass. He reached lower and tugged at the hem of my dress.

“Dane,” I murmured.

“Trust but verify,” he joked.

My skirt inched up higher. His fingertips ran around the top of my thigh-

high pantyhose, stretching the elasticity.

“These are so fucking hot,” he groaned. “Seriously, I’m having about twenty different fantasies right now.”

“You like?”

“I love,” he said. He bent down and kissed my thigh. His breath brushed over my skin.

“Oh God.”

I felt his fingers slide in the band of my tights and slowly drag them down. He lifted one foot and pulled off my heel before he rolled the hose off. He did the same with my other leg.

My breathing grew heavier with every sensual touch. He wrapped his hands around my calves and pulled my legs apart. He began to kiss and suck on the sensitive skin of my inner thighs. His lips and every touch of his tongue felt like a brand.

“Dane,” I gasped. “The windows.”

“They’re blacked out. We can see out, but they can’t see in. You should know that with all your peeping earlier.”

“Not here,” I said. “I can’t. I can’t focus.”

He chuckled and continued kissing my leg. “It certainly feels like you’re focused.”

I shuddered and reached my hand into his hair. “Dane.”

He leaned back on his haunches and looked up at me. “Alright, let’s go in back.”

“Or we could go to my place,” I offered. “I don’t live far.”

“I can’t wait that long,” he said and got to his feet. “I can practically taste you. There is no way I’m going to make it two minutes. I need you.”

He whisked me through the restaurant, kicked open the kitchen door, lifted me off my feet, and dropped me on the smooth steel prep surface. He violently pushed up my dress and jerked my legs open. His hands went to my hips and pulled me to the edge of the counter.

“Dane!”

He didn’t answer. His mouth was pressed against me. His tongue pushed inside me, and I nearly screamed.

His fingers dug into my hips as he began to thrust with his tongue. I gripped the edge of the table and threw back my head. His tongue slid out of me, and his lips wrapped around my clit.

“Oh God.” I shuddered.

He sucked on my clit and slid two fingers into me. He pumped into me fast and hard. I gasped and reached down to the back of his head.

“Dane,” I moaned. I was so close.

He growled. He sucked harder and his fingers went faster. I exploded around his fingers, quivering and shaking. He moaned, sending vibrations into my sensitive flesh.

I reached down and pulled his head to me and kissed him. My body was still shuddering from my orgasm. He pushed my dress to my waist and hoisted my hips to the edge of the counter. I fumbled with the button of his pants and pushed them down.

“How do you do this?” I murmured.

“Do what?”

“My body doesn’t feel like my own,” I said. “I’m completely at your mercy. I have no control. It’s like I’m an instrument for you to play.”

He grunted in affirmation. “I love that. I love that I make you feel like that. You feel so good.”

His cock was hard. I stroked it lightly. “You’re so ready for me.”

“I’m always ready for you,” he said. “I need you. I need to be inside you.”

I raised my hips, and he pushed inside me. The angle was different. It felt so good. He moaned in my ear as he thrust into me. I felt myself getting wet again.

“I want you to fill me up,” I panted.

He moved in and out of me with hard, fast strokes. I clung to him as he fucked me. My head whirled. I could feel myself getting close to another orgasm. He kissed my neck and nibbled on my ear.

“I’m going to come,” I moaned.

His breathing was ragged and heavy. He was close to finishing, too.

“I want you to come,” he said. “I want to feel your pussy clenching around my cock.”

I gasped as my body exploded around him. My body bucked on the counter, filled with molten hot pleasure. He spasmed inside me. He grunted and groaned with his body jerking uncontrollably.

He held me to him and rested his forehead against mine. He pulled up his pants with a goofy smile before he kissed me.

“You’re the most incredible woman,” he said. “I want to be with you forever.”

I smiled. "Forever is a long time."

"It's not long enough with you," he said.

It was a heavy conversation that I wasn't sure either of us was ready to have.

"Well, I guess we better clean and sanitize this area," I said with a laugh.

He chuckled. "Yes, we better. I'll get the cleaner."

I meandered around the kitchen, checking out all the shiny equipment. It looked a little different than it had the first time I saw it when Dane duped me into believing he cooked the meal he served. He came out with a spray bottle and a towel.

"You know, this is a big kitchen," he said. "We should christen the whole place."

I laughed and walked back toward him. "That is a lofty goal. I would love to be a part of that."

I pulled his face to mine and kissed him. As usual, it only took a kiss to reignite the passion. With him, it was like I was constantly aroused. I couldn't get enough of him. It wasn't long before I felt his erection spring to life. He was just as bad as I was.

"I'm insatiable with you," I told him. "I feel like someone has slipped me something. I just can't stop."

"Me either," he said. "I swear, I don't think this is normal for a man my age."

"You're not exactly old," I said, giggling.

"I'm not exactly a teenager either."

I got down on my knees and unbuttoned his pants for the second time in thirty minutes.

"What are you doing?" he asked with a wicked grin.

"I'm going to christen the kitchen," I said.

His lips pulled into a wide smile. "I like the way you think."

I pulled his pants down to his ankles and left them there. I took his hard cock in my hand and brought my lips to the tip. It was still wet. I ran my tongue down the full length.

He moaned as I made my way back up. I could feel every vein and contour. I opened my throat and took him in as far as I could. I swirled my tongue around his head, rubbing it and massaging it. He moaned with his hands running through my hair. I softly sucked and teased him until I couldn't take it anymore. I bobbed my head up and down, trying to take in as

much of him as I could. He kept moaning and I could feel the pressure building.

I swirled my tongue around his tip, running it back and forth, swirling it in tight circles.

“Shit,” he gasped. “Oh, shit, Ginny. I’m going to come.”

He grabbed a handful of my hair and clenched his fist. His cock was thickening, his orgasm growing nearer. I was ready. I was determined to make it happen. I ran my hand down his shaft and wrapped it around his balls. I worked them, squeezing and massaging until he was grunting and thrusting his hips. I kept sucking until every last drop was gone.

“Damn, Ginny,” he said in a raspy voice. “I think I saw the pearly gates.”

“Thank you,” I said, getting off my knees and casually wiping my mouth.

“I think you needed that more than I did,” he said.

“Maybe,” I said, giggling. “I like having the power. I love hearing you lose control.”

He pulled up his pants but stopped short of buttoning them. “Should I bother?” he asked.

“I think we should take this up somewhere we can get very naked and maybe even in a bed.”

“Come to Grayson’s place,” he offered.

“My apartment is within walking distance.”

“We can go to Grayson’s and maybe go swimming or soak in the hot tub.”

“Okay,” I said, nodding. “You’re sure he won’t mind?”

“He’s not home. He won’t mind.”

“Then I would love to,” I said.

“I know you said you were full, but I’m suddenly starving,” he said. “I’m going to see what kind of leftovers are in the fridge.”

“I’m going to use the bathroom and freshen up. I’ll be back.”

“How about some cheesecake?” he asked. “I can take a couple of pieces with us. Or I bet there is some fried chicken left over.”

“Whatever you want,” I said. “But you’re right, I am a little hungry after all that.”

He flashed a grin. “Thought you might be.”

I found my way to the bathroom and cleaned up quickly. I ran my fingers through my hair to make it look a little better. My makeup was a lost cause. I decided to save it for later and deal with it then. I found my way back out and

straight into Dane's arms.

"You look better than you did five minutes ago," he said.

I pointed to the bag on the counter. "You look like you packed enough for a week."

He chuckled. "I wanted to make sure there was plenty of nourishment in case this thing went all night."

"This thing?" I questioned.

"With the way I'm feeling right now, I feel like I might be able to go all night. And I mean *all night*. Over and over and over. I want to make sure I have the proper nutrition to do so. I would hate to leave you only half satisfied."

"I think we both know that would never happen," I said, laughing.

"Did you drive?"

"No, I took a cab," I said.

"Then let's go," he said and grabbed the bag off the counter. "I'm already getting worked up just looking at you."

CHAPTER 43



DANE

“It’s so pretty!” Ginger exclaimed as I pulled through the gate.

The Christmas lights were on a timer. The trees in the front yard were all decked out in lights along with the house and the shrubs.

“It seems kind of silly to have the place all decked out when they aren’t even here,” I commented.

“But they’re coming back in a week,” she said.

As I pulled up to the garage, I noticed the lights on the Christmas tree in the living room were on. “Shit, I wonder if those are on a timer. I don’t think I turned them on.”

“It’s gorgeous,” Ginger commented. “It’s beautiful. Really beautiful.”

I parked the car, and we got out, walking up to the front door. As we stepped inside, I was struck by how warm and cozy it felt. I smiled at how perfect everything looked.

“This house is incredible,” she whispered.

“I know,” I agreed. “Let’s put this in the kitchen and then we can go up to my room.”

“Or maybe we can take it to your room,” she said, giggling.

“Ginger Rowley! Are you suggesting we get nasty with the food?”

“No,” she said, laughing. “Get your mind out of the gutter.”

“Let me turn off the tree lights,” I said.

The grand Christmas tree in the living room was the only light in the room. Ginny reached for my hand. I led her into the room, but a noise caught my attention.

We both froze. I held a finger to my lips. Someone was in the house. My heart pounded as I immediately thought about how I was going to keep

Ginger safe.

But as my eyes adjusted to the dimness, I spotted two figures on the sofa, locked in an intense make-out session. The more my eyes focused, I was able to see who it was.

I immediately closed my eyes, trying to block the images. I pulled Ginger out of the room and rushed upstairs.

“What the hell was that?” she asked. “Was that—did I see a couple making out on the couch?”

“You did,” I said with a sigh.

“Who the heck was that?”

I winced, trying to suppress my laughter. “Pretty sure it’s my dad,” I replied, shaking my head at the awkwardness of the situation.

Her eyes widened in disbelief. “No way!” she exclaimed, her laughter nearly giving away our presence.

I chuckled and motioned for her to follow me. We continued to tiptoe through the house, heading toward the guest wing where we would find our own privacy.

I closed the door behind us. “I need to wash my eyes,” I said.

“Your dad is staying here?”

“He was, but then he said he was going to be staying at my Aunt Kathy’s house,” I said. “I’m not sure why they are here.”

“Maybe he thought you were going to be out all night,” she offered.

“I’m guessing my cousin James is cramping their style at Kathy’s house, so they came here to get their freak on.” The moment I said it I shuddered with revulsion. “I cannot believe I just said that or witnessed it.”

“Uh oh,” she said, smiling. “Did we just find your kryptonite?”

“I’m thinking it came close, but I’ll recover,” I said, laughing. “That was just a little weird. I think I just had an idea of how he felt when he caught us in the pool that time.”

She groaned and covered her face. “Oh my god. I forgot about that. Or I repressed it. Probably the latter. That was humiliating.”

“Imagine what it was like for him,” I said.

“Poor man. But enough of that. Why don’t we eat some of the cheesecake I pilfered?”

The massive room had its own private fireplace and a nice sitting area. I used the remote to turn on the gas fireplace. The room was instantly transformed into a romantic hideaway.

“This is nice,” she said.

I shrugged out of my jacket and tossed it on the dresser. I kicked off my shoes and loosened my tie. We sat down in the chairs positioned in front of the fireplace and dug into the individual portions of cheesecake. I had tossed in plastic utensils as well.

“Damn,” Ginger said. “This is incredible.”

“You didn’t have any tonight?”

She shook her head. “They seriously stuffed me with everything else. I had a little of the lava cake, but I was too damn full.”

How was it that my life felt so right? I was in the right place at the right time.

“Hey,” she said after a minute. “This is your mom’s recipe.”

I smiled. “It is. It’s one of the few recipes I didn’t tweak.”

“It’s perfect,” she said. “It’s exactly the way I remember it. Gonna tell me the secret ingredient?”

I chuckled and shook my head. “If I told you that, I’d have to kill you.”

She rolled her eyes and took another bite of the cheesecake. As we sat there, enjoying each other’s company and the warmth of the fire, contentment washed over me. It was moments like this that made all the stress and chaos of my job worth it.

Ginger scooted her chair closer to mine and rested her head on my shoulder. I wrapped my arm around her and pulled her close.

“You know,” she said softly. “I can’t remember the last time I felt this relaxed.”

I kissed the top of her head. We sat in comfortable silence for a while longer, savoring the cheesecake and the warmth of the fire. I stole glances at Ginger, admiring her beauty and the way her eyes sparkled in the firelight.

“I know how we can relax even more,” I said.

She giggled. “I’m not sure that’s relaxing. It’s certainly fun, but I don’t know that working up a sweat and breathing heavy is relaxing.”

“Look at you,” I teased. “You’re always thinking about sex, you little nymphomaniac.”

“It’s hard not to be like that when I’m around you.”

“Well, I’m certainly thinking that’s a great idea, but first, come check this out.”

I got up from the chair and led her into the adjoining bathroom. The deep soaker tub took up one corner of the massive space.

“A bath?” she asked.

“Come on, look at that thing, it’s a spa. There are some candles in that cupboard. I’ll sneak downstairs and get the bottle of champagne from the fridge.”

“You have a bottle of champagne?”

“I bought it with the intention of celebrating the grand opening,” I said. “I wasn’t sure I would actually need to open it, but I think it’s been earned.”

“You sneak down there, and I’ll get the bath started,” she said, smiling. “Try not to disturb your father.”

“Trust me, I’m going the back way. I’m not about to walk in on whatever is happening down there now. Remind me to never sit on that couch.”

“Are you going to tell your cousin?”

I laughed. “How in the hell am I going to bring that up? Hey, Grayson, I caught your mom and my dad getting hot and heavy on the couch.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” she said, nodding. “Some things are better left unsaid.”

I made my way down the back staircase, careful not to make a sound. The last thing I wanted was to interrupt my father and Grayson’s mother in the middle of their moment.

I grabbed the bottle of champagne and a couple of flutes from the cabinet and made my way back upstairs, being careful not to make a sound. As I walked into the bathroom, I was hit by the scent of lavender steam rising from the tub. Ginger was already in the water, her eyes closed and a smile on her lips. I set the champagne and glasses on the side of the tub and started to undress.

“You know, I can’t stop thinking about you,” she said, her eyes still closed as she leaned back against the tub. “It’s weird, but you’re always there. It’s not intentional, it just happens. Like sitting in the tub, I closed my eyes and thought about what I was going to do tomorrow, but it was you that came to mind.”

“I’m not complaining,” I replied, my eyes on her body as I stripped down to nothing.

“Come in here with me.” She opened her eyes and reached for me, pulling me into the hot water. “This is exactly what I needed.”

“I’m glad I could provide,” I joked as I slid behind her.

The inviting warmth and the flickering candles around the room created an atmosphere of serenity and relaxation. We settled into the tub, bubbles

tickling our skin, and I couldn't resist pulling her close to me.

We continued to flirt and playfully tease each other, our laughter filling the air as we enjoyed each other's company. The stresses of the restaurant's grand opening and the chaos of the past few days melted away.

As the water caressed our bodies, Ginger twisted her head around to look at me. "Are you going back to Vancouver in January?"

I took a moment to consider the question. I sighed and looked into her eyes, my fingers gently tracing her cheek. "That was the plan," I admitted. "But now, with the restaurant opening and everything that's happened? I'll be flying out here every two weeks for the first few months. There's a lot more for me in New York now."

Ginger's expression changed as she processed my words. She turned back around and leaned her head against my shoulder. "I see."

I pressed my lips against her ear with my hands sliding under the water to caress her body. "Plans change," I whispered softly, my voice filled with sincerity. "I don't want to be away from you for too long."

She looked up at me once again. I kissed her, hoping to convince her things were different now. Ginger's lips met mine, hesitant at first, but soon her mouth opened up, welcoming me in. My hands moved up her stomach, feeling the curves of her body. The water around us sloshed as we shifted, moving to find the best angle for our kiss.

She turned around as I sat forward. She straddled me, her legs stretching out behind me while I kissed down her throat.

I pulled her against me, my hands exploring her body. My fingers traced the curve of her breast, feeling the weight of her in my hands.

She leaned forward and kissed my neck. I moaned softly as her lips moved across my skin, her lips burning into my flesh. I cupped her breast, gently squeezing and massaging.

The water sloshed around us as our bodies moved. My hands slid down her body. My fingers traced a path across her stomach and down to her thighs, teasing her.

She opened her eyes as I moved my mouth across her chest. My lips traced a line down to her breast. She gasped as I teased her nipple, flicking it with my tongue.

"You're so beautiful," I whispered, my voice hoarse with desire.

"I'm thinking we should get out of the tub," she said. "We're about ready to make a really big mess in here."

I chuckled. “You’re right. I don’t think Grayson would appreciate me flooding his house.”

“No, he wouldn’t,” she said.

We got up and each grabbed a towel, but it was pointless. Our wet, slick bodies came together, and we ended up on the floor in front of the fire, where I made love to her. It wasn’t hot, passionate sex. It was making love. It was sharing our bodies, hearts, and souls.

CHAPTER 44



GINGER

I dressed in jeans, booties, and one of my favorite sweaters. It was silver with faint threads of red and gold woven through it. I had bought it on clearance last year with the intention of it being my holiday sweater. That was before I knew my parents were going to be out of town for Christmas.

I was looking forward to my official date with Dane. It had been a week since the restaurant opened. Things were running smoothly, and he felt confident he could take a night off. I found myself missing him when he was at work. I counted down the minutes until he would come over after he got done at Edge.

I knew a time was coming when he wasn't going to come over after work. He was going to go back to Vancouver. We were going to have to deal with the long-distance thing when the time came. I was dreading it. I didn't know how I was going to function without him. I hated that I had become one of those girls that was so crazy about her man she couldn't get through a day without craving his touch.

I heard the knock at the door and quickly went to answer it. Dane looked incredibly handsome.

"Hey, beautiful," he said as he leaned in for a kiss. The moment our lips met, I felt a surge of electricity. I had never felt so connected to someone before, and it scared me.

He held up the package he was carrying.

"What's in the box?" I asked as he handed it to me.

"Open it and find out," he replied with a mischievous grin.

I tore off the wrapping paper to reveal a red lace teddy. My breath caught in my throat and I looked up at him in surprise. "Dane, what is this?" I asked,

feeling my cheeks flush with embarrassment.

“It’s a gift for us to enjoy,” he replied, his eyes darkening with desire. “I want to see you in it.”

I laughed. “Does this mean we’re not going to the boat show in Staten Island?”

He shook his head. “No, this is for later.”

I put on my coat, and we set out. Dane and I wandered along the docks holding hands. The air was crisp, and the streets of Staten Island were adorned with twinkling holiday lights. Yachts and boats of all sizes were beautifully decorated as well.

We stopped in front of one particularly magnificent yacht. “Wow,” I breathed out, taking in the sight of the sparkling lights and the grandeur of the vessel.

“They really go all out,” Dane said.

Despite having lived in the city for fifteen years, this hidden nearby treasure was a delightful surprise. “I can’t believe I’ve never taken the time to come out here,” I said. “It’s really cool and different.”

Dane chuckled. “That’s because you were too busy,” he teased, pulling me in for a kiss.

I melted into him, feeling the warmth of his body and the strength of his arms around me. The kiss deepened, and my hands found their way to his hair. His hands trailed down my back, and I knew that the red lace teddy was going to come into play sooner than later.

As we continued our leisurely stroll, the sound of laughter and the cheerful chatter of families filled the air. The walk eventually led us back to the pier, where a Christmas Market had been set up. There were colorful stalls offering an array of holiday-themed crafts and treats. Artisans were selling all kinds of cool, unique gifts.

“Oh, what is that?” I asked, turning my nose up and sniffing.

“That would be the scent of roasted chestnuts,” he answered.

“Oh wow, that smells so good,” I said. “It’s nice being with a foodie.”

“Come on, let’s go get a bag,” he said.

After waiting in line for the roasted chestnuts, we went to another stand selling a variety of hot chocolate flavors. Dane bought two steaming cups, and we gladly indulged in the seasonal delights.

As we sipped on our hot chocolates, Dane and I stole glances at each other. Our eyes were filled with an intense passion that was only growing

stronger with each passing moment. I could feel his gaze on me, and I knew that he was thinking the same thing that I was thinking.

We explored the market together, drifting from one booth to the next.

“Oh wow,” I said, running my fingers over a soft scarf.

“It’s beautiful,” he said. “It suits you.”

I casually looked at the price and dropped it back on the pile. “Cashmere,” I said. “Of course. I’ve always been drawn to the expensive stuff.”

“Try it on,” he said.

“No.” I shook my head.

“I’m going to buy it for you,” he said. “I want to make sure it looks good on you.”

“No, you are not!” I laughed.

“Miss, I’d like the scarf and matching gloves,” Dane said, completely ignoring me.

The woman eagerly took his credit card while Dane wrapped the scarf around my neck. The delicate fabric felt heavenly against my skin.

He smiled and adjusted it. “Perfect. I knew it would look amazing on you.”

“I think everyone looks good in cashmere.”

He leaned in close to my ear. “I didn’t say *good*. I said you look *amazing*.”

As we continued to wander through the market, the winter air grew colder, and the snowflakes began to fall more heavily. Dane took my hand, leading me to a quieter corner of the market. He turned to face me, his eyes gleaming with a fiery intensity.

“Are you having fun?” he asked.

“So much fun,” I replied. “Thank you for this. I live in one of the most beautiful cities in the world and I have pretty much stuck to my little corner. I need to explore it more. I want to do more.”

“We will,” he said. “I’m looking forward to it.”

Soon, it was time for our next adventure of the evening—a Broadway show. “I’ve never heard of this show,” I said.

“It’s something one of my dishwashers told me about,” he said.

“Cool,” I said, smiling. “I’m looking forward to seeing something new. That’s one thing I *have* done. I’ve been to a few shows.”

“Like?”

“Wicked, Hamilton,” I answered. “Oh, I went to the Lion King a while ago.”

“I think this one is a little different,” he said, smiling. “A little less, um, trendy.”

We made our way to the theater, and as we settled into our seats, I noticed Dane was acting a little weird. “Is something wrong?” I asked.

He shook his head while smirking. “Nope.”

“Dane, what do you have up your sleeve?” I asked.

“Nothing,” he protested.

“Dane, I know you a little too well. You can’t lie to me.”

“I’m not lying. It’s going to be fun. I’m looking forward to it.”

I looked around the theater and noticed it seemed to be a younger crowd. “You’re smiling,” I said.

“It’s just a good night,” he insisted. “It’s one of the best nights I’ve had in a long time. Not counting the other nights we were together. But this is a different kind of good night.”

The curtains rose and the performers took the stage. I was captivated by the enchanting holiday production. The songs, the dancing, and the festive atmosphere filled the theater with a sense of joy. I couldn’t have asked for a better way to spend the evening. I was smiling so big my face hurt.

But as the show progressed, my unease grew. Something wasn’t quite right. The performers seemed to be engaging more with the audience than usual, and they were drawing people from the crowd onto the stage. My heart raced as I realized that I was the next target. It was an interactive play, and I was in the hot seat.

Dane was beside himself with laughter as I was called on to join the actors.

“I’m going to kill you,” I hissed.

“You said you wanted to do something you’ve never done,” he said, laughing.

“Oh, trust me, I know something I’m never doing now,” I said. “For starters, I’m *not* sleeping with a man wearing a red negligée.”

His eyes widened. “No.”

“Oh yes,” I said, nodding. “There will be payback.”

I hesitantly made my way to the stage, my face flushed with embarrassment. The audience cheered, and I found myself thrust into the spotlight, surrounded by talented performers who guided me through the

interactive performance.

Despite my initial reluctance, I got swept up in the magic of the moment. The energy of the crowd was infectious, and the experience turned into an unexpected surprise.

Dane cheered me on with a grin that was both apologetic and delighted. He had orchestrated the entire playful setup to surprise me. I was having fun, but that didn't mean I wasn't going to get him back later. I laughed and enjoyed the absurdity of the situation.

By the time the performance was over, my face hurt from smiling and laughing. As we left the theater, I couldn't resist teasing Dane. "You really had me fooled back there," I admitted, still smiling.

He chuckled and wrapped his arm around me, his hold washing away any lingering embarrassment. "I couldn't resist," he confessed. "But you were amazing up there. You're not mad?"

"No, but it was pretty sneaky."

Dane grinned. "I'm glad you enjoyed it. And don't worry, I'll make it up to you later tonight." He winked at me, and my heart skipped a beat. I knew exactly what he meant, and I couldn't wait.

"I'm still deciding what I'm going to do to get back at you," I teased. "You are not off the hook yet."

"I bet I can make you forget all about the little incident on stage."

"Sex is not going to work," I warned him. "I'm going to be out for blood. Are you still afraid of clowns?"

"I'm not afraid of clowns," he said.

"Good," I said with a sly grin. "Because I have the perfect revenge plan in mind, and it involves a certain red-nosed, floppy-shoed clown."

"You better not," he warned. "I cannot be held responsible for my actions if you try anything with a damn clown."

"You know how much I hate being the center of attention," I reminded him.

"You're basically a celebrity now," he said, laughing. "I thought you got over it."

"I did, but that doesn't mean I want to be publicly humiliated again," I retorted. "Besides, who said anything about public humiliation? This is just a little prank between me and you."

Dane raised an eyebrow. "I don't like the sound of that. What kind of prank are we talking about here?"

“You’ll have to wait to find out,” I said, grinning.

“You wouldn’t do that,” he said.

“Oh, sweetie, I absolutely would. You better sleep with one eye open.”

He chuckled and shook his head. “I forgot how vengeful you could be,” he said.

“You should have remembered that before you picked a fight.”

I knew exactly what I was going to do to get back at Dane, and the thought of it made me giddy. We walked down the streets of the city, weaving our way through the crowds of people. I was practically bouncing with anticipation, and Dane noticed.

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?” he asked, a hint of amusement in his voice.

“Absolutely,” I said, grinning from ear to ear. “The worrying and anxiousness is half the battle. You’re going to be on edge, looking over your shoulder.”

Dane chuckled. “Fine, fine. You win. What’s the plan?”

I leaned in closer to him, my voice low. “I’m going to hire a clown to follow you around for the day.”

Dane’s eyes widened in shock. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Nope,” I said, popping the ‘p.’ “It’s the perfect revenge. You’ll be so paranoid and uncomfortable all day, and I’ll get to sit back and watch the show.”

Dane groaned. “You wouldn’t do that.”

“You’re right, but I will do something. Watch your back, mister.”

CHAPTER 45



DANE

The past week had been a whirlwind, the kind of whirlwind that left me grinning like a fool. When I wasn't running around the restaurant, ensuring everything ran smoothly, I was with Ginger. Every moment with her felt like a cherished gift. I had made her laugh at the Broadway show, and while she hadn't quite forgiven me for that stunt, it had allowed us to grow even closer. I wasn't about to let her slip through my fingers this time.

We were inseparable. It was just like it used to be back in the good old days. We had this camaraderie that I had never been able to find with anyone else. She was easily my best friend. She always had been. The last fifteen years apart from her had been hell. I had been going through life with only half my heart. Now that she was back in my life, it felt whole. It explained why everything was clearer. I was inspired to create new recipes. The food tasted better.

She made life better.

Christmas was all about magic, love, and togetherness, and I was determined to make this one extra special. I had made a choice. I was going to go all in on Ginger Rowley, the girl of my dreams.

I wasn't going to wait. If I waited, I might lose her again. I didn't think I would survive that. Not a second time. I was already making plans for how I was going to keep her. I couldn't afford to hold back. I lost her the first time because I was too afraid to tell her how I felt.

Not this time.

"Dane, did you want to test this?" Cara asked.

I pulled myself back to the present. "No." I shook my head. "You are going to be flying solo in a week. This is on you. I trust you."

“You’re sure?”

“Positive,” I said, smiling. “I’m going to make sure the front of the house is in order.”

I meandered around the dining room, straightening place settings and adjusting some of the decorations. So far, we had been getting nothing but rave reviews. Sampson seemed to drop off the face of the earth. I hadn’t even bothered to look at the reviews. I didn’t need to. The customers that were coming into the restaurant all loved it. I didn’t need Sampson’s approval or dismissal.

“Cara, I’m going to run an errand,” I said once everything was in order. Dinner was still an hour away and Cara had things well in hand.

“We’ll be here,” she said.

I had yet to buy Ginger a gift for Christmas, and I wasn’t about to arrive empty-handed for our night together. I quickly made my way to a nearby jeweler. As I perused the fine jewelry on display, I was drawn to a collection of dazzling engagement rings. The diamonds sparkled and shone in the soft store lighting. It was hard not to get caught up in the romantic allure of the rings. It was a symbol of forever.

My heart raced at the thought, but I shook my head to refocus. One thing at a time. No need to scare her off. I wasn’t even sure if she was ready for that step.

After a brief internal debate, I decided to start with something less intimidating.

“Can I see those?” I said and pointed to a pair of exquisite diamond earrings.

“Ah yes,” the saleswoman said. “These are sure to make any woman smile. We have a matching bracelet if you’d like to see that.”

“Yes, please,” I said, nodding.

I knew both would look beautiful on her. The jewelry was meaningful, but they weren’t the big one. We’d only been back together for a few weeks. And we hadn’t discussed anything. I wasn’t sure if we were dating or just hanging out.

I returned to the restaurant and joined my team for the dinner service. Despite it being Christmas Eve, the place was packed. The holiday spirit was infectious, and the staff’s enthusiasm added to the spirit. I felt grateful for my wonderful team and the woman who had brought so much joy into my life.

I had invited Ginny to come to the restaurant for dinner, but she insisted

on staying in. I knew she was a little sad not to be home with her family. We talked about her family's traditions, and I knew Christmas Eve was special.

As the dinner rush faded and things started to slow down, I decided it was as good a time as any to leave for the night. There was nothing else I needed to do. "Merry Christmas, everyone," I said. "And please, check your stockings. Santa came a little early."

There was a round of applause. I said goodbye and left the restaurant. I couldn't wait to get to Ginger's place. This was my favorite time of the whole day. But tonight was a little different. I intended to make this Christmas one she would always remember.

I headed to Ginger's beautiful prewar apartment in the East Village. The moment I stepped inside, the delightful scent of holiday cooking enveloped me. The air was filled with the warm aromas of cinnamon, shortbread, onions, and an array of other delectable scents. It was a homey, inviting atmosphere.

"It smells good in here," I said. "Really good."

Ginger greeted me with a kiss. She was dressed in an apron, her comfy loungewear, and slippers. There was something about it that made me want to rip it off her body right then and there.

"Thank you," she said. "These are the few things I can actually cook well."

"What did you make?" I asked. "I'm getting all kinds of hints."

"I made the traditional breakfast casserole for the morning," she said. "And a batch of cookies for tonight."

"For Santa?" I teased.

She giggled. "Yes. It's a tradition. And of course, I have to have cookies with my hot Christmas toddy."

I snatched one of the cookies and took a bite. "Good," I said, nodding. "What else do you have here?" I lifted the foil on one of the dishes.

"Just some sides dishes for our feast tomorrow," she said, smiling.

"Babe, you didn't have to do all the cooking," I said. "I would have been happy to help."

"You cook all day every day. You cook for us all the time."

"Because I like to," I said, smiling.

"It's just like my mom and me back home," she said, her eyes slightly misty. "We'd spend hours cooking together, and my dad would sit at the kitchen island, sampling everything we made."

My heart ached for her as I wrapped my arms around her. Ginger had always been close to her parents, and it was clear she missed them. I wanted to do what I could to make her feel better. I couldn't replace her family, but maybe we could create new traditions.

I gently wiped away the tear that had slid down her cheek with my thumb. "You have a lot of love for your family," I told her, my voice filled with admiration. "It's beautiful. I've always admired that about you and your family. You're lucky."

She smiled, her eyes shining with affection. "I do. I miss them, especially at this time of year. It's the one time of the year I get to be a young, carefree girl again."

I pressed a kiss to her forehead. "I understand," I murmured, my voice low and comforting. "I know how hard it can be to be away from your family during the holidays."

"Do you usually spend it with them?" she asked.

I slowly shook my head. "Not for a long time," I said. "My mom was the one that did all the traditional stuff. As we got older, we all got busy, and we just didn't make it a priority."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I can't imagine how hard that must have been for you guys. I'm very grateful to have my family."

My fingers gently cupped her chin, tilting her face toward mine. Our lips met in a tender, lingering kiss. "I know you miss your family, but I'm here. I'm going to be here for you."

Ginger smiled at me, and her eyes sparkled with appreciation. "Thank you," she whispered. "I don't know what I would do without you."

I kissed her again, and this time, my lips were more insistent. Ginger responded eagerly, her arms wrapping around my neck as we kissed deeply.

The oven timer went off. "Oh, that's the green bean casserole!"

"Let me change and I'll help," I said.

"No, you can go sit down and relax with a drink," she said. "You've been working hard all day."

"I want nothing more than to cook with you," I assured her. "I'll be right back."

I walked to her bedroom. I had a few things at her place. I had been spending more time there than at Grayson's. It was easier to keep clothes at her place.

I quickly changed into my sweats and a T-shirt. It was nice to be able to

chill with her. We usually stayed up after I got done at the restaurant and watched Netflix and ate pizza or whatever takeout.

As I walked back to the kitchen, the smell of the green bean casserole made my stomach growl. She was putting a pie into the oven. I smiled at how domestic she looked. Her hair was in a messy bun, and she was wearing one of my oversized T-shirts.

I walked over to her, wrapping my arms around her waist from behind. “You look beautiful,” I whispered in her ear, nuzzling my nose against her neck.

She giggled, turning around to face me. “Stop it. You’re making me blush.”

“I can’t help it,” I said, grinning. “You always look beautiful to me.”

Ginger smiled. “You’re very charming, do you know that?”

“I’ve heard that once or twice before,” I said, grinning. “Now, what can I do? The sooner we get all the prep work done, the sooner we can sit down and enjoy one of these hot toddies you speak of.”

Ginger handed me a knife and a cutting board. “You can start by chopping the carrots,” she said. “And then we can move on to the potatoes.”

I nodded and got to work, my mind wondering about what we could do after dinner. The thought of us curled up on her couch, sipping hot toddies and watching a movie had my heart racing. I wanted to be close to her, to feel her body against mine.

As we cooked, I stole glances at her. This was what I wanted for the rest of my life. I wanted to come home from work and make dinner before hanging out. I wanted to wake up with her every morning.

“Dane?”

I blinked. “What?”

“You’re spacing out,” she said.

“I was just thinking,” I said, smiling.

“About?”

“Honestly, part of me is waiting for a clown to jump out,” I said, laughing. “But mostly, I’m thinking about how happy I am to be here with you.”

“I’m glad you’re here,” she said. “Do you want to know what would make me happy?”

“Always.”

“Pizza,” she said. “That’s kind of our Christmas tradition. Usually, me

and mom are so busy cooking, we don't have time to make dinner. Sometimes we would go to a friend's for dinner, but the last few years, my dad just ordered pizza."

"On it," I said and pulled out my phone. I quickly searched for the nearest pizza place and placed an order for delivery.

Ginger beamed at me with gratitude as we continued to prepare the rest of the meal.

"This is perfect," she said. "Thank you so much for being here with me."

"Baby, I don't want to be anywhere else."

CHAPTER 46



GINGER

With all the side dishes cooked, covered, and put in the fridge for tomorrow, Dane and I moved to sit on the couch with our pizza, hot toddies, and my favorite Christmas movie on TV. The heater which looked like a fireplace was on. The fake flames danced alongside the lights from the Christmas tree. I took a moment to appreciate the scene. I knew it was going to be a memory I cherished for the rest of my life.

As we sat there, munching on our pizza and sipping our drinks, I felt a sense of contentment. It was as if everything in the world was exactly as it should be. Dane wrapped his arm around my shoulders, pulling me in close to him. I leaned into him, feeling the warmth of his body against mine.

We sat like that for a while, lost in our own little world. The movie ended, leaving me with a warm and fuzzy feeling.

“I’ll make us another round,” Dane said and got up. He took my glass and walked into the kitchen.

I turned off the TV and watched the lights twinkling on the tree. Maybe it was the alcohol, but I felt warm. Very warm but not hot. It was a feeling in my heart that emanated warmth through my body.

“Here you go.” Dane returned with two glasses.

“Thank you.”

I took the glass from him and sipped on the hot toddy. It felt good as it warmed up my insides. I looked up at Dane and saw him looking at me like I was the only person in the world that mattered.

“You know, you’re the best thing that ever happened to me,” he said, taking my hand in his.

I smiled at him, feeling my cheeks flush with happiness. “You too,” I

replied.

We sat there in comfortable silence, enjoying each other's company. Suddenly, Dane leaned in and kissed me. It was gentle at first but quickly turned passionate. I kissed him back, my heart racing with excitement. His hands wandered down to my waist, pulling me in closer to him. I could feel his hard body against mine, making me melt even more.

As we broke apart, I felt a burning desire for him.

"Dane," I whispered, looking up at him. "I want you."

He took my drink and put it on the end table before getting to his feet. He reached down and pulled me into his arms.

His arms wrapped around me, holding me close as we gently swayed to music only we could hear. The orange glow from the flames mingled with the lights from the tree. I closed my eyes and felt his heart beating.

Slowly, he lifted my chin with his finger and looked deep into my eyes. I could see the intensity and passion in his gaze.

Without a word, he laid me down on the shag rug in front of the fireplace. He slowly undressed me, taking his time to explore every inch of my body with his hands and lips.

He pulled off his shirt and tossed it to the floor. "Lay down," I whispered.

He stretched out on his back, allowing me to pull his pants and underwear down. "My turn," I said softly.

I began to kiss his shoulders and down his chest. I moved back to his neck, kissing and sucking on his hot flesh. My tongue slid over one nipple while my breasts dragged over his hard stomach.

"Damn, baby," he groaned. "You've got me on the edge."

"I'm going to keep you on the edge for as long as I can," I said and kissed down his stomach.

"Please tell me this is your revenge," he grunted. "This feels like revenge."

I laughed softly and reached down to take his long, hard cock in my hand and gently massaged it. He moaned in pleasure and put his hands on my shoulders. I slowly took the tip of his cock between my lips and began to suck.

He ran his fingers through my hair as I took him deeper and deeper into my mouth. I could feel his muscles flexing as my head bobbed up and down. He began to thrust his hips, fucking my mouth.

"Oh, baby," he moaned. "That feels so good."

I took him all the way down my throat, suckling and licking his hard cock as I did. He began to thrust harder and faster, bucking his hips as he fucked my mouth.

“I’m close,” he moaned.

I pulled away, looking up at him with a sexy smile. “Not yet,” I teased.

He groaned and playfully hit the floor. “You’re so cruel.”

“I know.”

“Two can play at that game.” He chuckled.

I didn’t have time to react before he flipped me onto my back. His mouth found my ear and he whispered, “You’re going to be so sorry for teasing me.”

I shivered as he kissed down my neck. His tongue circled my hardened nipple and he suckled. I arched my back, moaning with my fingers tangled in his hair. His mouth moved to my stomach and lower, kissing and licking my skin. His tongue slid over my wet folds.

My hips bucked as he teased my clit and slid his tongue deep into my pussy. “Oh, god,” I moaned. “Oh, god.”

He slid his tongue back up to my clit, taking it between his lips and sucking it gently. His other hand slid between my thighs, and he ran his long fingers through my soaked pussy.

“I love your pussy,” he moaned. “I love tasting it.” His fingers slid into my pussy, and he began to thrust them in and out. His mouth moved back to my clit, sucking and licking it gently as he fucked me with his fingers.

I moaned loudly as he teased and pleased me. I arched my back and bucked my hips, grinding against his mouth and hand. My breathing quickened as I got closer to the edge. “Oh, god,” I moaned. “I’m so close!”

“Come for me,” he moaned.

I cried out loudly as my body exploded with pleasure. My hips bucked wildly. I moaned and whimpered, squeezing my eyes shut as the waves of pleasure squeezed my body. I whimpered as I came down from the high, breathing heavily. He kissed me deeply.

He climbed to his feet and kneeled between my legs. “Look at me, Ginny.”

I stared into his eyes. The glow from the fireplace cast him in soft shadows. My heart blossomed in my chest as he looked down at me. I could see the love in his eyes. I hoped I wasn’t making a huge mistake by falling crazy in love with him again.

“I see you,” I said.

He lowered his mouth to mine and kissed me. I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him passionately. He pressed his hips forward, sliding his hard cock against me. “Do you know I think about this every minute of every day? It’s not just about sex with you. Yes, it feels good, but it’s more than that.”

“I know,” I said. “It’s more than sex for me too. This is different than before. This feels like my whole soul is involved. It’s good, but it’s a different good. My heart sings when you’re inside me.”

He kissed me again. I could feel his cock throbbing against me. I reached down between our bodies and took his cock in my hand. I moved my hips and helped him slide into me. He moaned into my mouth as he filled me completely.

I wrapped my legs around his waist and dug my heels into his ass. He fucked me slowly and gently, staring into my eyes. I whimpered as he pulled almost all the way out and pushed back in. He kissed me and moved his hips slowly, his cock sliding deep inside me.

The whole time, he held my gaze. I could practically see our souls stitching together. I didn’t know what the future held, but I knew this was something that would never change. I would love him until my last breath.

I moaned and whimpered as I moved my hips with his. I could feel my orgasm building slowly. Wave after wave of pleasure washed over me. I clung to him, kissing him wildly as I came. He fucked me through my orgasm, and then I felt his cock throbbing against my insides.

“Oh damn,” he whimpered. “I can’t. Dammit, it’s too good. I can’t hold back.”

He came, moaning against my neck. He held me, pressing me against the floor. Both of us were breathing hard.

We held each other close for a long time before he slowly pulled away from me. “Ready for those cookies?” he asked with a smile.

I slipped into his T-shirt while he pulled on his underwear. We curled up on the couch together with our drinks and cookies and put on another Christmas movie. I smiled to myself. I had no idea what the future held, but I knew I’d be with him as long as I could.

“Did you ever think you would be here like this?” I asked him.

“No,” he said, laughing. “Not in a million years. I honestly assumed I would never see you again. We went fifteen long years without running into

each other. I gave up.”

“You never looked for me?”

“You never looked for me,” he countered.

“You’re right,” I admitted. “I chose to never look for you. I never wanted to see you with another woman.”

“I never did, you know.”

“What?”

“I never dated anyone who meant anything to me,” he told me. “I’m not even sure I could. I didn’t want to.”

“I wanted you to be happy,” I said. “I made sure my parents never told me about you. I didn’t want to know if you were happily married with an army of kids.”

“Has there been anyone serious in your life?” he asked quietly. “If there has, you can tell me. I wouldn’t blame you. You’re a beautiful woman and I’m sure there’s a long line of men that want to be with you.”

I shook my head. “I just couldn’t be with anyone else. At first, my heart was too broken to even think about dating. Then I told myself I was too busy to date. I tried going out with a few guys, but I just never saw anything in them I was interested in. I know I was being very, very picky. Carmen and Dez are always giving me hell about not dating. I just couldn’t find the energy to go through all of that again.”

“You were afraid you’d get your heart broken again,” he said, nodding.

“Yes,” I said, smiling.

“I know,” he said, pulling me close to him and kissing me softly. “I was the same way. Every woman that flirted with me felt wrong. I kept looking for a reason not to call them for a second date. I convinced myself they were only after me for my name and money.”

“You’ve always been paranoid about that,” I said.

“Not paranoid,” he said. “Just cautious.”

“There’s a difference?”

He chuckled. “A paranoid person believes everyone is out to get him or her. A cautious person assumes everyone is out to get him or her and takes steps to protect his or herself.”

“Did you ever want to call someone back for a second date?” I asked.

He nodded. “I was tempted a few times, but something always stopped me.”

“What?”

“I don’t know,” he said, sighing. “I just didn’t feel like I could trust them. I knew I was being ridiculous. Honestly, I think I’ve just always been waiting for you.”

My heart swelled with love for him. “Me too.”

CHAPTER 47



DANE

The sun had yet to rise, but I was wide awake. I wasn't the least bit tired. I woke up feeling energized and ready to conquer the world.

Last night with Ginny had been incredible. It was more than just sex. I felt like we had connected like we never had before. At some point, I got a strange feeling that we were supposed to be together. Like we were going to be together. It wasn't a question anymore. I knew what I wanted. Hell, what I needed. I was certain I saw it in Ginger's eyes as well.

I watched her sleeping, taking note of the relaxed expression on her face. Her neck had a few red marks from my enthusiastic kissing. I liked seeing her marked with my lips. It gave me a very strange alpha feeling.

While I was watching her, she slowly stirred awake. Her eyes fluttered open. She smiled when she saw me looking at her. "What are you doing?"

"Watching you," I said, grinning. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas," she replied.

Under the blankets, we were in a warm cocoon. Frost had painted delicate patterns on her windows, casting a serene winter scene outside. Her apartment was cozy. "I could stay right here in bed with you all day."

"Me too," I murmured, and she snuggled a little closer.

"Are you sure you don't need to go back to Grayson's?" she asked. "I don't want to keep you from your family."

"Grayson, Hannah, and the kids are going to spend Christmas with just their family," I said. "My dad is with Kathy, James, and Rory. We have the family dinner tomorrow. You're still going with me, right?"

She grimaced. "Yes. But I hope it goes better than last time. Is Mason going to be there?"

“As far as I know, the whole damn clan is going to be there,” I said, laughing. “It will be my first time meeting a lot of them. I need moral support.”

She kissed my chest. “Then I’ll be there.”

From the street below, the voices of carolers serenaded the world. “I want to see,” she said and crawled over me to walk to the window. “How cool is that?”

I got up and joined her at the window. A light snow fell. A group of about twenty carolers walked down the sidewalk singing Christmas songs.

“That is very cool,” I agreed. “Very Norman Rockwell.”

“I miss caroling,” she said.

“You used to go caroling?”

“I did,” she said, nodding. “With my mom. We would go out on Christmas Eve with a group. It was a lot of fun. Afterwards, we would go back to someone’s house and drink hot apple cider. I remember dipping a cinnamon stick in it. It was so fun.”

“You have a lot of holiday memories,” I said.

“I do. I think I get a little melancholy because all those traditions I held near and dear are slowly fading.”

“That’s because you’re supposed to make new ones,” I told her. “You’re supposed to start your own family and pass along all the traditions you cherished when you were younger.”

A squeal from across the hall broke through our tranquil morning. “What the hell was that?” I asked.

She laughed. “I would assume that’s the kids from across the hall. I’m guessing Santa stopped by and they are excited.”

“Ah,” I said, nodding. “I remember those mornings. It’s been a long time since I’ve been up at dawn on Christmas morning. I forgot kids still did that.”

“My mom always said I was one of the lazy kids,” she said, giggling. “I was not the kid jumping out of bed when it was still dark and rushing for the Christmas tree. I loved my beauty sleep.”

I kissed her nose. “It certainly paid off because you are one of the most beautiful women in the whole damn world.”

“I’ll make coffee,” she said. “And then I need to put the turkey in.”

I quietly slipped her gift under the tree and then joined her in the kitchen. The rich aroma of her favorite dark coffee filled the apartment. We each took our cups and moved to sit down on the couch. Ginger was wearing fuzzy,

festive socks, and I couldn't resist the opportunity to pamper her. She kicked her feet up into my lap, sighing with contentment as I began to rub them gently.

"God, I love you," she muttered, her head leaning back.

I stopped for a moment, surprised and elated by her words. She cracked open one eye to peer at me, her expression half-lidded and filled with horror. It was pretty clear she didn't mean to say it. It was a moment of vulnerability that made my heart skip a beat.

My lips curled into a devilish grin. "I love you, too."

Her other eye popped open, and she stared at me in wide-eyed amazement. A grin broke across her face. "I just said I love you out loud," she said, laughing.

"You didn't mean to?"

"It wasn't intentional."

"That means you don't mean it?" I asked.

"No. I mean yes. Yes, I mean. I love you."

I leaned over and kissed her. "Good, because I love you."

We sat sipping our coffee for a few more minutes. I was sure she was feeling the same thing I was. It was an incredible feeling that made me feel like I was soaring. This must be what it meant to be on Cloud Nine.

"Are you hungry?" she asked.

"I am," I said, nodding.

As we settled down to enjoy the delicious breakfast casserole she made, Ginger looked at me. I could see the question in her eyes. "What's up?" I asked.

"What does this mean for us?" Her voice was low and once again I picked up on her vulnerability.

"What does what mean?" I asked. I picked up a forkful of casserole. "If you mean are we going to have high cholesterol after eating this, probably, but I think we can work out a little harder and we'll be fine."

She laughed. "Stop, you know what I mean. If you love me and I love you, what do we do now?"

I met her gaze. "It means I'm going to move to New York full time."

Her eyes widened. "Seriously?"

"Yes," I said, nodding. "I have you and I have the restaurant. I'll have to make trips back to Vancouver on occasion, but maybe you can come with me on those trips. You can visit your parents and I'll check in on my businesses."

She squealed with joy and hopped out of her chair to kiss me passionately. "This is the best Christmas ever," she said.

We had finished the meal and were in the midst of cleaning up the kitchen and checking on the turkey when I turned to her. "Can we go back to the living room?" I asked her.

"Sure," she said. "I think the turkey will be fine on its own. No point babysitting the oven."

"I have something for you," I announced.

Ginger blushed. "Dane! No! I didn't get you anything. I thought we agreed we were just going to spend time together."

"Yes, and we are," I said. "But I like spoiling you. I like to give you things."

"But I want to give you something," she complained.

"You are," I said. "We're spending the day together. We're starting new traditions. I love you. That's what matters. You've already given me the best Christmas of my life. This gift is simply something special I want you to have."

I led her into the living room and sat her down on the couch. I grabbed the box that was wrapped in gold paper with a huge bow.

Her eyes sparkled with excitement as she took the box.

"I really feel bad," she said. "I feel terrible I didn't get you anything. You gave me the scarf and gloves and now this."

"Just open it," I said. "Please. This makes me happy."

Ginger opened the box, and a gasp of delight escaped her lips. Her mouth dropped open as she stared at the bracelet and earrings that sparkled in the soft glow of the holiday lights. She was awestruck.

"Dane," she whispered. "It's gorgeous."

Her hands trembled slightly as she stared at the exquisite gift. Her eyes met mine, and her words tumbled out with heartfelt gratitude. "It's too much, Dane. They're beautiful, but it's too much."

I shook my head. "There's no such thing, Ginger. Not when it comes to my girl."

I took the bracelet from the box and delicately fastened it around her wrist, the diamonds sparkled in the light.

She put on the earrings and smiled. "I feel so fancy."

With a loving smile, I leaned in and kissed her tenderly. "Merry Christmas, baby," I whispered, knowing that our love was the most precious

gift of all.

Ginger's eyes closed as my lips touched hers. The kiss was slow and sensual, and it sent shivers down my spine. She tasted like peppermint and warmth, and I wanted her badly. I pulled back, my eyes lingering on her plump, pink lips.

"Merry Christmas," she murmured, her voice low and husky. "Thank you for the beautiful gift. You were always good at making me feel like a princess."

"You're welcome," I said. "It makes me beyond happy to see you decked out in diamonds."

Ginger giggled and looked down at the bracelet, admiring the way it glimmered in the light. "I feel like I could conquer the world wearing this," she said, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

"You've already conquered my heart," I said.

She giggled and pushed at me. "That was cheesy."

"Sorry," I said, laughing. "I couldn't help it."

"I am going to get dressed and then we are going to turn on the TV and watch some football while the turkey cooks. That's tradition."

"I'm up for it," I said. "I'm up for anything."

We spent a leisurely couple of hours snacking on veggies and dip while flipping through the channels. It turned out we weren't all that excited about football.

"I think the turkey is ready," she announced. "You get to do the honors of cutting it."

"Another tradition," I said, smiling.

I stood up from the couch and followed Ginger into the kitchen. The aroma of roasted turkey filled the air, making my mouth water.

As I picked up the carving knife, I noticed how sexy Ginger looked in her tight jeans and Christmas sweater. Her curves were accentuated in all the right places, and I felt my desire for her intensify.

She was wearing the bracelet and earrings. It was strange to feel so possessive. Seeing her wear the jewelry made me feel like I had claimed her. She was mine. I couldn't wait to put a ring on her finger, and I knew that was absolutely going to happen. One day, we were going to be married.

I cleared my throat and concentrated on the task at hand. With practiced precision, I carved the turkey into thick slices and arranged them on a platter.

Ginger poured us each a glass of red wine and we sat down at the table,

enjoying the delicious meal.

“Baby, this is amazing,” I said, taking another bite of turkey.

Ginger smiled at me, her eyes sparkling as she sipped her wine. “I’m so glad you like it. You’re the real cook, but I’m glad I can compete a little.”

We ate in comfortable silence, enjoying each other’s company and the warmth of the meal. As we finished dessert, Ginger stood up and beckoned for me to follow her.

“Let’s go watch the sunset,” she said, taking my hand. “And then we’ll come back and enjoy a nice quiet night together.”

“I like the sound of that,” I said.

We walked outside, the cool breeze hitting our faces as we made our way down the sidewalk. The sun was setting, casting a warm glow over everything around us. I felt a sense of peace wash over me as I stood there with Ginger, her hand in mine.

As we watched the sun sink below the horizon, I turned to her and pulled her into my arms. Our lips met in a passionate kiss, our tongues intertwining as our desire for each other intensified.

CHAPTER 48



GINGER

I was nervous, but I was ready for an ambush this time. If Mason came at me, he was going to get a mouthful. I let him get away with it once. It wasn't going to happen again. He didn't know me, and he didn't get to judge me. He was a bully, but I had dealt with a lot of bullies in the past. I could handle him.

"You look beautiful," Dane said as he kissed my cheek. "I really, really like you in red."

"I've gathered that," I said, laughing.

We arrived at Grayson's mansion. Cars lined the driveway. It looked like there was one hell of a party going on.

"It's going to be fine," Dane assured me. "If Mason pulls any shit, I'll take him down."

I laughed. "Let's not create a family scandal."

We walked into the house and things were in full swing. There were kids everywhere along with a series of hot men. They were all similar to one another. There was no denying the family resemblance.

"Dane!" A deep booming voice echoed down the hall.

"Go," I said. "I'm fine."

"We won't let Mason eat her," Hannah joked.

Adelaide walked over and gave me a hug. "I'm really sorry. For what it's worth, I withheld sex for a week as punishment."

All of the women laughed. Kathy walked into the kitchen carrying a tray. "What's so funny?" she asked.

"We were just discussing Mason's previous behavior," Hannah said.

Kathy smiled. "That boy has never had good table manners. I'm sorry he

was so offensive. They told me.”

“It’s fine,” I said.

I felt a sense of comfort and belonging that I hadn’t felt on my first visit. This time, I was in my element, surrounded by the warm and welcoming company of Dane’s extended family. I was eager to get to know the wives of his cousins and even some of his brothers who had managed to make it to New York City for a pre-New Year’s dinner.

In the midst of the cheerful chaos, I found myself in the kitchen, where Thea, Reese’s wife, was the center of attention. Reese was Dane’s older brother. It was extremely difficult to try and keep all the names straight. The adults, I could almost get down, but holy shit, the gaggle of kids was another thing. There was a joke that they were going to have to start wearing nametags. I wholeheartedly agreed.

Thea was bubbling with enthusiasm, sharing her passion for the Haven, her animal shelter. She explained how the new shelter was enabling her to provide better temporary homes for an increasing number of animals in need. Her relationship with one of Dane’s brothers had made it possible. Armand had done a good job with his boys. They were all generous men that would do anything for the women they loved.

Thea described some recent photo shoots she had orchestrated with dogs sporting adorable Santa hats. She had posted the heartwarming images on the adoption page of her website, and the response had been overwhelmingly positive. She gushed about how successful the photo shoots had been in drawing attention to the shelter’s work and encouraging adoptions.

The stories Thea shared were inspiring, and her dedication to the animals and her work was evident in every word she spoke. I admired her and the difference she was making in the lives of these furry companions.

“That is very cool,” I said. “My parents could use a dog. When they get home, I’ll send them to your shelter.”

Thea’s eyes lit up, and a smile spread across her face. “That would be wonderful,” she said. “We have so many dogs that need forever homes, and every adoption makes a difference.”

I nodded, feeling a sudden pang of guilt. I had never really considered adopting a pet myself, always too busy with work and travel to give a furry companion the attention it deserved. But seeing the passion and dedication in Thea’s eyes, I knew I had to at least consider it.

While we garnished dishes and hung out in the kitchen, I had the

opportunity to chat with the other women as well. We discussed various topics, from family traditions to the challenges of life in the city. Their genuine warmth and the ease with which they welcomed me into their circle made me feel like part of the family.

I loved that we all contributed to the dinner. It made me feel like I was a part of it. We all had different tasks, whether it was setting the table, arranging decorations, or assisting with cooking. I loved being a part of this communal celebration. I didn't have a big family, but I had always wanted one.

My heart swelled with gratitude. I was not only celebrating the holidays with the man I loved but also experiencing the joy of being embraced by his family and their traditions. Along with a lot of stories. These women had all found love. They had homes and families and the dream I hoped I would have one day.

Hannah and I were setting up a couple of tables for the kids. "So, how are things going with Dane?"

I smiled. "Good."

"Come on," she said, laughing. "Just a few details."

I wasn't one to delve into the dirty details with anyone, especially someone I barely knew, but I couldn't help the smile. My gaze drifted across the hall from the dining room and into the grand living room, where I spotted Dane.

He was sitting on the floor, surrounded by a group of kids who were engrossed in their new Christmas toys. It wasn't long before they swarmed around him, their laughter filling the room as they pulled him down to the floor. I couldn't see him through the throng of children, but I could hear his hearty laughter and playful banter. They loved him and he clearly loved them. He was good with kids.

With a warm smile, I turned back to Hannah. "The scoop? Well, let's just say I'm going to marry him. I'm going to have his babies."

I didn't even realize a few of the other women had come into the room.

"Congratulations," Adelaide said. "Did he propose?"

I laughed. "No, but he will one day. Or I will. But I know he's the man I'm going to marry."

Soon, the entire family settled down at the table. Dane and I were seated next to each other. His hand rested on my thigh, giving it a gentle, affectionate squeeze.

“Everything okay?” he asked quietly.

“It’s very okay,” I replied. “It’s fun.”

“Good.”

The chatter of the Bancroft clan filled the room. Nearly thirty adults were lined up and down the table. Everyone was talking. It wasn’t noisy. It was beautiful. It was the perfect melody with the kids at the far end all talking and laughing. I had to take a moment just to let it all sink in.

Grayson stood up and raised his glass, clinking his fork against it. The conversations around the table stopped. “I want to thank all of you for coming,” he said. “Those near and far and everyone in between.” His eyes briefly locked onto his half-brothers, Thomas, Oliver, and Jensen, making it clear that, despite their differences, they were all valued members of this unique family.

“Now, let’s eat!” Mason called out.

Cheering and laughter erupted, and then the wild process started of people passing around baskets filled with rolls, large bowls of mashed potatoes, casserole, and every other side dish. It felt like a workout. Once the dishes stopped moving, it was time to take a moment to bow our heads.

It was barely a moment before everyone started eating. I had to swallow my laughter. It sounded like a feeding frenzy.

Then the chatter picked up once again. I was content to listen to the many conversations while eagerly eating the delicious food.

As I looked around the room, my heart swelled with affection for the children, the bright and promising young Bancrofts. They represented the legacies each family member was building, and I thought about the potential legacy I might one day become a part of.

Dane, seated beside me, leaned in and whispered in my ear, his voice a playful purr. “You’re driving me crazy in that red dress.”

I chuckled. “Maybe that’s the plan.”

Jack and Natasha had their heads together, talking about something that had Nat rolling her eyes. The love between them was unmistakable.

Mason was deep in conversation with Adelaide. I imagined she was lecturing him to behave himself. He was the kind of guy that would need a lot of reminders.

Colt and Maisie, those two were chatting with Oliver. I liked that, despite the strange circumstances that brought them all together, they were still friendly with one another.

Channing and Madeline were very tanned despite it being the end of December. I knew they lived in Bali most of the time. Dane's brother Reese had flown in just for the dinner. Thea was beside him chatting about her beloved dogs.

Rory was due soon and James was doing all he could to take care of her. It was very sweet. I wondered what I would look like all big and pregnant. I did want Dane's babies.

Kathy and Armand Bancroft, the matriarch and patriarch of the massive family, watched over the scene with pride. It was good to see them together. Armand looked happy.

As the night went on, the conversations became more animated, and the atmosphere grew increasingly charged. The clink of glasses and the sound of laughter filled the air. I felt Dane's hand on my thigh, his touch electric even through the fabric of my dress. I leaned into him, feeling the heat of his body against mine.

After dinner, we were all cleaning up when Armand stopped me. "It's good to see you again, Ginny."

"You too, Armand. How are you?"

"Better now." He chuckled. "I take it things are going well for you and Dane?"

I laughed. "Much better than they were fifteen years ago."

"Your parents are in the Cook Islands, Dane said?"

I nodded. "Yes. They'll be back soon. I heard a little about your escapade in Singapore. I'm glad you're home safe."

"Me too," he said, grimacing. "Nasty business. I seem to have an uncanny knack for finding trouble. Rather, it finds me."

"Are you going to stay in New York for a while?" I asked him.

He smiled and glanced over his shoulder. "I'm certainly considering it. Although I think Kathy might be interested in a change of scenery as well. She's been here her whole life."

"Her children are here," I said. "Do you think she would leave them?"

"Kathy is an independent woman," he said. "She loves to travel. She has a thing for cruises. I'm thinking about buying a yacht and setting sail."

I laughed and then remembered he was ridiculously rich and was probably very serious. Only people as rich as Bancrofts could wake up one morning and just decide to buy a yacht. "I bet she would like that," I said. "That would be a nice retirement for both of you."

Armand's eyes glinted with amusement. "We've been retired. Now it's time to really retire."

I chuckled. "Good plan."

Armand's gaze flickered over my shoulder to where Dane was chatting with a few of his cousins. "How is he?" he asked softly.

I turned to look at Dane as well. He caught my eye and smiled, raising his glass in a silent toast. "He's good. Better than I ever imagined he would be."

"You two are happy?" Armand's voice was gentle, but there was an edge to it that made me wonder if he knew something I didn't.

I hesitated for a moment, trying to read his expression. "Yes, we are. Happier than we've ever been, actually."

Armand nodded, his gaze still fixed on Dane. "I'm glad to hear that. He deserves to be happy."

"He does and I hope I can make him happy."

CHAPTER 49



DANE

I leaned back in my chair on the back patio of Grayson's house, savoring the rich flavor of the cigar and the warmth of the brandy in my hand. The evening was chilly with the stars above twinkling in the night sky. There were several patio heaters on to ward off the chill. All the kids had been put to bed or were quietly watching TV in one of the rooms upstairs. It was a huge slumber party for them.

The atmosphere was very relaxed. We were all content. The men were outside with me, puffing cigars. The women were inside talking and playing cards. Ginny seemed to be fitting in with them very well. I was happy they accepted her. Then again, with a family this size, it wasn't surprising they were used to welcoming new people into their fold all the time.

Reese sat down beside me with a knowing smile. "So, Dane, what's the deal with you and Ginger?"

I immediately smiled and my heart swelled with happiness at the mere mention of her name. "Ginger," I said with a sigh. "I've known her for half my life. We had our moments, and we had our time apart. But she's back in my life now, and I'm not letting her go again."

"I thought for sure she was the one that got away," he joked.

"Me too," I said, nodding. "She almost did. Coming here to open the restaurant was the best thing I've ever done. I'm not about to let her get away."

Reese chuckled, raising his cigar in a mock salute. "That's the spirit. Life's too short for regrets. What are you going to do about the distance thing? Is she going to move back to Vancouver?"

"Actually, I'm going to move here," I said. "I'll still visit Vancouver, but

this is where I want to be. “

Colt laughed. “Great, another Bancroft in Manhattan. This should be interesting.”

Thomas and Jensen shook their heads.

Jack chimed in. “Just what we need—a Bancroft bringing more chaos to the city.”

I laughed, feeling a warmth in my heart that I hadn’t felt in years.

“That means you’re pretty serious about her,” Reese said.

“I am,” I said, nodding. “I’m ready for the next step.”

“You’re in for a wild ride, my friend,” Thomas said with a grin. “We have some kind of gene that pairs us with the best women, but they are also challenging and stubborn.”

“Ups and downs,” Jack said.

“Twists and turns,” Reese added.

I nodded, accepting my fate. “Bring it on,” I said with determination. “I’m ready for whatever comes next. I’m building the next phase of my life right here, and it’s going to be the best one yet.”

The men raised their glasses and clinked them together, celebrating the future, love, and family that bound them together. I knew that with Ginger by my side and my huge family, I could tackle any challenge that lay ahead.

“He’s been heartsick for this girl since he was in high school,” Reese said.

The guys laughed, and I felt my cheeks flush. It was true. I had always been drawn to Ginger. Even as a kid, I knew she was special. And now, after all these years, I was finally going to make her mine.

“Yes, I have,” I said, nodding. “I was foolish enough to let her get away from me once. I’m not about to do that again.”

I thought about all the things I wanted to do for her. I wanted to take her on a trip around the world, buy her a house with a huge garden, and spoil her with all the love and attention she deserved. I knew it wouldn’t always be easy, but I was ready for the challenge. We both were.

“Hannah likes her,” Grayson said. “I trust my wife’s judgment. If she likes her, you’re golden.”

I laughed. “Is there anyone Hannah doesn’t like?”

A few of the other brothers groaned. “Yes!”

“Hannah knows good people,” Grayson said. “If she doesn’t like someone, she lets me know. Then, I have to tell whoever it is that Hannah’s

radar has been tripped and they need to tread with caution.”

“Good to know,” I said, laughing.

Colt had gone in to check on the women and walked back out onto the patio. “Those women are brutal,” he said. “I swear they’re in there writing spells. If any of us start feeling strange phantom pains, I’d blame them. They probably have those little doll things.”

We all laughed at Colt’s joke.

“Voodoo,” I said.

“That’s it,” he muttered and sat down. “Maisie is pissed at me because I accidentally deleted a file on her computer.”

“Did she get it back?” Jack asked.

Colt shook his head. “Nope.”

“What was on it?” I asked.

“She was putting together a photo album or something,” he said, shrugging. “That’s where it gets tricky. All the pictures are still on the hard drive. I just deleted the album.”

“Those things take forever,” Reese said. “Thea works on them for her shelter. So, yeah, you’re in trouble.”

I felt grateful for my own relationship as the guys continued to joke and tease each other about their wives. I had never felt so lucky to have found someone like Ginny. She was beautiful, intelligent, and most importantly, she understood me. I knew that I had to make every moment with her count.

Our father eventually emerged from inside the house, a bashful grin on his face as he carefully lit his cigar. Reese and I exchanged a knowing look. Our cousins joined in with a chuckle.

“Where’s Aunty Kathy?” Reese asked, feigning innocence.

Our dad shrugged, pretending to play it cool. “Inside with the others, I think.”

“Dad, did you see the mistletoe in the archway to the dining room?” I asked.

The guys snickered.

Dad arched an eyebrow, as if genuinely unaware. “Mistletoe? What are you talking about?”

No one could contain their amusement.

“Uncle Armand, come on,” James chimed in. “You’ve been dating Mom for months. Don’t tell us you’re shy about mistletoe.”

“She’s the one that insisted on it,” Grayson said.

Dad chuckled, shaking his head. "I had no idea you all were so observant."

Mason laughed. "Dane even caught you making out with her on the sofa last week when he brought Ginger over."

"Mason!" I growled.

"Wait, what?" Grayson asked.

A look of sheer astonishment crossed Dad's face as the realization hit him. He hadn't been as discreet as he'd thought, and he was thoroughly taken aback. "I thought we were flying under the radar," he admitted.

The Bancroft men shared another round of laughter. The atmosphere was light, and it was clear that everyone was delighted by the development.

Grayson looked a little uncomfortable. "Can we go back to the couch thing?"

"Ginny told Adelaide that they were sneaking into the house for a little sleepover and happened to catch Mom and Uncle Armand on the couch," Mason explained.

I squeezed my eyes closed. It wasn't a scene I wanted to replay. I was sure Ginny probably thought she was confiding in Adelaide and her secret was safe, but that wasn't the case. Not in this family. And the husband-and-wife thing meant there were no secrets.

"My couch," Grayson said. "Which one?"

Everyone looked at me. "Living room," I muttered.

"Okay, okay, that's far too much information for me. I don't need to know who's hooking up in my house, least of all my uncle and my mother. It's just weird. I am getting rid of that couch, by the way."

Jack chuckled, giving his uncle a reassuring pat on the shoulder. "Mom is crazy about you. I'm glad she's happy."

James nodded in agreement. "You've always made our mother happy, and she deserves that. Dad never loved her as well as you do."

"Very true," Mason said. "Dad was an asshole."

"We don't want to speak ill of the dead," Jack warned.

"I don't care," Mason said, shrugging. "I'll be happy to talk to his ghost if his ghost has a problem with me."

As the conversation shifted to their deceased father, I felt a pang of sadness. I didn't know him well, but I knew he had never been kind to my cousins. It was clear that his absence was felt, even if it wasn't in a positive way.

But as the night wore on, the conversation turned to lighter topics. “When do you go back to Bali?” I asked Channing.

“A couple of weeks,” he answered. “The kids are ready to get back to the beach. We spent a few weeks upstate and we’re all about sick of the cold and snow.”

I smiled wistfully. “I wish I had a beach to escape to. It’s been a long winter.”

Channing leaned in conspiratorially. “I can give you some recommendations. There are some hidden gems in Southeast Asia that are relatively unknown to tourists.”

“I would love that,” I said. “I would love to take Ginny on a tropical vacation. Maybe February. That’s when everyone gets the winter blues.”

“I know a lot of people,” he said. “Give me your email and I’ll send you some of my contacts.”

I eagerly shared my email with Channing, feeling grateful for the opportunity to take Ginny on a much-needed vacation.

“How’s the restaurant going?” James asked. “Rory really wants to get in there and try it.”

“Let me know when you want to go, and I will give you the exclusive table.”

“I’d like to take Kathy,” Dad said.

I smiled. “Of course, Dad. Just let me know when.”

We talked a while longer before those of us that weren’t staying the night started to pack up.

“Grayson, thanks for all your hospitality, but I’m going to be staying with Ginny.” I clapped him on the shoulder.

“I’ve been abandoned for a woman,” he joked.

“Thank you for letting me crash here. Dad, call me when you want to come for dinner.”

I walked into the house and followed the sound of women’s laughter.

I entered the living room. Ginny and the ladies sat on the couch, sipping cocktails and chatting animatedly. They turned to look at me as I walked in, and Ginny’s face lit up with a smile.

“Hey, babe!” she said, patting the empty space next to her. “Come join us.”

I sat down next to her and put an arm around her shoulders. “I was just coming to see if you were ready to head back to the city.”

She looked at the clock. "Oh wow! I had no idea how late it was."

"Do you want to stay longer?" I asked.

"No, we should go," she said, smiling. "Ladies, thank you so much for being so kind. I cannot wait to spend time with you all again."

"We'll do lunch," Hannah said. "Most of us live here and are always looking for a reason to go out to lunch."

"I have your number," Ginny said.

As Ginny stood up, I admired her beauty. We said our goodbyes and headed out to the car. As we drove back to the city, I couldn't stop thinking of our future together. I couldn't wait to show up at the next big Bancroft gathering with Ginny as my wife.

Her hand had been resting on my thigh, but I felt it slowly inching up toward my crotch. I looked over at her and saw the mischievous glint in her eye. "I want you, right now," she said with a coy smile.

I swallowed hard, trying to keep my eyes on the road. "We're almost home, baby."

"I can't wait that long," she said, her hand rubbing me through my pants.

I laughed. "You're going to need to hold on another ten minutes."

"I love you," she said, smiling. "I love that we get to be together."

"Me too," I said. "You've made me a very happy man."

"I like your family," she said, sighing. "They are really nice."

"Most of the time," I joked. "Get used to it. You'll be seeing them a lot."

EPILOGUE



GINGER

One Year Later

The past year had been nothing short of amazing. I looked around our new townhome still cluttered with unpacked boxes. I smiled, reflecting on all the changes, hard work, and hustle that had led me to this point. One year after Dane came back into my life, we moved into our own place together. It was huge, but not Grayson's mansion huge.

I missed my apartment in the East Village, but this was a new beginning for us. We had searched for the right place to call home. We considered moving out of the city, but with the restaurant and my work, we decided it would be easier to stay in the heart of the city. There would be time for the suburbs later.

Tonight, we were finishing up the decorating for Christmas. We had officially moved in a couple of weeks ago, but the whole unpacking thing was taking a while. I never realized how much stuff I had until I had to pack it all up.

"Babe!" Dane called out.

"Living room," I said.

He came into the living room, snow clinging to his hat and eyelashes. "I brought coffee."

"Good, because we still haven't unpacked the coffeemaker," I said, laughing.

“Yeah, maybe we can just hire someone,” he said.

“I would love that, but this is our house,” I reminded him. “We’re supposed to do this.”

“What time do your parents get into town?” he asked as he handed me a coffee.

“A couple of hours,” I said.

He cringed. “Then we better get our asses in gear.”

“They said they’re going to the hotel,” I said, shrugging. “I told them we hadn’t unpacked, and the house was a hot mess. Mom offered to help, but I can’t let her do that.”

“I need to get the kitchen unpacked,” he said. “We’ve got what, fifty people showing up tomorrow for dinner? Maybe it wasn’t the smartest idea to offer to host Christmas dinner before we even unpacked.”

“It’ll be fine,” I assured him. “We’ll bust ass. The kitchen is halfway done. The grocery delivery came earlier. It’s all put away.”

“Alright,” he said, nodding. “I’m going to get started.” He gave me a kiss. “I love you.”

“I love you.”

For the next two hours, we divided and conquered. He tackled the kitchen while I took care of the living room. I fluffed pillows, arranged books on the shelves, and made it look like an actual home. Then it was all about putting up Christmas decorations. I left the tree standing in the corner for the two of us to decorate together.

I was looking forward to seeing the extended Bancroft clan, along with Dez and Carmen. Carmen was eight months pregnant and grumpy as hell but still my best friend. I couldn’t wait to see her tomorrow. We had been so busy between working and moving and life in general. I couldn’t wait to catch up with her.

I wandered into the kitchen and was amazed by how fast he had worked. “Wow!”

He laughed and slid a drawer closed. “Done. I just need to take the boxes to the garage and the kitchen is good.”

“Living room is done,” I said. “I left the tree for both of us to decorate.”

“Do you want something to eat first?”

“I’ll grab a snack,” I told him.

We ended up eating ham and cheese sandwiches. It wasn’t gourmet, but we didn’t have time for gourmet. We scarfed down the sandwiches and went

to the living room. "It looks good in here," he said. "It's like a real home."

"We'll just have to leave the bedroom door closed," I said, laughing. "And no one is allowed to open any closets."

"Can you believe it's Christmas already?" he asked.

"I can't believe it's been a year," I said, sighing.

Dane leaned over and kissed me. "It's been the best year of my life, Ginny."

"Let's get this tree decorated," I said. "I'm exhausted."

We strung lights and opened the box of ornaments. We worked together, hanging them on the tree, reminiscing about each one as we placed it. As we hung the last ornament, Dane wrapped his arms around me and whispered in my ear. "Do you remember the first time we decorated a tree together?"

I smiled, remembering that first Christmas. We had just started dating and were so excited to spend the holiday together. We had gone to a tree lot and picked out the perfect one, only to realize we had no idea how to actually set it up in his bedroom. We spent hours trying to figure it out, laughing and joking the whole time.

"I do," I said, sighing.

"This is the first of many years we're going to do this," he said.

"I know," I said, nodding. "I think that's it," I said once we put on the last bit of tinsel.

"Want to do the honors?" Dane asked.

"No, you do it."

I turned off the lights while he grabbed the power strip. "Ready?"

"Do it!"

He turned it on, and the tree lit up. It was so beautiful it took my breath away.

Dane stood beside me with his arm wrapped around my shoulders. "I love it," he said.

"Me too."

"I can hardly wait for tomorrow morning. I have a feeling this Christmas is going to be unforgettable."

I grinned. "Why don't we open our gifts tonight?" I said. "I can't wait to give you your gift. Tomorrow we're going to be crazy busy with cooking a feast. We could just do this now."

"Someone's eager," he said, laughing. "You know I'm all about tradition, Ginny. Our gift exchange is set for tomorrow morning."

I pouted playfully. “Oh, come on, Dane. I’ve been itching to give you this gift for days. It’s just one night early. I am going to explode if I can’t give it to you.”

“What’s in the gift?”

“I can’t tell you, but you can open it,” I said.

I reached under the tree to retrieve the present that was making me crazy to give him. I handed it to Dane, my heart racing.

I watched him carefully unwrap the gift, his eyes wide with curiosity as he lifted the lid of the box. His face transformed into an expression of confusion, surprise, and then pure joy when he saw what lay inside.

“Ginny,” he said. “Is this what I think it is?”

The box contained a pregnancy test, a tiny baby outfit with matching booties, and an ultrasound picture.

I nodded with tears filling my eyes. “Yes. That’s what you think it is. We’re going to have a baby next year, Dane.”

Dane shook his head. “Ginny, this is... this is the best gift I could ever imagine. A baby? We’re going to be parents?”

“Yes, we are.”

“Wow!” He pulled me into his arms and held me close. We were both overwhelmed with emotion. We were both laughing and crying tears of joy. “This is amazing. I can’t believe it. I’m so happy.”

“Me too,” I said. “I know it’s a little earlier than we talked about, but these ovaries aren’t getting any younger.”

“We’ll take full advantage of those ovaries,” he said, grinning. “Now, it’s my turn to give you my gift.”

He stepped away and went to the Christmas tree. He reached into the branches and pulled out a small box that I didn’t even know was there.

“That’s where you hid the last gift,” I said, laughing.

“I’ll have to think of a new place next year,” he said. “You’re onto my secret hiding spot.” He kept the box in his hand. “I think we might be doing this a little out of order, but we don’t really do anything the normal way.”

My eyes dropped to the box in his hand once again. The size of the box gave me butterflies in my stomach. “Dane?”

He dropped to one knee in front of me. My heart raced, and my eyes filled with tears as he took my hand. He looked up into my eyes with an intensity that took my breath away.

“Ginger, this year has been a whirlwind of love and happiness. It’s

brought us closer than I ever thought possible. I knew when I saw you that day outside of Edge it was meant to be. I saw you and I knew we were supposed to be together. We were always supposed to be together. When we broke up, it was wrong. Our lives were disrupted. But when we got back together, everything fell into place. I can't imagine living without you. I want to spend the rest of my life with you, Ginger. Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

Tears streamed down my face as I looked into his eyes. I had always known that Dane was the man I was going to marry, but I never expected it to happen like this.

"Yes," I whispered. "Yes, of course I will."

He chuckled. "Maybe you should have unwrapped this first."

I quickly tore off the paper and popped open the box. I took one look at the ring and felt the tears running down my cheeks once again.

The sparkling diamond in the center was surrounded by smaller diamonds, all set in a band of white gold. It was the most beautiful ring I had ever seen.

Dane took it out of the box and slid it onto my finger. It fit perfectly.

"I love you so much, Ginger," he said, standing up and pulling me into a tight embrace. "I can't wait to spend the rest of my life making you happy."

He slipped the ring on my finger. I threw my arms around his neck, kissing him deeply. This was the best Christmas present I could have ever received. Dane was my soulmate, and I couldn't wait to spend the rest of my life with him.

"We're going to be a family," he said with a laugh. "I feel like we've gone from zero to sixty in no time at all."

"But you're happy about it?" I clarified.

"Hell yeah!"

"This means I either get married with a big old pregnant belly or we get married after the baby is born."

"Or we get married in the next few weeks," he suggested.

"Seriously?" I asked.

"Too bad we couldn't get a license today," he said, sighing. "The whole family will be here tomorrow."

"I might need a few days to plan," I said, laughing.

"But I think we should get married before the baby is born," he said.

"Me too," I said, smiling.

“Hey, let’s go upstairs and pick which room will be the nursery.”

We walked up the stairs, hand in hand, to explore the rooms. We had plenty of rooms to choose from, but we both knew which room would be perfect for the nursery.

As we walked into the room, I could already picture it. A white crib, a rocking chair, and a bookshelf full of children’s books. The walls would be a soft shade of yellow, and the curtains would be light and flowy.

“I love it,” I said.

“Me too,” he replied, wrapping his arms around me from behind.

We stood there for a moment, taking in the room and the thought of our future child. But then his hand slipped down to my stomach, and his touch sent shivers down my spine. I turned around in his arms to face him.

“I love you,” I said. “I feel like I’ve swallowed the sun. I’m beaming from the inside out. You’ve made me happy. Really, really happy.”

“I love you too,” he replied, his eyes filled with emotion. “I can’t wait to start our family together.”

“Technically, we’ve already started,” I joked. “Now, we just incubate the little peanut and you are a daddy.”

We meandered down the hall to our master suite, which was still a bit of a hot mess. We changed and climbed into bed.

As we lay there, wrapped up in each other’s arms, I felt overwhelmed with love for this man. He was going to be the father of my child, my partner for life.

He leaned in to kiss me softly but passionately, and I responded eagerly, my body pressing closer to his. His hands roamed my body, exploring every inch of me, and I felt myself growing wet with desire.

A year of loving each other, and I wanted him as much now as I did then.

I just loved Dane and Ginger! What about you? Would you like more?

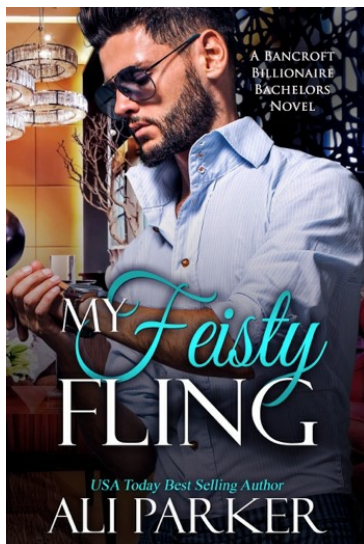
Download this deleted scene today!!

[Get your copy HERE!!](#)



Loving those Bancroft Brothers?

Need more of them?? Check out [My Feisty Fling](#)



The last thing I need is a sexy distraction, yet here we are. Again.

My father has been kidnapped.

I'm the only one with the skills to bring him home, but my wicked hot ex shows up at the airport and is on my flight.

What are the odds?

She's also a private detective working her own case.

But much to my surprise, she wants to work together.

Not a chance in hell.

She gives the good stuff, then takes it away.

No way this woman is destroying me again.

But she is my favorite sin.

Unfortunately, there's no time for romance as we find ourselves in

danger.

I have a life or death fight on my hands, but I never imagined the real battle would be for her.

My first love. My Feisty Fling.

Get your copy [HERE!](#)

Insider Group



Well hello again! Thank you so much for grabbing one of my books. I sure hope you loved it.

I'd hate to part ways now that you are through the book. How about we stay in touch? We have a great family of readers on my Insiders Newsletter Group that you just can't miss out on.

We do exclusive giveaways, facebook parties, Christmas cards, event invites, and sneak previews for this amazing group.

And as a HUGE thank you for joining,
you'll receive a free book on me!

[Join the fam Here!](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ali Parker is a full-time contemporary and new adult romance writer with more than a hundred and twenty books behind her. She loves coffee, watching a great movie and hanging out with her hubs. By hanging out, she means making out. The man is hot. Hello.

She's a creative at heart and loves coming up with more ideas than any one person should be allowed to access. She lives with her hubs, teenage son, two grown daughters and two love-of-her-life grand babies! Telling a good story that revives hope, reminds us of love and gives a vacation from life is all she's up to.

Questions, comments or concerns? You can always email her at Ali@aliparkerbooks.com.

Let's connect...

**Website ~ Insider's Group ~ Facebook
Instagram ~ The Parker's Playground**

A Holiday Love Affair

A Bancroft Billionaire Brothers Novel #15

Copyright © 2023 by Star Key Press

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

The novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and plot are all either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons – living or dead – is purely coincidental.

First Edition.

Editor: Eric Martinez

Cover Designer: [Ryn Katryn Digital Art](#)