



Baby, Be
MINE



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
TARYN QUINN

BABY, BE MINE

A SMALL TOWN ROMANTIC COMEDY

CRESCENT COVE

BOOK 15

TARYN QUINN



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Baby, Be Mine

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BABY, BE MINE

Baby on board has a whole new meaning...

What I was looking for?

An event coordinator to help out with the busy summer season at my restaurant.

What I got?

An emergency baby delivery on my party boat during our second interview becomes a life changing moment for **both** of us. Now I have to convince the brand new mama that I'm forever dad material—and the man who will love her forever.

Author's Note: Restaurant owner Mason Brooks has never believed in forever until a surprise baby and feisty new mom showed him what he was missing. *Baby, Be Mine* is a standalone romantic comedy with a happily-ever-after ending and no cliffhanger.

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For all the single moms out there.

You are kind.

You are brave.

And you most assuredly are ENOUGH.

ONE



IN THEORY, MONDAYS WERE THE DEAD ZONE WHEN IT CAME TO restaurant life.

This was the theory, but not exactly what I was seeing as I looked over the dining room at ten in the morning.

Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays were buzzy and busy. It was May in Crescent Cove, and my customers were hungry for the longer days. And luckily, that included my exceptional food and drinks. The Mason Jar had boasted a packed house since Thursday, and it seemed like Monday was going to be the same.

Mondays were for recovery, balancing the books, and paperwork. Not exactly my favorite thing to do, but it was a cycle I was used to.

Then again, it wasn't usually ninety degrees this early in the season, let alone before noon. I was relieved to see Rami and Esther were jumping into action. My hostess, Sara Beth, was seating people and the morning crew was clearing tables and rapidly setting new places.

I'd called in reinforcements because of the interviews, but I'd figured I'd have to send someone home. The revenue-conscious half of me was happy to see the dozen or so people who had just been seated, but the other half was worried.

Summer staffing was in process and I had a feeling I'd need to up my previous number. Especially since I was also adding a party barge to the outdoor activities for the summer.

The Mason Jar sat on Crescent Lake and we had prime real estate with multiple docks.

I'd just recently upgraded a boat launch for water-set picnics. My kitchen had perfected the to-go lunch for those who spent the afternoon on the lake. I was even toying with the idea of a boat version of UberEats.

I had a lot of plans, but it required people and new employees.

And that meant interviews.

"Hey, Boss."

"Hey, Rami."

Her sweetly freckled face warred with the fact that she was stunningly gorgeous. Her dark hair was scraped back in a high ponytail against the heat. She wore a The Mason Jar black T-shirt with a pair of black shorts and her ever present kicks.

"I hope you don't mind, but I called in Christy and Megan."

"No, I'm glad you did. I was just wondering how I was going to do the interviews with all this extra traffic. Any idea why we're so busy?"

"According to Patty Duncan, there's a flea market on Main."

Patty Duncan was one of the many town busybodies and part of our hub of information since she was addicted to our morning coffee service. "Well, shit."

"Yep."

I raked my fingers through my hair. "All right. If you need to call anyone else in today, go ahead."

"Got it. Oh, and your first three interviewees are here."

"Three?" I'd specifically staggered them so I didn't have people waiting.

"Yeah. I think they're anxious. I set them up at the second level bar so they'd be out of the way. Though I wouldn't be

surprised if the drinking starts before noon today.”

I blew out a breath. “Guess we should call in some of the bartenders too. It’s too hot to have people on the back patio.” I moved to the windows and Rami followed me. There wasn’t a cloud in the damn sky. I could practically feel the sun sizzling the deck.

I made a mental note to have the umbrellas and pergola shades be pulled out of storage. It looked like summer was definitely making herself known before the holiday this year.

“If you need overflow from the dining room, push some people onto the second floor patio instead. There should be enough shade up there to eat comfortably.”

“Got it.”

I gripped my small tablet and started up the stairs to the second level. “I’ll probably be out of pocket for the next few hours. You and Esther have the floor.” I glanced over my shoulder. “If you are jammed up, call in Gillian.”

Rami’s nose wrinkled.

“I know. She doesn’t usually work Mondays, but if it’s going to be this crazy before the lunch rush, we might have to drag her in.”

“I’ll make Esther call her.”

I pressed my lips together against a smile. Gillian Waller was the head of waitstaff and bartenders and could be a tad difficult. She’d been with me since The Mason Jar had been little more than a shack on the water and was indispensable when it came to running this place. Unfortunately, she was well aware of her worth and lorded it over the staff when she was on the warpath.

Mondays were her day off and there was generally hell to pay if we called her in.

The sound of a hissing hydraulic had me turning around and rushing back down the stairs. I winced as a bus circled the parking lot.

How had I missed the damn memo about a flea market in the heart of Crescent Cove? Then again, I'd been juggling so many things lately, checking my email tended to fall to the bottom of the list.

“Oh, crap.” Rami went onto her toes beside me and peered at the stream of people coming off the bus. “I’ll make those calls.”

“Good idea.” I rerouted to the front desk. My interviews would have to wait until I could get this under control.

I touched Sara Beth’s elbow. “Ladies, welcome to The Mason Jar. How many in your party?”

I felt her relax as she called ahead another party. “I can help you over here.”

A woman in a startlingly neon floral dress came up to the desk. “Eleven.”

I nearly choked, but my smile never wavered. “Okay, let me get that set up for you.” I peeked over my shoulder. “Would you mind a patio seat? Or prefer inside?”

“Inside.”

Of course she wanted inside. I kept the smile on my face and waved Esther over.

Esther scanned the room in that way she had—she was one of the best servers who’d ever worked here—and quickly crossed the dining room to meet me.

“I need a seating for eleven.”

“Sorry. I meant thirteen,” the older woman added oh so helpfully.

“Right. Thirteen.”

Esther’s dark eyes widened, but she nodded. “On it.”

I glanced at the bar where the trio of potential new hires were waiting. I’d called in two women and a man for a second interview for the entertainment coordinator I desperately needed. If I was going to utilize the outdoor spaces in the best

way possible, it would require someone who knew what the hell they were doing.

One of the interviewees turned to look at me. She had wild, sun-kissed blond hair and blue eyes bright enough for me to notice across the room. She wore a summery hot pink dress that showed off tanned shoulders and an armful of bracelets in various stones and metals.

Emmaline Hauser.

The name was burned into my brain. We'd done a Zoom interview for the first round, and she'd made me laugh the whole time. Sharp, smart, and effervescent, bubbling with excitement and ideas, Emma was a top contender for the job as far as I was concerned.

Even if part of me was a little too intrigued by her, I knew she was ideal for what I was looking for. Someone who could light up a room and yet was forceful enough to keep people in line. She had a drama background which seemed incongruous for the job, and yet she was the one who'd come up with the best ideas for events so far.

But right now, she'd have to wait.

They all would.

I needed to worry about feeding a dozen octogenarians who seemed ready to cause a scene. By the time me and my staff got the front porch cleared and people seated, I was thirty minutes behind for the first interview.

I swung by the second level bar area and hurried behind the counter. "Sorry, guys. I didn't know we'd end up with a late breakfast rush."

"Not a bad problem to have." Emmaline laced her fingers on the glossy bar top. Her fingers were just as colorfully bejeweled as her arm.

"Definitely not." I quickly filled three glasses of water and passed them out. "I'll be a few more minutes, but I didn't want to leave you here without something to drink."

“I could go for something harder,” Jim Something-or-other said as he leaned heavily on the bar. Looked like he might have partied a bit harder than he should have before an interview.

“We don’t serve before noon,” I said with a genial smile.

“C’mon.”

I arched my brow at him, and the man seemed to come to his senses. Not exactly what a future boss would like to hear. *Idiot.*

“Right.” Jim cleared his throat. “Water’s fine.”

Emmaline smothered a smile behind her hand as she stabbed her glass with a straw and took a deep drink.

I swiped down the bar-top automatically. There had been many a night when I’d first opened where I had to jump in to help serve drinks. “Can I get you guys something to eat while you wait? On me.”

Emmaline glanced at the other two and then shrugged at me. “I never turn down free food.”

“I’m fine,” the other woman said. Her name escaped me, and I made a mental note to check my iPad before I came back.

“Something greasy, Jimmy?” Emmaline asked with a wink.

Jim flushed.

She turned that captivating smile my way. “Fries sound good to me.”

“Basket of fries coming up.” I rushed down the stairs and into the kitchen.

My chef, Henry, was barking orders as his second-in-command, Jackie, kept the rest of the kitchen running smoothly. I put a ticket in for the fries, scrawling my instructions for no bill.

The clatter of dishes, the terrifyingly fast tapping of a knife on a cutting board, and the sharp scent of garlic and peppers

assaulted my senses as I skimmed through the orders and the staffing schedule for the kitchen today. I'd need to call in reinforcements there too.

“Mase, I have an order coming in and no time to check over the inventory.” My chef's voice was as sharp as one of his Henckel knives.

I looked up from my screen with a sigh. I'd rather have Henry manning the stove and his dozen pots than yelling at one of our delivery guys. Monday was also a major delivery day because it was usually slow.

I blew out a breath. “On it.”

Henry threw me a sour look.

“You don't want me at that stove and Jackie is plating for eight tables. Don't give me that stink-eye.”

Henry only grunted at me.

I went down the hallway at the back of the kitchen that led to my tiny office. I checked my phone to make sure nothing was going on with my family and saw the redline of the battery. Great. I slipped inside for a second of quiet. I'd soundproofed the room during the first remodel and it was the best money I'd ever spent. I took a few deep breaths, plugged in my phone, and then skimmed my iPad for the names on my interview list. I shuffled Jim Perry down to the third spot.

He'd originally been neck and neck with Emmaline, but his red-rimmed eyes and hopeful look for a hangover beer left a bad taste in my mouth. Not that I hadn't had my share of hair of the dog after a night of drinking, but I'd never done it on a damn interview.

I quickly reviewed the details on Carol Martin. She looked great on paper. A degree in marketing, secondary MBA from Syracuse University. But the pinched look on her face at the chaos in the room also was a point against her.

But I really wanted to see what each of them had to offer before writing anyone off completely. I put my iPad on the docking charger with my phone because that one was dangerously ready to die as well.

I blew out another slow breath then opened the door to the echo of kitchen life drifting down the hall. Instead of heading toward the kitchen, I hung a right and headed out the back door.

The produce truck was running, and a pallet of fresh vegetables was stacked high. Our usual supplier from a local farm leaned on the pallet jack, scrolling on his phone.

“Hey, Brad.”

The older man looked up and grinned, stuffing his phone in his pocket. “Wow, no Henry? Is someone missing a limb or something?”

I laughed. “We got a surprise rush of customers today. He’d be out here looking over every leaf of lettuce if he could.”

“Worse things.”

“Won’t hear me complaining until Henry skins me alive for not checking everything over. Let’s make sure we’re almost as good.”

Brad handed me the order. “Works for me. You’re way nicer.”

I took it. “Thanks. I think.” I skimmed the list with a sigh. This wasn’t going to be quick.

In the end, I only had to turn away half a bushel of Brussels sprouts that looked anemic even to my untrained eye. But it put me another forty-five minutes behind.

I thanked Brad and together, we wrestled the pallet through the double doors to the chiller. Brad released the jack and gave me a genial salute before the squeaky wheels clattered over the tracks of the large walk-in fridge.

He whistled as he made his way back to the truck and pulled away.

I closed up the chiller and ran into Henry in the hallway. His spiky blond hair stuck out from the wide bandana he wore in lieu of a chef’s hat. “What are you doing back here?”

“I need food to actually cook.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. Henry never fetched his own product. “You just don’t trust my check-in.”

“Nope.” He pushed by me and swung open the door.

I shook my head. Part of why I put up with Henry was because he was damn good at his job. Even if he was pissed off more than half the time. I pushed my way through the kitchen door back out to the dining room.

I was on my way up the stairs to the next level when Gillian called my name. I paused on the stairs and forced myself to unclench my fingers.

“Are you the one who authorized someone to call me in?”

I turned. “As you can see from the full tables, we needed you.”

“Then I want Friday off.”

“If you can find someone to cover, by all means.”

“I have a date.” She tipped her chin up, somehow staring down her nose at me even though I was halfway up the stairs.

“Good for you.”

“You’re impossible.” She rolled her eyes and stormed off.

I sighed as I turned back around and caught Emmaline’s gaze. Her mouth was quirked up at the corner and she stared me dead in the eye, completely unashamed at overhearing us. I got to the top of the stairs and before I could get to the bar, Esther waved me down.

“Sorry, guys. It was supposed to be a slow Monday.” I tapped the bar, then noticed Emmaline rubbing her side. I frowned, but before I could ask if she was all right, Esther rushed over.

“Mason, I can’t get the awning to open.”

“Right. Coming.” I glanced back at Emmaline one more time, but the bar blocked her. I rushed out the back door to the

second level patio. It was scorching hot and the awning that shaded most of the deck was stuck at half-mast.

Perfect.

It was made of metal and canvas and sturdy as hell. I rushed to the control box and heard the hum of the motor grinding.

“I think it’s jammed.” Esther’s dark cap of hair stuck to her temples as she tried to pull the arm out.

“It’s okay.” I smiled at a pair of ladies sitting in the spare spot of shade. “Would you mind standing up for just a second? We’ll have you nice and shaded in just a jif.”

The older woman stood and gathered her things. “It’s a hot one.”

“That it is. How about we send you over one of our wine slushes on the house?”

“Oh.” The woman laid a hand on her chest. “Well, that would be lovely. Connie, what do you say?”

The other woman smiled. “Free is for me.”

“Perfect.” I moved the chair out of the way and jumped up on the railing.

“Jeez. Be careful.” Esther rushed forward to hold my leg.

“This is nothing. Should have seen the trees I climbed as a kid.” I hissed as my forearm hit the awning. A quick flash of a memory hit me out of the blue. Hitting my arm on my mom’s curling iron. I hadn’t thought of her in a million years. I didn’t have many memories of her since she’d left when I was a baby.

Evidently, a burn was a core memory.

I eased back a little and found the culprit for the jam. I pulled a tree branch out of the folds of the canvas and suddenly, the mechanical arm hummed to life. I hopped down and pulled the chairs back for the women, waving the older one over. Then I helped her into her seat.

“Why thank you, young man.”

“My pleasure.” I glanced up at Esther as I fixed the table then held the chair for Connie as well. She blushed prettily and fussed with her napkin. “Esther will get you those drinks.”

I’d learned long ago a little kindness and extra manners went a long way to keep customers happy.

Now if I could just get thirty minutes of peace, I could get these interviews done.

TWO



I WAS GOING TO FLOAT AWAY IF I HAD ONE MORE GLASS OF water. I'd already escaped to the bathroom twice while the hot restaurant dude rushed around. Then again, if I breathed wrong, I needed to pee these days.

I rubbed the side of my belly where my little future ladies' soccer player was kicking me with a vengeance. Interviewing while I was heading for nine months pregnant had not been on my bingo card for this year. If my parents and siblings had had their way, I'd have been ensconced in my old childhood home.

My mother had already made over one of the bedrooms into a nursery.

They'd just assumed I would move home when I'd dropped the bomb of my pregnancy at my brother Clint's Pre-Thanksgiving dinner. But the idea of going back to Clintondale with my out-of-wedlock baby had been a hard no.

The little town I came from—and my family was named after—was progressive in some ways. My father, Mayor Clintondale Hauser, liked to believe he was open-minded. But traditional family values were still a staple in the town of three-thousand constituents.

And the Mayor's unwed, twenty-two-year-old daughter wasn't exactly the best look.

Not that my parents made me feel like that, but I'd seen how people looked at Jenny Stuttgart when I was in high school. She'd gotten knocked up the summer after she graduated and ended up staying in town instead of going off to

college. Of course the boy couldn't stay—he had a full ride to Syracuse University for basketball. Did he get whispered about?

Nope.

But boy, Jenny did, and the whispers came with plenty of pitying looks.

No, thanks.

I'd rather work two jobs while pregnant. Oh, wait. That was exactly what I'd been doing.

They'd been mostly work from home-style jobs, but I was going stir-crazy being cooped up in my apartment. I needed adult conversation that didn't revolve around me pushing a baby out of my vagina. I was already freaking out about it, I really didn't want to talk about it twenty-four-seven with my mother, sisters, and my overprotective older brother.

Luckily, Clint was an overworked veterinarian in Kensington Square. Just far enough away from me that I could avoid long drawn-out conversations by giving him a twice daily check-in text.

Which reminded me to do my morning text. It wasn't exactly morning anymore. Then again, I hadn't expected my interview to last two hours without any of us actually talking to Mason Brooks for more than three minutes.

I reached down for my purse and the twinge in my lower back ricocheted around my belly. I gave a quick squeak that I hopefully muffled.

The prim and proper Carol, who sat rigidly straight on the stool beside me, gave me a bit of side-eye. Her gaze dipped down under the lip of the bar and then her eyes widened comically.

She quickly averted her gaze back to her glass and twisted it earnestly in the small pool of condensation it had left. Mostly because Carol hadn't taken more than a sip from her sweaty glass. I was tempted to grab it and guzzle it down myself.

I wondered if they would mind if I went around to the back of the bar to refill my glass again.

Would they even notice?

Everyone was rushing around in the restaurant. I'd polished off the fries that Miss Stick-In-The-Mud refused to eat. I was pretty sure ol' Jimmy was still burping up last night's bourbon and beer at the other end of the bar.

I'd told him the grease would help, but he was being stubborn.

Ah, well, that just meant more for me.

And personally, I'd go for another basket if someone actually stopped in to check on us. Then again, the waitstaff was scattered to the four winds with the bus full of geriatrics who wanted special attention along with the senior's menu.

In my boredom-slash-research I'd perused The Mason Jar's website and the only senior thing on their classy menu was breakfast. Probably why they'd descended on the end of the breakfast rush like the squawking seagulls outside on the lake.

Or ducks.

They were surprisingly plentiful in this town. Maybe even the Mallards had a touch of the effervescent baby fever that seemed to be part of the lore of Crescent Cove. I couldn't say I knew for sure since I'd gotten myself preggo outside town limits.

One thing I could say about the Cove was there was no judgement about women walking around in a baby way. Not that you could really tell I was, thankfully. Well, up until the last week or so. I'd fully popped, as they say.

They being the constant barrage of people who wanted to touch my damn belly.

I might have been the smallest of the Hausers, but I still had a bit of height to me. And for once, my long torso had come in handy. I rubbed my side again. But even with the little bit of extra room, this kid was kicking up a storm today.

I dug into my purse for my phone and winced when I saw that five texts were waiting for me. Most were from Clint, and one from his new wife Kitty.

Bringing out the big guns if Kitty hopped into the text pool.

CLINGER:

How are you feeling today?

CLINGER:

Are you awake yet? Is everything okay?

CLINGER:

I called all the hospitals in the area. Answer me.

ONE MISSED CALL

CLINGER:

<32 second voice memo>

CLINGER:

Dammit, you turned off the location app again.

KITTY:

I'm sure you're fine, but your brother has his head between his legs for non sexual reasons. Could you check in with him so I can enjoy the one afternoon he has off? I would like to have adult relations and he can't concentrate.

I snorted and fired back a group text to them.

I'm fine. I'm having lunch with friends.

Not exactly a lie.

Maybe a small stretch of the truth.

All my friends were back at school. I'd managed to scrape together the brainpower and sheer power of will to finish school while the bean was rapidly changing my life. Lucky for me, my baby daddy was avoiding me like the plague, so I didn't have to explain myself.

Good thing, because I didn't know quite what to say.

So, I just didn't say anything at all.

I swallowed a groan as my soon to be little girl tried to eject one of my ribs. I rubbed circles on the spot, careful to keep things under wraps beneath the bar. I just had to make a winning argument for getting hired—even if I'd be ready to pop in a matter of weeks.

If Mason Brooks would land somewhere for five minutes, dammit.

I couldn't astound him with my quick wit and winning personality if he didn't freaking talk to me for more than ten seconds. Even I wasn't that good.

Speak of the devil.

Mason came through the sliding door to the outside patio. He was flushed with his wheat-colored hair sticking to his temples, showing off a bit of a red undertone where he'd been sweating. He turned back to talk to someone on the patio and I caught a smattering of freckles along the nape of his neck.

Okay, no looking at the boss's freckles, girl.

I did not need to scope out the boss, even if he was a nice long, tall drink of water. I'd already gotten myself into enough trouble by sleeping with the head of the drama department, I certainly didn't need to add boss of the small-town establishment I wanted to work for to my resume.

Then again, no one was looking to sleep with me right now.

My equipment was on the fritz anyway. Carrying around a basketball tended to take care of any and all sex drive I previously had. That and the random people who kept trying to

touch me. As if a pregnant belly had magical properties or something.

Mason turned back around and we locked eyes for a moment and my deceased libido stirred fractionally.

And that was definitely a problem.

Not on my radar in any way.

No men.

Not now, and possibly not ever. Okay, ever was a stretch. I really did like men on the whole and I certainly liked sex, but abstinence for the next three years or so sounded about right. Perhaps then I'd have my body back and would have made peace with the stretch marks.

Possibly.

I shut my eyes against another twinge. This one not a kick, but a rippling fire up my spine.

Not now, Braxton Hicks. I do not have time for you.

The phantom labor pains had been plaguing me for over a month now and I was so very over it. The first time, I'd called my doctor from an Uber in a blind panic as I raced for the ER in Kensington Square. Seven months along was far too close for comfort, thanks.

Now I knew they were my new normal.

"Just your body getting ready for the baby, Emma!"

I could hear my chipper doc's voice in my head. Well, physician's assistant. Which was fine by me, I liked her better. Most of the time. Except when she put her *Toy Story* Barbie voice on. That often incited a murderous reflex that I had to squash.

I dug the tips of my fingers into the underside of the bar as another wave crept around my belly.

When I looked up, Mason was behind the bar staring at me with a worried face. "Are you all right?"

I smiled tightly. “Fine. Never better. Probably shouldn’t have had the fries without gravy,” I added weakly.

He laughed. “You should have our poutine. Even better.”

I groaned. “Don’t tease me.”

“I can get you an order to hold you over.”

I shook my head. The idea of food right now made me want to evacuate what was in my stomach right then. “No, but I know what to get next time. Hoping there’s a next time anyway. If the interview works out.”

“Yeah, I’m really sorry about that.” He seemed to notice he was only talking to me. “To all of you. I know you probably have other things you need to be doing.”

“It’s all right. I’m just glad for the chance to interview.” Carol’s super polite voice was laced with enough saccharine that I could taste it on the air.

“I do have to get out of here soon,” Jim interjected. “I have a shift at The Spinning Wheel tonight and I need to crash.”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. Jim was not making the best impression for this interview session. I was pretty sure most of us were on the second or third round.

“All right, if you ladies are all right with it, I’ll take Mr. Taylor first.”

I desperately wanted to say no, but I figured Jimmy would show the rest of his ass in a few minutes and the interview would be over. One more gold star in my column. “Fine with me.”

Carol nodded. “Whatever you need.”

Suck up.

“Okay. Why don’t we head out to the boat and see what’s what.”

“Sounds good.” Jim finally sat up from his slouch and loudly sucked up the last of his water from the spare few ice cubes he had left in his glass.

Once the two men were down the stairs, Carol turned to me. “How far along are you?”

“Why, Carol, this could be a french fry belly.”

The woman colored and sat up straighter if it was at all possible. “I...beg your pardon.”

I grinned. “Sorry, couldn’t resist. When I interviewed for the position, I thought it was going to start a little earlier.”

Her eyes got larger. “You didn’t know you were pregnant?” she whispered.

“Oh, I knew. But I gotta pay the bills. Still do.” I patted my sizable belly. “For me and the bean.”

“But won’t you need to take time? Is that fair?”

I leaned against the back of the stool, forcing myself to relax against the lower back pain that was my constant companion. “Plenty of moms work. Are you a mom, Carol?”

“Yes. But my children are in school. It’s time for me to be back to work.”

I tilted my head. “Because your husband worked enough to cover you to stay home?”

She lifted her chin. “No husband?”

“Nope.”

Her gaze lowered to my bright, floral dress, then she lifted her eyes to meet my gaze. “But surely the father would want to...help.”

The father of my baby had helped himself to another woman while I was still in the picture. I wasn’t sure Carol would be up for that answer. “Surely you are aware us woman can do it all these days. Even when we thought we wouldn’t have to.”

She swallowed hard and turned back to her mostly untouched glass of water. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I made the best choice for me and my baby. And if that means working and taking care of my kid at the

same time, that's what I'll do."

"I'm not sorry about that," she said quietly. "I'm just sorry you have to."

The ire slipped out of me. "I have a great family, but I just want to show them I am capable. And dammit, this job is perfect for me. Even if the timing is a little less than perfect."

I clenched my fist against the side of my leg under the bar.

Not at all the best timing, but I was determined to make it work.

For me and the bean.

THREE



UNSURPRISINGLY, JIM TAYLOR DIDN'T GET ANY BETTER during his interview. I tried to give him the benefit of the doubt but he was a damn hot mess. If he couldn't put himself together for an interview, I couldn't believe he'd be any better at the job itself.

Especially considering parties were a main component of the job. I wouldn't trust that he'd stay freaking sober while at work.

I took a deep breath before I climbed the stairs to the porch. I took one last look over my shoulder at the barge. I'd commissioned a muralist to make the flat, featureless boat more interesting.

It was three levels, with the uppermost deck open to the elements. I had a feeling it would make for great summertime parties on the water. I even had a wakeboarding boat being painted to match. Crescent Lake was perfect for boards, skis, and even some oversized inner tubes.

Now I just needed to find the perfect person to help me make it a reality. That meant getting these interviews taken care of.

Carol Martin was sitting primly on the barstool beside Emmaline Hauser. Where Martin was dressed exactly right in a summer suit in a subdued cornflower blue that had been steamed to an inch of its starched life, Hauser was in a free-flowing dress in a screaming pink that was the definition of summer on the water.

Martin was the safe bet.

My accountant as well as my silent business partner would earmark Carol Martin as the one to hire. Still, even from across the room, the air sparkled around Emmaline Hauser.

“She’s beautiful.”

I blinked out of my stare and glanced down at Rami. “Not exactly the important part of an interview.”

“I don’t know, boss. Pretty does sell. Think I do all this,” she waved over her face, “for myself?”

I grinned down at her. “Yes.”

“Okay. You’re right.” She narrowed her eyes at me. “You’re far too intuitive to be single, Mason.”

I was single because I knew too much was more like it.

“Carol is very qualified.”

“Is she the one who needs an enema?”

I swallowed a laugh. “She’s just serious. And her qualifications are two pages long.”

Rami shrugged. “I’d never waited tables in my life before you hired me and now I’m HBIC most of the time.”

I’d heard the term from her before. And while she was the head in charge of the waitstaff, she wasn’t a bitch. Far from it, but she didn’t take any bullshit, for which I was very grateful. When Rami was on the schedule, I was rarely called on to deal with the minutiae. Exactly how I liked it. I could concentrate on making the rounds and dealing with all the other fires of running a restaurant.

“Have you interacted with either of them?”

Rami folded her arms. “It’s been a bit busy, but I can tell you Carol hasn’t moved a muscle. Pretty much front and center the whole time. She doesn’t even look around. While the hot blond has had her head on a swivel since she sat down.”

“Could just be a busybody.”

“This town is full of them, but she’s different from Mrs. Gunderson.”

I winced. I much preferred Patty Duncan, who was in most days of the week—so much so that she had her own table. But the trials of Crescent Cove were on the light side. People cared, and for the most part they looked out for one another, but there was usually a healthy dollop of gossip in between.

However, Mrs. Gunderson was...a lot.

“She was watching how the dining room worked, that kind of thing. In between many bathroom breaks.”

I raked my fingers through my hair. “I did leave them alone a lot. Pretty sure she had many glasses of water.”

Rami slapped my shoulder. “I like her though. The other chick is pretty cool, but if you go with my gut feeling, I’d go with the other.”

“Noted.” I glanced around the dining room, noticing it was filling up rather than emptying out. “All good on the floor?”

“I called in the dragon, so what do you think?”

“Gonna be a busy one. Maybe I should reschedule the rest of the interviews.”

Rami waved me off. “We got it.”

“Sure?”

She gave me a snappy salute. “Aye, Captain.”

“Shut up.” I laughed. Ever since I’d upgraded the simple boat to the barge, my staff had been giving me shit. The lake was an untapped resource, I was sure of it.

There were two sets of stairs to the second floor bar and dining area. I took the side stairs two at a time and noticed my staff had started filling the tables on the second level. Definitely atypical Monday behavior. As I’d poured a bunch of money into the barge, I wasn’t complaining.

It just meant I’d have to do even more hiring.

My head throbbed at the thought. Staffing wasn't as easy as it used to be. People preferred cushy work at home jobs over the manual labor of being on your feet all day in the service industry. On days like today, I couldn't blame them.

It took an extra five minutes to get across the dining room. Another part of small town living, everyone knew you—especially when you owned a business in said small town. Oh, and that my older brother was the Chief of Police

No big deal.

By the time I got back to the bar, even the ultra polite Carol was drumming her fingers.

“Sorry, ladies. It's been a day. If you can't wait around, I don't mind—”

“No!” Emmaline practically shouted. “I'm good with waiting. Right, Carol? We've been doing it this long.”

Carol checked her wrist discreetly. “I do have to pick up my children by half past two.”

Who the heck said half past two? “I don't think we'll take that long.”

I glanced at Emmaline and noted she looked pale. “Miss. Hauser, can I get you something to eat?”

“I'm good.” She pressed her lips together tightly enough that they whitened around the edges then gave me a rueful smile. “Full of fries.” She waved me off. “Take care of Carol's interview. My butt has made a groove in this stool. I can't move anyway.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.”

I turned to Carol. “Okay, let's go see the boat, then.”

“Boat?” Carol finally seemed a little ruffled.

“Yes. The entertainment coordinator's purview includes The Mason Jar II.”

“Electric Boogaloo,” Emmaline chirped.

I laughed and glanced over at her.

She pinked up. “Sorry. I’m full of obscure references.”

“Are you saying my boat is an unnecessary sequel?” I knew the reference too, mostly because 80s and 90s movies were a staple of my childhood. Since my mother lit out when I was a baby, my father really didn’t know what to do with me. We’d watched many movies together when I wouldn’t sleep.

“Not this girl. *Breakin’ 2* was a classic.”

I shook my head and resisted the urge to smile wider. I was not going to be charmed by her. I would remain professional. But damned if I didn’t like her already.

“Excuse me, are you saying this job is on a boat?”

I focused on Carol. “Yes. That’s a major part of the job.” Did we not discuss that during the first interview? I knew there had been a bit of a time jump since my first round of interviews, but I didn’t think I could’ve left that part out.

“Yes, most of the coordination is for parties on the boat, as well as events through the summer.”

“Oh, yeah. That barge outside?” Emmaline interjected with a wide grin as she leaned on her hand with a dreamy look. “So perfect for bachelor and bachelorette parties, some theme parties, could even do some corporate stuff. It’s limitless.”

“Exactly what I was thinking.” I nodded. “And a weekly outing in the summer. Mid-week, maybe.”

“Right!” Her blue eyes widened. “Every week a different theme. Ridiculous Hawaiian shirts, or Marvel nights with the movie playing on a screen on the top deck. Can have food to match. I’m sure your chef could be persuaded to get creative. You know, if you really wanted to get involved. Or maybe work with other local restaurants to get some community going.”

This was exactly what I was looking for.

I cleared my throat and turned back to Carol. “Sorry. Got a little carried away.”

Carol's eyes had widened and I was pretty sure she looked a little green around the gills.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes.” She smoothed down the already perfectly smooth buttons on her jacket. “I didn't realize I'd have to be on the boat with people.”

I stuffed my hands in my jeans pockets. “Actually. I can show you that right now. It's—”

“No, that's all right.” Her gaze darted to Emmaline. “Actually, I think you have your answer with Miss Hauser. Even if she is in a...difficult way. She seems far more suited to this job than I am.”

I frowned. “Difficult?”

Emmaline's face lost that bright and excited smile.

“I don't think there's enough Dramamine on this earth to have me work on a boat every day.”

I blinked. “You get seasick? And you applied?”

Carol cleared her throat. “I thought I would be handling the bookings, not actually being on the boat to run the parties. I'm very sorry I misunderstood. Perhaps your job posting should have been a little more clear.”

“It was pretty clear, Carol.” Emmaline folded her arms across her chest. “And my situation isn't difficult. Especially not in this town from what I hear.” She slid off the stool and straightened and there was no denying that there was a very generous curve to her belly.

One that I was very used to seeing in the Cove. Mostly because my sister-in-law to be had just had a baby recently.

Regardless of her very obvious baby situation, I was surprised she was standing up for me. Mostly because she didn't have the job yet.

Before I could open my mouth, Emmaline stepped forward and Carol backed up. “And more importantly, there's no way that a woman who has such a rod up her butt could plan a

party that didn't include china and a book club with cucumber sandwiches."

Carol flushed. "I—there's nothing wrong with a book club."

"Sure, if we're reading something super hot and filthy. Then I'm down for it. But I don't think your Oprah titles are exactly the kind of party Mr. Brooks had in mind." She glanced at me. "Oh, we should definitely talk about a possible smutty reader party for the boat. You know, when you give me the job." Emmaline gave me a huge smile that punched me in the gut.

Carol lifted her chin. "And what do you think you're going to do with a baby on your hip in a matter of days?"

"Ladies, please." I glanced around and internally groaned at how many people were turning their attention to us.

"I'm going to do what every woman who has a baby does. I'm going to work and take care of my kid. Just like you, Carol."

She sniffed.

"Okay, why don't we take this outside? Do you want help, Miss Hauser?"

Emmaline waved me off. "I'm perfectly fine. And I'd love to see the boat and continue this conversation. If you still want me to interview, that is." She stared me down. "Me having a baby isn't going to be a problem, I would assume?"

I swallowed. "Of course we'll continue the interview." I was quickly digging myself a hole on either side of this line.

Had I not been clear in the job posting? I'd posted with many online accounts, not to mention the Crescent Cove Pennysaver.

Now I wasn't quite sure at all.

And how the hell was I going to hire a woman who looked like she was a minute away from giving birth? Didn't they have to take like twelve weeks off to do the first...*everything* with a baby?

My brain was whirling, and I didn't know what to do other than to get them out of here, so the entirety of Crescent Cove wouldn't be discussing my interview prowess—or lack thereof—with dinner tonight.

“I'm sorry things didn't work out, Mrs. Martin. If you're interested in something inside the restaurant, we can certainly discuss it.”

Over my dead body. If she was going to critique my job posting, I could only imagine what she'd do with how I ran my restaurant.

“No, thank you. I don't think this is the place for me.”

Emmaline scrunched her nose up adorably. “Might want to try the Sherman Inn. I hear they're looking for someone to do a similar job. While it might be less fun, it could be just your kind of thing, Carol.”

The woman looked insulted and intrigued at the same time.

I was pretty sure my expression mirrored Carol Martin's. Emmaline went from insulting her to giving her a lead on a job with a backhanded compliment.

Sort of.

Carol sniffed. “I'll look into it.” Then she turned on her very sensible shoes and rushed down the stairs and through the dining room to the front door.

I glanced at Emmaline. “You're an interesting woman, Miss Hauser.”

She linked her arm through mine. “Call me Emma. I have a feeling we're going to be getting to know each other very well.”

“I...uh.”

“Look, I know the baby thing is a little out of the ordinary, but I'm young and hale and hearty. We can definitely figure something out. Why don't you show me the boat and we'll see if we fit?”

Part of me wanted to run for the hills, but I found myself steering her to the less used stairs across the smaller second level dining area. “I think I owe you a full interview at the very least.”

“Damn straight. I can’t wait to see the boat.”

Personally, I couldn’t wait for this day to be over.

There was no way I could hire a woman who was this far along in her pregnancy when I had a summer slate full of weddings and parties in mind.

I just had to let her down gently without getting in trouble with every labor law on the books.

I was so screwed.

FOUR



I WAS LOSING HIM.

I could feel it. I'd known it was a possibility when he saw me in person. No hiding the basketball under my dress anymore. I had a long torso for my height, but at this point, Bean was outgrowing her little nest—that nest being me.

Nerves and sleepless nights plagued me at this point. And the smart thing would be to move home and let my mom take care of me. She was dying to, but I just couldn't deal with the stares in my old hometown. Everyone giving me those pitying stares, and not to mention the way they spoke to my father.

Nope.

I really had to figure this stuff out on my own.

And that meant I had to convince Mason Brooks that I was meant for this job. It was right there in his eyes when I'd started telling him my ideas. I had a million of them. Looking at my background at first glance it didn't look like I should fit, but I'd been working productions for so long in the drama department that I was a pro at problem solving. And selling the reason why anyone should see the plays I was in.

Yes, part of me missed the stage, but the thrill of acting was so entwined with Pierre, it had lost a lot of its spark.

My hand immediately slipped under my belly as we went down the stairs. Now I had this new spark that needed me.

Almost as much as I needed him or her. Though I was pretty sure the baby was a her. I couldn't even say why, but

something about the baby felt a lot like me.

And we'd be okay together, dammit. No matter what I had to do.

Even if it meant I strapped this kid to my chest while I planned the best parties in this damn town.

We reached the bottom step, and I stilled Mason before we went out the side door to the dock. "Look, I know this isn't the most ideal situation for either one of us, but give me a chance, okay?"

Mason's deep blue eyes were so serious. The laughter from before was gone, and in its place was wariness.

Before he could answer me, I gave him my brightest smile. "Let's just go talk for a few."

"I have a feeling that smile gets you what you want a whole lot."

I shrugged. "Not gonna lie. My charm is one of my best assets, but it also works in your favor. Did you know I talked a company into sponsoring my entire production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* as a junior in college?"

"I'm sure that's impressive."

"The entire show. Have you ever looked at a playbill? There's usually a lot of sponsors. And I did it on a shoestring budget. Myself, Mr. Brooks. Without anyone's help because the cast was filled with a bunch of idiot college students who were more excited to smoke up and drink than to figure out the specifics of production."

"And you weren't?"

I moved in front of him to stare into his eyes. To make him hear exactly what I was saying. Because a play was obviously not in his wheelhouse, but juggling all the moving parts of paying for the production could be easily slotted into things he could understand.

Just spit it out, Em.

“I may look like someone who is more at home enjoying a party than planning it, but I can assure you I excel at planning, executing, and juggling a production staff of fifty people. I was made for this job.”

“And why aren’t you in the city trying to do that on Broadway?”

I pointed to my stomach. “My former fiancé turned out to be a less than standup guy. And you know what? I’m damn good at pivoting.”

A sharp pain radiated up my back and around my belly and it took everything inside of me not to grab onto Mason. I needed to make him see just how good I’d be for him and this restaurant.

Just hold on, Bean.

Mason narrowed his eyes. “Are you all right?”

I rubbed the side of my belly. “Just this little future soccer player is using my ribs for practice.”

He winced. “Do you want to sit down?”

“Nope. I want to see the boat.”

“Are you sure? It’s really hot out there.” He looked over at the busy dining room and I could feel all the gazes glued to us.

I shook my hair back. “I want a closer look at the barge. It was very impressive when I drove in today.”

“You drove?”

I laughed. “How else would I come here for the interview?”

He glanced down at my belly. “Mom van?”

“Not yet. Once you give me this job, I’ll be looking into that.”

He huffed out a laugh. “You are persistent.”

“You’ll want someone like me taking care of all those parties you mentioned. I’m a terrier.”

“I’d say terror,” he muttered.

“I heard that.”

“I didn’t hide it.” He opened the door. “After you.”

I sailed through the door and the warm blast of air nearly knocked me off my feet. It was barely a week into May and the temperatures were already skyrocketing. The water shimmered in the sun and a wash of sweat drenched my back.

Good thing the wild pattern of my dress would hide it.

I marched my way over to the dock and heard Mason double-time it behind me to catch up.

The Mason Jar II was stunning. Freshly painted in white and deep hunter green, the three levels of the barge were prime for big parties or perfect to spread out for more elegant affairs.

A mural of a tree with mason jars hanging from the branches in varying stages of light was open and inviting. Fairy lights gave the hyper-realistic illustration an ethereal glow.

“Who’s the artist?”

“A husband-and-wife team from Kensington Square.” He came closer and I could feel the warmth of him behind me. Or maybe it was the pregnancy hot flashes. Either way, it spurred me forward to the catwalk.

I nimbly walked across the thin walkway.

“Whoa. Wait.” He reached for my waist—or what used to be my waist. He quickly backed off as I got on board. “Sorry.”

“It’s all good. I appreciate that there are still people who have a shred of chivalry.”

Much different from the men I was used to. Most notably the one who up and disappeared before I knew Bean was a little bean inside of me.

The inside of the boat was even more impressive. Mason jars made up elegant lights along each post. It was a wide-open space that could be set with tables for a romantic dinner, but right now, it was waiting, just full of possibilities.

I set my purse on the floor just inside the door then twirled around and could see people dancing under a dome of string lights. There was a bar along the short side of the boat. Forward? Aft? One or the other. There was also a discreet spiral staircase that led to the second level.

“How many people can be on the boat at once?” I asked as I peered up the wrought iron stairs. I wasn’t quite sure I could make it up there right then. But I did use the railing for support against a sudden wave of dizziness.

“You know I’m the one who’s supposed to be asking the questions, right?”

I turned back around and leaned against the wall with a grin. “I’m made for this job.”

He glanced down at my stomach. “Is that so?”

“Did you want to call Jim McHangover back for another round of interviews?”

He crossed his arms. “I have other options. Plenty of people are looking for a good job.”

“Do plenty of them have my ideas and my energy, invading bean aside?” I straightened off the wall and the twinge made me swallow a gasp. “I saw that spark in your eyes when we were brainstorming.”

“Ideas are easy. It’s the implementation I’m more worried about.”

“Fair.” I stepped forward to skim my fingertips over the bar and to use it for a little balance. “Did you know most women go home from the hospital the same day they give birth?”

“No, and that’s horrifying.”

“Boot you right out the door these days. And while I’d love to take the whole first year to hang out with my little bean, I’d actually be bored.”

“Bored?” Shock laced his voice. “Isn’t that how most women are with their kids? Like they don’t want to let them

out of their sight?” His eyebrows furrowed. “My sister-in-law will barely go to the mailbox without him.”

“Pro-tip, Ace. All women are different.”

His face went adorably red. I was trying not to notice how attractive he was. The strawberry blond hair and preppy clothes usually would turn me off. Must have been the wilding pregnancy hormones. I usually went for the artsy, esoteric, dramatic types. Not a salt-of-the-earth and stable guy who probably took his shoes off at the door and ate at the same time every day.

I was pretty sure I’d had a saltine with a Yoplait yogurt sometime this morning. Oh, and of course, the fries. I’d practically licked the plate.

Maybe that was why I was feeling off.

“Miss Hauser?”

“Em, Emma, Emmaline even, but Miss Hauser sounds too close to my mother the ma—” I cut myself off. No way did I want to tell him who my family was. Not that he would know who the Hausers were in Clintondale, but the mayor’s wife was just asking for too many questions.

And I was not going there right now.

“Your mother the...”

“Matriarch of my family. I have a big family and,” I shuddered, “that’s not me.”

He frowned at me. “Okay. Emma, then. You look a little pale.”

I waved him off. “It’s hot as hell, Mr. Brooks.”

“Right. Well, we can just go for first names for both of us. Call me Mason.” He went around the bar and reached into a cooler. “How about I show you around upstairs,” he handed me a water, “and we’ll see what we see?”

I took the water and popped the top, glugging down most of the bottle. I was so damn thirsty. I wiped my chin with the back of my hand. “That sounds like a very good plan.”

“After you, then.” He glanced down at my belly again. “I mean, maybe we shouldn’t. It’s not much different from this floor.”

“I’m fine.” I turned resolutely toward the spiral stairs. I could totally do this. If I wanted this job, I’d be climbing these stairs all the time. Probably with a baby tied to my chest in that Baby Boba wrap thingie my sister had sent me in the mail.

I could do this.

I *would* do this—I didn’t have a choice.

I shimmied up the first curve of the stairs and the railing brushed my dress like a whisper.

The fact that the whisper told me to turn around was only mildly annoying.

It was only fifteen stairs. I could do this. I got to the second curve and the pain rocketed from the back of my leg right up to my neck.

This time, I couldn’t hold back the yelp.

“Emma?”

I heard his voice as if it was a long way off. Suddenly, my legs were wet and so was my face. Mostly because the waterworks had started from every orifice evidently.

I braced myself on the railing and my legs nearly buckled.

“Not now, bean.”

I wasn’t ready. I was supposed to do this in a softly lit room in Crescent Cove’s soothing birthing center. I’d booked the suite with the magical energy that a local witch had designed.

Crystals and music and the sweetest little hand-carved crib beside the hospital bed.

Perfectly lovely.

Not *this*.

I heard a pounding as Mason rushed up the stairs.

He didn’t run away.

Distantly, I thought that was kind of nice. I wasn't sure I'd have done the same.

I gripped my belly as what I'd thought were Braxton Hicks rippled through my body.

That was a nope, judging by the moisture running down my legs.

I was in active labor.

On a boat.

On a stupid spiral staircase.

With a stranger.

Goddammit.

FIVE



“HOLY FUCK.”

I rushed up the stairs. I knew I shouldn't have let her talk me into going to the second level. Even without...*this*. Whatever this was.

It was *not* a woman giving birth on my brand new boat.

I wouldn't even let myself entertain that thought.

From instinct, I slid my hand along her back to steady her. I did not need her falling down. Not where she could slide through the slats of the stairs and break an ankle. Or worse, tumble us both down and hurt her.

Or the baby, you idiot.

I gripped her closer to me, ignoring the back of her dress drenched in sweat. How long had she been in labor?

That was ridiculous. She couldn't be in actual labor. Could she?

“When are you due?”

She turned into me, gripping my shoulder with a strength that almost buckled my own knees.

She smelled like the ocean and cinnamon at the same time. Spicy and free and somehow golden. I wasn't sure if the smell was from her hair floating all around us, or the fact that the sun was roasting us on the metal staircase, making me delirious.

Suddenly, she shrieked, and I grabbed her closer. “Hang on.”

I looked around. We were a few feet up and still had a handful of steps to go to reach the second level. I shouldn’t have let her come on the boat. Even more, I shouldn’t have let her go up the spiral stairs when there were perfectly good regular stairs off the outside deck.

Not that I really had a choice—she’d been determined to push through the interview and all that bravado was captivating as hell.

Her belly bumped into mine and I had the strongest urge to wrap myself around her to protect the two of them.

What the hell was happening?

A biological response. It had to be. Protectors ran in my family. But I hadn’t realized I also had that gene until just now.

“Let’s get you downstairs, yeah?”

“No!” Her huge blue eyes flashed as she clutched my shoulder with one hand and my arm with the other. Tears overflowed and raced down her pale cheeks. “No, I can’t move.”

“I can’t let you fall on these stairs.”

She laughed maniacally. “You just don’t want me to fall so I don’t sue you.”

The laugh surprised me. How the hell could either of us laugh at this point? Another few alarmingly large tears squeezed from her eyes and my chest tightened. Tears always gutted me. “Nope. No suing me. I just bought this boat, and I can’t have you christening it like this.”

“Christening includes sex, pal.”

“See?” I laughed and met her gaze. “Definitely don’t want to do it up with a baby first.”

The tears returned with a vengeance as her face went red and her talons sunk into my skin.

“Breathe.”

“Don’t tell me to breathe! How would you know what I need to do?!”

“I didn’t say breathe like whatever a birthing coach would say. I mean just get some oxygen. You’re bright red.”

“You try having a contraction!” she growled in a voice that would probably follow me into nightmares tonight.

I slid my hand around the back of her neck, also drenched in sweat. “Okay, just look at me and take a deep breath.” Her whole body was shaking, and I could feel her tensing again.

The rage boiled in her eyes and just as suddenly flowed out as she relaxed and her breath whooshed out. She sagged against me, and her forehead dropped to my chest. “I can’t do this here. No way. Not here. I had a plan.”

“When are you due?”

“Obviously, right now, even if it should be a few more weeks at least.” Her hand slid down to my side and dug in as another round of contractions hit. “Fuck.”

I held onto her as I looked around and tried not to panic. I was pretty sure her purse was downstairs near the door. Right now, that seemed very far away.

My brain whirled as I remembered my phone was in the restaurant on my desk plugged into the charger. Helpful. I didn’t even know where my iPad was. Did I leave it in my office? Hell.

It was dead, just like my phone. Both on my charging dock. Just perfect.

I gathered her closer as she sagged against me. “These are coming really fast.”

“I think I’ve been in labor for a while.” She buried her face in my neck. “I just thought they were Braxton Hicks. I’ve already gone into the birthing center twice and they kept telling me I wasn’t ready.”

She was shuddering against me, and I’d never felt more helpless in my whole damn life.

“It’s okay. We’re going to figure this out.”

She peered up at me. “What? You going to birth this baby for me, Ace?”

I laughed. “Definitely not. But I’m not going anywhere. But while we’re between contractions, how about we try to get back down the stairs?”

She squeezed her eyes shut as she shook her head. “Nope. No way.” She curled her arms under mine and held on like a damn monkey. “Nope. I can’t get down all those steps. I’m already dizzy.”

“I’ll help. I can...carry you.”

Emma leaned back and gave me a deadpan face. “Yeah. Okay. Do you see all of this? No. And there’s no way you’re tossing me over your shoulder.”

“Right.” I looked around and hoped to see someone come out of the restaurant. Maybe I could flag someone down.

But it was ninety-freaking-five degrees and I’d told everyone to keep people off the patios today. And everyone was way too busy in there to pay attention to how long we’d been gone.

“Okay.” I blew out a breath. “What about going up then? We only have a few stairs.”

She turned and saw that we only had five stairs to go. She nodded slowly. “Okay. I can try.”

“That’s my girl.” When she frowned at me, I cleared my throat. “Then I can go down and get your phone out of your purse.”

She nodded. “Okay. Okay, that’s good.”

“Right.” I released the back of her neck to grip her hips. We both slipped a little and I caught her closer to me. She was all softness and sea-scented and my brain was scrambled by the need to help her and run at the same time.

I wasn’t built for this.

Why couldn't this have happened while my brother was here?

He always seemed to know what to do.

"I'm sorry." Her voice was watery with tears. "My water broke on the stairs."

"It's okay. It's just biology and I've got a power washer."

She burst out with a sob and a laugh at the same time. "Gee, thanks."

I shrugged. "Just sayin'." I shuffled slowly so that I could get my feet right on the stairs so I could get up to the next. Before I could get myself situated, she braced again.

"Mason."

"I gotcha. I'm not letting go."

"Okay." Her whole body shuddered and her knees buckled.

I held her tight. Visions of us both going down the stairs in a tumble of blood and broken bones as well as her precious cargo had me shaking just as hard.

When she sagged against me again, I relaxed slightly. "How long did you say you were in labor?"

"I don't know. Maybe since this morning."

"Dear God." I squared my shoulders. "First baby?"

"Um, obviously."

"How would I know?"

"I'll tell you right now, I wouldn't be doing this a second time if I knew it felt like this, buddy."

"Can't blame you." First babies generally took the longest to come—at least from the research I'd done as an uncle. I'd been so nervous being around my brother's fiancée, I had read the baby books with him. That and I wanted to be prepared for anything.

I huffed out a laugh. "Okay. Want to try to get up the stairs?"

She nodded.

I managed to turn us around so I could back my way up a step. She clutched my hands, and I slowly drew her forward. “Eyes on me, Emma.”

“Right. Not on the holes in your steps. They’re stupid, by the way.”

“I thought they were cool until this very moment.”

She took a shaky step up and I officially lost circulation in my hands. But she was moving, and that was all that mattered to me right now.

I’d deal with the crushed bones after...

What?

A freaking baby was born on my boat?

I would *not* think about that right now or I’d be the one hyperventilating.

“You’re doing great.”

“Don’t patronize me. I’m dripping God knows what under this dress and a baby is trying to flip my insides to my outsides.”

I wasn’t sure if the fact that what she said made sense should terrify me or astound me.

And I didn’t want to think about anything regarding her insides right now. Or helping her birth this baby. I needed to get her upstairs and call a freaking ambulance.

Now.

“Just two more. You can do this.”

“I can’t do this. I didn’t even get to the pushing part and I’m ready to bail.”

“No! No pushing. Dear God. You’re going to get up those last two stairs and I’m going to set you up with the best water view you’ve ever seen. Then I’m going to get a real doctor here to help you. Or at least a paramedic that knows what the fuck they’re doing.”

“Okay. That sounds good. Water is good. Water is soothing.”

“Right? Can you hear the water lapping out there?”

“No. I can’t hear anything over the roaring in my ears.”

I laughed and hoped it didn’t sound as unhinged as it did in my head. Her sparkly pink shoes peeked from underneath her long dress and then we were up on the last step.

I didn’t think. I just swooped her up into my arms and strode across the open deck of the second floor to the bench seat beside the water view.

She clutched my shoulder and the nails of her other hand dug into the front of my chest, ripping out a handful of hair under the shirt. “Don’t drop me.”

“I’m not going to drop you. You’re not even heavy.”

Lies. She was very heavy and cumbersome, but I didn’t want her to do something insane like lay down in the middle of the floor and push that thing out of her.

Did it work that way? No. Even I knew that. But it didn’t stop my overactive imagination from going into hyperdrive.

I only grunted slightly as I set her down on the bench.

Probably manfully—maybe.

Her frown said no, but then she was arching her back and going into a full-on contraction and it didn’t really matter what she thought of me. We were going to get her through this hopefully before the damn ambulance came.

I got behind her shoulders and held onto her as she screamed out a string of slashing French. At least I was pretty sure it was French. I barely spoke any token Spanish.

“I don’t know what you’re saying, but let it out, honey.”

Honey?

Crap. Not sure where *that* had come from.

“I’m going to kill him for doing this to me.” Suddenly, she sagged against me.

Him? It had to be the baby's father. "Is there someone you want me to call? The dad?"

"No!" She reached behind her to grab at me. "No, he isn't part of this."

"Okay." I found myself smoothing my hand down her hair. "It's okay. We don't need to call him, but there has to be someone."

"Sorry." She laughed and it came out more like a sob. "I know I sound crazy."

"Just overwhelmed. I can't imagine what you're feeling."

"I got myself into this mess, and I'm the one who has to deal with it."

It sounded like there was more to the story. "But you have family, right?"

She got quiet and turned her head to look at me.

Damn, those huge blue eyes. She already looked exhausted, but she was excruciatingly beautiful as well. And she seemed insanely young too. "We're in this together." I cleared my throat. "At least until you let me go to get your phone."

"Don't go. Just...for a minute. I—"

"It's okay." I wiggled back a little to brace my back on the post and opened my legs to let her use me for support. I remembered seeing something about this position in the baby books I'd read by the dozen. Mostly to ease my brother's mind when Gina had been pregnant. And my own nightmares about being stranded with her while Jared was on shift. "Ease back against me like I'm one of those huge teddy bears from the fair."

She laughed.

"We'll just look out on the water and calm things down, okay?"

She nodded and relaxed a little.

The sun bounced off the water, making the swells of the waves sparkle and flash.

“Distract me.” She shifted against me, obviously uncomfortable. “What made you buy this place?”

“*That.*” I absently stroked her arms which were as soft as the water we were looking at. “My older brother lives on this lake too. Not too far from my restaurant. He’s also the Chief of the CCPD.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah. I grew up nearby. Back when Crescent Cove was just a nearby sleepy town with a few shops. My father has a greenhouse and little plant shop on the edge of town. There wasn’t a damn thing to do here. I honestly didn’t think I’d ever come back.”

Her fingers flexed on my thigh as the contractions started up again. “Keep talking. Distract me.”

“Right. I left because small town life was too boring.”

“Me too. My hometown is even smaller,” she said with a gasp. She gripped the window ledge with her other hand and nearly levered herself up and off me.

I didn’t know where to put my hands.

“Feels like this is gonna get really crazy, Mason.”

She arched and I grabbed her before she rolled off the bench. “I’m getting that.” I gripped her hips to hold her against me, squeezing her with my inner thighs to keep her braced.

“Tell me about the restaurant!” Her voice was practically a growl.

“Okay. I stood on that shore right there. The very place that I built the dock. The place had a little shack that sold fish fries and the old man wanted to sell.”

“This is not a shack.” Her voice was wild and an octave away from crazy.

“Not anymore. Not after I bought the land.” Old Man Landis didn’t want to sell to just anyone. He’d made me

promise him that I wouldn't sell to Maitland Enterprises no matter what they offered me. Me and Xavier Hastings bought it. Not that he wanted many people to know that. I couldn't afford it on my own. I had a sizable nest egg from working overseas. I worked cruise ships and yachts, hell, I'd even been a flight attendant for a while. Once I got the wanderlust out of my blood, I realized that all I really wanted was home."

"I really like your restaurant." She gritted her teeth and breathed out a keening cry that made my teeth sing. "And now I'm here to make you even more awesome. I'm going to make this boat awesome."

She was going to give me a heart attack, that was for certain. "Emma..."

"I am. You'll see." She dug her nails into my thigh. "I drove into your parking lot and just felt it. That I was meant to be here. Then I stepped out of my station wagon and just knew this was supposed to be my place."

I recognized the feeling. I'd felt the zing of knowing when I'd stood on the lake, but the timing could not be worse. But right now, she wasn't thinking straight. Pain made people crazy. "Did you say station wagon?"

She laughed. "I need a seat for a baby, right? And I'm not about that minivan life. But I can rock out a station wagon with wood paneling."

I laughed. "Do they even make those anymore?"

"Nope. But I stole my mom's old wagon when I left. It's still cherry because my dad is ridiculous and loves her like crazy." She curled forward and panted. "It handles like a hearse, but it's mine." And suddenly, as with every other contraction, she just dropped against me.

"I don't want to know why you know how a hearse handles."

She laughed and laughed, turning onto her side to lean against my chest. "No, you definitely don't. Did I mention I come from a small town?"

“I think you did.” I stroked her sweaty hair. She was getting far too close to this baby actually coming. I didn’t even want to think about what was going on under her dress right now. Was she already crowning?

Nope.

I couldn’t handle that.

“I really have to call the ambulance, Emma.”

She nodded and laid her cheek against me, her other hand curved around her belly. “In a minute. I’m just so tired.”

“I know, but we need help.”

I would never forget my freaking cell phone ever again.

She sniffled. “I’m scared.”

My heart twisted in my chest. “Are you sure I can’t call someone for you?”

She was quiet as she traced the pattern of my shirt with her fingertip. “If I call my family, they’ll take over. They’ll take me home and I’m afraid I’ll be weak enough to let them. I’m just tired.”

“I have a feeling you’re anything but weak, Emmaline Hauser.”

She made a little hiccup of a sob as she snuggled into me. “Thanks.”

It had to be the adrenaline and the palpable fear coming off of her, but I didn’t want to let her go. “I’m sure they just want to be there for you.”

“You don’t know them.” She tipped her head up and those lake blue eyes sparkled with tears.

I frowned. “Are you afraid—”

“No. God, no.” Her eyes crinkled at the corners and the tears flowed into a laugh. “They’re just overwhelming and chaotic.” She sniffled. “But my brother Clint is nearby. I can call him.”

“Okay. I just don’t want you to be alone.” It hollowed me out just thinking about it. “I’m just going to have you sit up for one second.” I helped ease her upright.

She pressed her lips together until they were white at the edges. Her golden hair was fuzzing around her face with the heat of the day and the sweat of full-on labor. Her cheeks were red flags, and her eyes were too bright. But bravery was there under the fear.

“I’ll be right back.”

She nodded and I quickly got up, careful to not knock her off the bench. I ran across the deck and nearly skidded down the damn stairs.

I found her purse and dug deep into the cavernous pockets until I found a sparkly pink case. Thank God it was an iPhone. I hit the power button until the emergency option came up.

“911, what’s your emergency?”

“I need an ambulance at The Mason Jar on Crescent Lake Road.” I pounded back up the steps.

“What’s the emergency?”

“I have a woman in active labor.”

I heard the clacking of keys before it went suspiciously silent. “Active?”

“Yes. And we’re on a damn boat and I have no way to get her off.”

“A boat? Are you on the actual water?”

“We’re docked, but yes. We were...you know what? It’s too much to explain. But she’s on the second floor of my boat.”

“I see.” The clacking resumed and she asked me a few more questions about the address and where the boat was located.

By the time I got back upstairs, I found Emma pacing and blowing out long, slow breaths as she walked in circles.

“What are you doing?”

She braced her hands on the small of her back as she paced. “I don’t know. I just felt like I had to move.”

“Mr. Brooks?”

“I’m here.”

“Do you want me to stay on the phone with you?”

“No. How long for the ambulance?”

“Looks like it will be there within eleven minutes.”

“Eleven?” That seemed like an eternity.

“Do you know how many centimeters she’s dilated?”

“God, no.”

“Okay. Well, they’ll be there as soon as possible. Be on the lookout for them.”

“Yeah. Okay, thanks.” I stuffed her phone into my pocket.

She’d kicked her shoes off and was waddling and singing.

“Are you okay?”

“Of course, I’m not okay. I’m going to give birth on a boat during my interview. You’re giving me the job, by the way.”

“I...we’ll discuss that later.”

“No.” She whirled around and pointed at me. “You know I’m perfect for this job, we just have to figure out the logistics. I’m young and very healthy. You should see what kind of things I’ve been doing with pilates to make sure this body is prime after the baby.”

“I don’t think we need to worry about that right now.” I backed up a step.

“I’m going to be active and show this baby how awesome life is no matter how she started in this world. I’m going to show her that I’m a good mama.”

Oh, shit. The waterworks were starting again. “I’m sure you’re going to be amazing. How about we call your brother now?”

“No. Tell me you’re hiring me.”

“Emma, it’s not that easy. I have a huge summer planned and you need time to recover after a baby. Once you have him or her, you’ll see. You’ll want to spend time with them and then we can—”

“No. I need this job. I need to show my family that I’m not a complete fuck-up. I need to show this little bean that I’m ready for him or her too.”

Panic licked at my brain. I knew all too well what it was like to live in the shadow of family. To be the one who never amounted to much until I found my space.

Until The Mason Jar.

She bent over at the waist and screamed.

I rushed over to her. “Okay. Okay, we’ll figure it out. Just don’t scream. And please wait ten more minutes ish to have this baby.”

Don’t make me help you give birth.

Please.

“Oh, God. That was a big one.” Her hair was plastered to her temples. “It’s so hot in here.”

It was, even though I was freaking out too much to pay attention. I should have grabbed her another water. Was she allowed to have water? Why did I remember something about ice chips?

“I swear, this baby wants to make a dramatic entry into this world.”

I helped her straighten up and walked her backwards. “Please don’t.”

She sat on the edge of the bench and braced her elbows on her knees with her legs wide open. Thank God that dress was so oversized and long. I couldn’t handle much more of this.

Definitely not seeing what was under there.

Okay, it really was hot in here. Maybe I needed to put my head between my knees too.

“You okay, Ace?”

“Me?” I looked up and met her gaze.

She threw a huge smile at me. “Looking a little pale. I’m a little past helping you off the floor.”

“I’m good.” I stood and went to look out at the other side of the boat to where the parking lot was. It was busy with plenty of cars and another goddamn bus, but no ambulance.

I spun back around and pulled her phone out of my pocket. “What’s your code? Or do you want to call him?”

“Who?”

“Your brother.”

“Oh, right. No—you better call. If he hears me like this, he’ll go apoplectic.”

Oh, like I was? Sure.

“Code?”

“272727.”

I tapped it in and scrolled her contacts. “I don’t see a Clint.”

She started rocking. “Sparky.”

“Sparky?”

“Yeah, don’t ask.” She panted and tried not to yell.

God, it was getting worse. I spun around as the person on the other end picked up.

“Hello? Is it time? Where are you?”

“Hi. Um, this is Mason Brooks. I have your sist—”

“Is she okay?” The voice was authoritative and brisk. “Where is she?”

“She’s fine, but I think the baby is coming. She’s with me at my restaurant—actually, my boat.”

“Boat? What the fuck is she doing on a boat? You let an almost nine months pregnant woman on your boat?”

I pulled the phone away from my ear. “Look, it was a weird situation. She was interviewing for a job. It’s not like a sailboat or anything.”

“Interviewing? She’s nine months pregnant!”

“Maybe tell her that. I was as surprised as you were.”

Clint took a deep breath. “Sorry. My sister is impulsive to say the least. Just tell me where you are.”

“I just called an ambulance. She’s been in active labor for a while from what we can tell.”

“Active? Are you sure?”

“Pretty sure since she’s currently having contractions on my boat.”

“Let me talk to her.”

I turned around to face her and she shook her head as her face went bright red. Yeah, probably not a great idea. “Um. How far away are you from Crescent Cove? Crescent Lake, more specifically.”

“Twenty minutes.”

I honestly didn’t know if we’d last that long, but babies had their own timetable.

“I’ll text you a pin.”

“Right. Okay.” I could hear him moving around and the clink of keys, the slamming of a door and then he was gone.

I hurriedly sent him a text with my exact address and stuffed her phone back in my pocket just in time to have her spring off the seat.

“Gotta walk!”

I gently took her elbow to help her with balance as we paced around the circumference of the deck. I should probably call the restaurant, but I didn’t want Gillian to make a freaking

scene. It would be bad enough when they spotted the ambulance in the parking lot.

I just kept pacing with Emma and cursed every minute of the ten we had to wait.

It had to be less than ten at this point. Five? Whatever it was, it was too long.

Baby on board suddenly sounded like a threat.

SIX



PAIN MADE THINGS CLEAR AND HAZY AT THE SAME TIME.

The crystal clarity of voices came in like a bullhorn and then out like I was wrapped in batting, then behind soundproof glass.

I could only focus on walking off the pain. A sense of urgency propelled me forward, one foot in front of the other. I'd thought I was ready for this baby.

I'd built the bassinet and changing table that took over the corner of my bedroom. The baby would sleep next to me for the first few months so it was smarter to just keep all the things with me.

Not like I'd be worried about bedroom boom boom for a good long while. It was going to be me and bean for the foreseeable future. Just the idea of letting anyone into my life right now was too overwhelming. I had to take care of us and that was about all I could focus on.

I'd quietly set aside the trust money from my grandparents as a cushion, but it pretty much covered the birthing center room and left me a little extra for emergencies. It wasn't a lot of money. My family might have been considered royalty in our tiny town of Clintondale, but it wasn't a never-ending vat of money. Especially since it was my family's money, not mine.

My father wasn't one for handouts.

However, I was determined to take care of my kid on my own. That meant I needed to find a job. *This* job.

It was made for me. And was flexible enough for me to take care of bean.

I felt it in my bones.

As soon as I'd pulled into the parking lot, I knew. The lake air, the breeze off the water, even the ducks. It felt like stepping into a perfectly lived-in sweater.

Some might think I was silly to live my life according to feelings and vibes, but it had never steered me wrong. I knew it when Pierre, my idiot ex-fiancé, cheated on me. I knew when a play was going to bomb. I even knew when a production would be a success.

It wasn't a question—at least not to me.

Same as I knew me and bean were going to make it.

In Crescent Cove of all places, but we'd fit right in with this baby crazy town.

“Thank God.” Mason urged me over to the other side of the boat so we could see the parking lot.

The ambulance had its lights on, but no siren. It was still enough to draw a crowd. Just as the stupidly hot paramedic jumped out of the back, another contraction came on. This one was even stronger than the others.

“I've got you. Let's keep you in the shade, huh? I swear, it's gotten hotter in the last few minutes.”

“Hottest part of the day is after noon,” I said weakly as the contraction abated. “Do you see my brother?”

“Not yet.” Mason was scoping out the parking lot, but his strong arms kept me propped up.

I leaned into his chest and the citrusy spice of him soothed something deep inside of me. I shouldn't be leaning on him. He was a near stranger. Heck, he was going to be my boss. There was no way I wasn't getting this job.

I might be delusional about it, but the minute we'd bonded over ideas, I'd felt the connection. With this place and with the man.

Mason waved to the paramedics. A sharply attractive woman bolted from the patio and down the steps toward the dock.

He swore.

“What? Is that your girlfriend?”

Even asking that made something shift inside of me—and for once, it wasn’t the baby.

“Definitely not. But she doesn’t know the meaning of cool, calm, and collected.”

“Neither do I.”

He grinned down at me. “Miss Hauser, you definitely have brought drama to my door.”

I shrugged. “That’s what I do. Never boring though.” The lightning bolt of pain returned and he eased me down on the bench seat.

“Okay, let’s try that breathing thing, okay? You are so red.” He pushed my hair back from my face.

“It’s so hot on this boat. You best add in some fans or something.”

“I think you’re right.” His denim blue eyes met mine. “In and slowly out, yeah?”

“What makes you know all this stuff?”

“My brother just had a baby.”

“Your brother, huh?” I laughed and repressed the shout bubbling up in my throat.

“Okay, smart ass. My soon to be sister-in-law. And my brother was never good at homework.”

“You were?” I squeezed his hands and held my breath against the next wave.

“Breathe, Emma.”

I shut my eyes and did just that. It didn’t really help, but then again, nothing would except having this baby.

“Actually, I was a great student. When it was something I wanted to learn about.”

My eyes popped open. “And babies interest you?”

“More like knowing all the scenarios.”

“Was this one in the book?”

“No, it was not.”

“I do like to be an original.”

Mason cupped my cheek for a moment. “No worries there.” He stood up. “Hey, guys there’s a set of stairs on the end of the boat.”

“And why didn’t we go up those stairs?”

He grinned down at me. “Because you are headstrong.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” I braced as another contraction came on. They were just too close together at this point.

Maybe I *was* going to have this baby on the boat.

He crouched in front of me. “Okay. You just have to hold on a little longer.”

“Not sure that’s happening, Ace. Think this baby wants a water birth.”

The clatter of the stretcher and heavy booted feet dented the wavy streams of heat around Mason’s face.

Suddenly, his hands came up to cup my face. “Oh, hey. Stay with me.”

I pushed his hands away. “So hot.”

“Miss?”

I closed my eyes at the new voice. I pushed at Mason and then pulled his hand to rest on my belly as I screamed.

“Okay, sir—Mason, right?”

“Yes.” Mason answered.

“We need you to move aside so we can—”

“No!” Panic blasted from my chest. “No, don’t go. Please don’t go.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” Mason laced his hands with mine over my distended belly. “I’m just going to sit next to you, okay?”

“Okay.”

The panic ebbed a little as the contraction backed off like a wave on the beach. I sagged against him, resting my head on his shoulder.

The stupidly attractive paramedic knelt in front of me. His dark blue uniform had a zillion pockets full to the brim with things I couldn’t name. Among them was a stethoscope. “Okay, what’s your name?”

“Her name is Emma,” Mason answered for me.

“Okay, Emma. My name is Ben. I need to take a look at you. See what we’re working with.”

“I knew someone would have to get under this dress eventually. I’m sorry in advance.”

The hot EMT grinned at me. “A sense of humor. Good. That’s what we need on a day like this. Hot one, right?” He waved over someone else. “Okay, Emma. We’re going to get you on the stretcher, okay?”

“No. I don’t think that’s gonna happen. I’m pretty sure we’re beyond you putting me up on that even with all those muscles.”

“Okay. Is it okay if my partner comes over? She’s done plenty of births.”

“I’ve heard this town is a little crazy.”

Ben laughed. “You aren’t kidding. Okay, Lana is going to take over for me.”

“Okay.”

I felt a little better about a woman seeing the carnage, but only a little. I was pretty sure no amount of pilates was going to save me after these contractions.

“Well, hey there.” A blond with a high ponytail appeared in front of me. “Any idea how close the contractions are?” She rolled my dress up to my knees.

I shook my head. “It feels like they’re here more than they’re not.”

“Okay.” She glanced at Mason. “How you doin’, Dad?”

Mason swallowed hard. “I’m not the father.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“The contractions are definitely coming at three minutes or less. I think it’s closer to two.”

“Oh.” Lana lost her smile as she glanced over her shoulder. “Okay, Ben, we’ll need that gurney.”

“I can’t go down those stairs.” I shook my head and held onto Mason.

“I’m just going to put you on the gurney so I can get you more comfortable. We can get it down closer to the floor, okay?”

Another wave of pain made Lana fade into a dark spot. I must have screamed, because Mason was hanging onto my hand as I resurfaced. His face was so serious and intent.

“Okay, that was a big one.” Lana was murmuring something to Ben and I couldn’t hear the words around the fuzz in my head. “Let’s hustle—as much as we can, mama. Okay?”

“Mama.” I swallowed down a lump. “I’m gonna be one of those really soon.”

“Well, you never know when it comes to babies. Sometimes they don’t like to come as fast as we think they are.”

I could hear the lie in her voice. Everything inside of me was shouting push and there was no amount of stalling I could do to stop it.

Mason stiffened next to me.

“Jesus.” I heard the deep voice behind the paramedic.

“What’s happening? Is that my brother?” Hope flooded me, but I also didn’t want Mason to go anywhere.

“No. That’s my brother actually. When I called 911, they must have sent out a cop as well.”

“Oh great. Both Brooks’ boys are going to see my situation.”

“Situation?” He laughed and held onto my hand as I screeched. “Oh, here we go again.”

I arched my back. “Okay, bean. It’s time to come out. I’m not waiting anymore.”

“Not sure it works that way,” Mason muttered.

Suddenly, Ben and Lana were on either side of me and I was lifted off the bench and set on the gurney. There was a flurry of activity as they put a pressure cuff on me. Next thing I knew, Lana was cutting off my bike shorts.

Modesty flew out the window as latex covered hands checked me out.

“Mason?”

“I’m here.” He crouched behind me on the gurney. “We got this far. I’m not going anywhere.”

Lana gave me a grim smile. “Well, you were right. That baby is crowning.”

“Oh, God.” I tried to get up on my elbows.

“Okay, just focus on me. We’re gonna do this together.”

“Can you take some of the contractions?” I asked on a weak laugh.

“Unfortunately, no.”

“And drugs are a no go, huh?”

“We’re well beyond drugs, not that I am allowed to give them to you anyway.”

“Dammit.” I wheezed out a laugh.

“Okay, this time when the contraction comes, I want you to push, okay? You’re going to use it to push the baby out.”

I tried not to think about the disaster zone the poor EMT had to deal with. I tried not to think about the Chief of Police being right there, or the fact that I was doing this two weeks early.

I tried not to think about anything other than getting bean out into the world safe and sound.

I bore down and Mason hooked his arms under mine to support me. I crunched forward and the pressure seemed like it was going to rip me into two.

“Okay, that’s good. We’re going to slow down.”

“No. No. It’s gotta come out.”

“I know, Emma. I just need to turn our little guy or girl. Do we know which it is?”

“No.” I wanted to push. It took everything in me to stop.

“Okay. It’s going to be a surprise for everyone.” Lana cupped my knee. “Here we go.”

I closed my eyes as my brother’s voice came from outside of the boat. The most righteous scream came followed by a howl of a baby’s cry.

“Girl!” Lana laughed. “It’s a girl.”

“Let me see her. Please.”

“Just one second.”

It felt like an eternity. My little girl. My little bean was screaming for me.

“Em?”

My brother’s voice came from the back of the boat. But nothing was as important as the baby. My baby.

I held out my arms as Lana wrapped my tiny little girl into a white towel and set her on my chest. “Great job, Mama.”

“Hi.” I sniffled. “Hi, little bean.” My hands shook as I cupped her head.

“Wow.” Mason’s voice was reverent and soft behind me. He pushed my hair over my shoulder. “Wow.”

“Yeah. Wow almost covers it.” Her little fingers curled around my forefinger as I cuddled her close.

I was shaking and my body felt like I’d been battered, but she was here.

I turned to Mason. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. You did all the work. And she’s beautiful.”

I sobbed out a laugh. “Yeah, she is.”

So tiny.

Lana and Ben were bustling around me taking vitals, but I couldn’t keep my eyes off of my baby.

“Can I see her?”

“Yep. Is this Dad?”

“No,” I said softly. “That’s my brother.” I glanced up and saw Clint’s shocked face. “How’s it going, Uncle Clint?”

“You just took fifteen years off my life, Em.” He knelt beside my gurney and tugged the towel off my baby’s head. “Hello there.” Clint’s voice was thick. “All the fingers, toes, feet and good stuff?”

“All the good stuff is accounted for,” Lana said with a laugh. “Now we gotta get Mom settled at the hospital to get checked over.”

The gurney clicked up to the correct height and started rolling. I looked over at Mason. “Thank you.”

“She’s okay?” Mason asked.

“I’m okay,” I answered him. “Promise. And I’ll be ready to work really soon.”

Mason raked his fingers through his hair. “Don’t worry about that part. Just take care of the kid.”

“You’re giving me that job,” I shouted as we got to the end of the boat.

I glanced over at Mason who had his fingers laced behind his neck and his mouth was still a little slack from shock.

“What job?” Clint asked from beside me.

“I’m going to be the entertainment coordinator for The Mason Jar II Electric Bugaloo.”

“Electric what?”

I laughed. “Never mind.”

“Em, you just had a baby. You’re not working anywhere.”

“Watch me.” I brushed my fingertip over the cap of my baby’s dark hair. Just figured that she’d get her father’s hair.

But that didn’t matter, she was whole and perfect and here.

That was the most important part.

SEVEN



“MASON, ARE YOU LISTENING TO ME?”

I turned away from the patio doorway. Normally, I’d be happily sneaking a peek at the raspberry and orange-streaked sunset on my lake with The Mason Jar II taking center stage, but all I could picture was Emmaline Hauser.

“What? Sorry.” I sighed. It had been a week since the high stress surprise baby delivery had blown my brain apart. Concentrating had not been my strong suit ever since.

“Do you want me to put the invitations on your desk?” Rami was holding a box.

“No, that’s okay. I’ll take them.” I took them from her. “Aren’t you off shift?”

“Yeah, I saw the box in the vestibule and figured I’d snag it before someone trampled it.”

That wasn’t like our usual mail person. Then again, I had been off my stride with all my usual things this week. Visiting customers, speaking with vendors, even talking to our delivery people—all the things that I loved about my job I’d been avoiding.

Because I couldn’t get my head wrapped around the fact that I’d actually been there as a baby had been born. And then just...nothing.

No updates.

No word from anyone.

I knew almost everyone in this damn town, but no one who overlapped with her.

“Are you okay, Mase?”

“Yeah.” I forced myself to smile at Rami. To act normal. I couldn’t continue to be this distracted. “Interviews not going well this week.”

“Sure that’s all it is?”

She’d been here when half the restaurant had poured out to see why the ambulance had shown up. Small town life was rife with gossip, and everyone was in each other’s business. Most of the time it wasn’t malicious thankfully, but it had spread far and wide that a baby had been born at The Mason Jar.

More specifically on my brand-new boat.

And while the baby factor was the stuff of legend, the joke about our water was now tenfold since a baby had been born directly on the lake.

But in all of that, no friggin’ details.

You could call her.

You have her details.

“Evidently, finding a party planner slash entertainment coordinator is harder than I thought.”

I’d interviewed two from nearby Kensington Square, and while they were right for the job on paper, there’d been no spark.

Not like Emmaline Hauser.

I couldn’t count on her, no matter what she said. She had a newborn to worry about, not summertime parties.

And I still had to get the details ironed out for my brother’s wedding. I didn’t have time to dwell on this stuff anymore.

“You know Gillian is just dying to do it.”

“I know.” I raked my fingers through my hair. “Believe me, I know.”

Gillian was the head of my hostesses and scheduling. She'd dipped her toes into planning for our staff Christmas party and it had been less than amazing.

Her personality was abrasive at the best of times and working with vendors and guests required a lot of finesse. Gillian's version of finesse was a flaming baseball bat followed by a RSVP of sharp knives.

I'd had to promise two of my suppliers I'd never sic her on them again.

The idea of her taking over The Mason Jar II left me in a cold sweat, but she might be my only option until I found someone else.

"You sure you don't want to try your hand at it?"

Rami shook her head. "No way. My kiddo has swim camp this summer. I can't even pick up extra shifts."

Which was also the worst thing about summer. A lot of my waitstaff had summer plans and juggling the schedule was definitely Gillian's strength. It might not be glamorous, but she was damn good at it.

"Well, have a good night. If any of your friends are looking for some part-time work, it's going to be a busy summer. We could use the help."

"I'll check in with the moms. Or the dads for that matter."

"We'll take 'em both."

"Okay. Hey, if you're still worried about Emma, you can always send her some flowers. And a new mom basket of goodies. We definitely don't want to think about cooking that first month. Especially since we're the food source most of the time."

"Who said I was worried about Miss Hauser?"

"You staring out at the lake like you're in a Keanu Reeves and Sandra Bullock movie."

"I am not."

"Sure you're not."

Annoyed that she was right, I grunted. “The only good movie with those two together is *Speed*.”

Rami snickered. “You need to add a few romance movies to your repertoire.”

“Why?”

“The fact that you’re asking that is the problem.” She tapped my cheek lightly. “Night, boss.”

“Night, Rami.”

I headed back to my office before someone else wanted something from me.

Okay, so romance hadn’t been high on my list of things to do lately. Ever since I’d moved back to Crescent Cove, I’d been running on coffee and adrenaline. I didn’t even get to enjoy a beer too often.

Occasionally with my brother, but now that he had a family, he was more interested in going home to Gina and the babies than lingering with a beer like we used to do.

Juggling the renovations, and now the boat, left little time for extracurricular fun.

I was too damn tired to even care about getting a woman under me these days. Then again, I hadn’t been interested in any in longer than I cared to admit.

Getting The Mason Jar stable and making money had been more important. Then I’d just fallen into routine.

Never thought I’d want that in my whole damn life, but now here I was.

I closed myself into my office and checked emails. Nothing was pressing there. Unfortunately, that also meant no one had replied to my ads. Disgusted, I lost myself in billing and payroll for an hour.

Happily, there was still money left over after that. The city-wide swap meet and flea market had definitely helped with revenue on my side.

From what I'd heard, the whole town had been overrun with foot traffic. The mayor had been so pleased, she'd set up another one for the fall season.

I'd be ready for that one and had marked it on my calendar for better coverage.

It was ever the learning curve to run a business in a town exploding with people. My father had given me his version of side eye when I'd bought the property for the restaurant.

He was a quiet man, but he was also risk averse. Brooks' Greenery had been a staple in Crescent Cove before the town had exploded. He knew the struggles of owning a business and was happy in the same little shop he'd been in since I'd been a kid.

I'd spent many a shift behind the counter through my teen years yearning for more—and here I was, back in this town with a place of my own.

A sharp rap on my door, dragged me out of the past. "Yeah?"

Gillian peeked her head in, her icy blue eyes lined in dark kohl that made them look otherworldly. Her gaze swept over me in that proprietary way that made me want to shift in my chair. "Can I talk to you?"

I resisted the urge to say no. Instead I sat back in my chair, the squeak of the springs reminding me that I needed to hit it with WD-40. "Sure."

She closed the door and sat on the edge of the desk. "Look, I know you're still looking to fill that spot for the MJ2."

I laced my fingers over my middle. "Yeah. I'm still interviewing."

"Until you find someone, why don't you let me try it?"

"We went over this, Gillian."

"I know." She folded her arms, making sure to shift them under her tight black top, showing off her chest.

I pushed back a little more and gritted my teeth when she inched closer. I nodded to the chair across from my desk. “Sit down.”

She sighed and slid off the desk, then she sat in the chair with a pout.

“I need you running the front.”

“How about I do it in addition to my shifts?”

I was still smarting from having her come in during the insanity last week. She’d terrorized Esther into working for her Friday so she could have that date she’d tried to make me jealous about. “Since when do you want to work extra?”

She rolled her eyes. “Since it’s something exciting.”

“You know it’s the planning and work of setting up these events, not actually going to the parties, right?”

“Going is the perk. Seriously, Mason. The fact that you want to do all these events this summer is the first exciting thing the Cove has done since the firefighters had a car wash.”

“That was last summer.”

“Exactly.” She slumped down in the small U-shaped chair. “Nothing happens in this town except people getting knocked up.”

I arched a brow.

“C’mon, you know it’s true. And you know what? Even beyond the baby lore of this stupid town, it’s pure fact because there’s nothing else to do but bang like freaking bunnies.”

“Gillian.”

“Don’t be a prude. I’ve been with you since this place was a shack, Mase. You used to party just as hard as the rest of us after a shift.” She sighed. “Back when you were fun.”

“Running this place takes more than slinging drinks and fried food these days.” And I was proud of that fact.

In a few years, I’d expanded from a small indoor/outdoor dining area to three floors and a double deck. I’d hired on

Henry Stone from nearby Syracuse and our cuisine went from decent surf and turf to elevated cuisine for date nights on the weekend with a family friendly menu during the week.

“Yes, I know. You know you don’t have to be all work and no play at all times.”

“When it’s important, you would be the same.”

She sat up in her chair, eyes flashing. “Oh, and I don’t find my job important?”

“I didn’t say that.”

She gripped the sides of the chair. “Pretty sure you did.”

“You know what I mean.” I was tired of dancing around her intimations about being open to dating me. She never crossed the line, but it was getting blurrier every day. “My dating life isn’t anyone’s business anyway.”

“Lack of dating life, you mean.”

“I don’t date employees, period.”

“Stupid rule.” She popped out of the chair. “Anyway, I want in on helping with MJ2.” Before I could open my mouth, she held her hand up. “You can’t do both and until you hire someone, I want to help.”

Deflated, I nodded. “Fine. I’ll need you on Friday.”

She winced. The perks of her seniority on the staff was that she was off every other Friday—which was our busiest day.

“I’ll be here.”

“All right. Hold down the fort. I’m heading out for a bit.”

She frowned. “Where are you going?”

“I have a few errands.”

“What kind of errands?”

“The kind that are out of the restaurant.” I stood up and ushered her to the door. “I’ll be back before the dinner rush.”

She tossed a hostile look over her shoulder and stormed down the hall. I followed her at a slower pace, stopping in at the kitchen.

Jackie was manning the late lunch shift. She was my chef's second in command and had come with him from the restaurant in Syracuse. They'd been a package deal and more than worth the cost of the both of them.

"Hey, what are the specials today?"

She looked up. Her festive cap was covered with dancing koi fish and sharks, which hid her red curls. The ties at the back fluttered as she rushed around the kitchen, plating a half dozen entrées as well as manning the grill.

"Mac and cheese with barbecue pork, seared tuna, and..." She trailed off and turned back to the stove to flip something. A hiss of steam rose up and the scent of marinated chicken filled the air. "Grilled lime chicken over spring greens."

"Can you make me a triple order of the grilled lime and pack it separate as well as the mac and cheese and separate the meat in case they don't do meat."

"Who the hell doesn't do meat?" Jackie asked with a sneer.

"Plenty of people and you know it."

She sneered. "Whatever. But yes. To go?"

"Yes."

"Give me fifteen." She nodded to the string bean looking kid that had just started. "Mitzy, can you pack up an extra-large salad?"

"It's Matteo."

Jackie shrugged. "Whatever. If you last two weeks, I'll learn your name. Chop, chop, Muffy."

The kid sighed, but he loped off toward the large walk-in cooler without complaint.

"Gotta be so hard on him?"

She quickly shuffled three pans around on the six burner stove. “Gets him moving and trying harder, doesn’t it?”

I shook my head. I’d never understand the biting and tense temperature in the kitchen, but it worked for them and I knew my role. “I’ll stop back in. Thanks, Jackie.”

“You got it.”

I headed into the main dining room. Gillian spotted me and turned on her heel to go out to the patio, shouting at one of the bussers.

“What crawled up her ass?” Stef asked.

Esther shrugged. “Wind blew west instead of east?”

I pressed my lips against a laugh. “Everything all right out here? No call outs for tonight?”

Esther hurried over to the front desk for the clipboard. She flipped through a few pages of reservations to the dining room assignments. “Just one. We should be able to cover without Penny.” She handed me the clipboard

I took it and skimmed the reservations. Healthy list for a week night. The warmer temperatures were luring people out to sit by the water. “Not like Penny to call out.”

Stef grabbed an apron from the cabinet under the front desk. “She won tickets to a show in the city. I can’t blame her. Harry Styles calls, and I’m going as well no matter how busy we are.”

Esther snickered. “You wish.”

“I damn well do.” He tied his apron around his waist. “What section am I in tonight?”

I flipped to the schedule. “You have the patio, and half of Penny’s section on the main floor—section five.”

“On it.” He pulled out a card with his name on it from the box tucked under the shelf. A tray of pagers was being charged for the evening rush, and beside the tray were twelve mini tablets we used for orders. He swiped his card to log it out and it would be the same card he used at the bar.

I'd made sure to upgrade our system when we'd done the last remodel. Pouring money into The Mason Jar had been a gamble, but I was glad Xavier believed in us—and didn't micromanage.

I was in the know about some of the inner workings of his business dealings due to our friendship. There was one thing he and his friends cared about—and that was keeping Crescent Cove a community and out of Maitland Enterprises' hands.

That was why he'd helped me in the first place. Xavier Hastings had more money than he knew what to do with. Instead of just acquiring money for the sake of it, he wanted to invest in a thriving town that attracted people to move here and to build on the businesses with a like-minded agenda.

Exactly what I'd been searching for all this time. It still surprised me that I'd had to come home to find it.

“What's up with you, boss? You've been off all day.”

I glanced down at Esther. I'd stolen her from the police station earlier this year and my brother still gave me grief about it. She, Rami, and Gillian knew me better than most.

“Just annoyed that I don't have a solid lead on someone for the MJ2.”

“The pregnant hottie didn't get the job? I thought she was a shoe-in. Or, rather, a boat in since she decided to have her little girl make a grand entrance right here on our lake.”

“Yeah, well...she just had a baby. I have a full May and June slated already. I think she's a little preoccupied with a new person in her life.”

“True. But I have a feeling about her.”

“Don't start with your feelings.” I rolled my eyes. “I'm off to see my dad for a bit. I'll be back before the rush.”

“Got it.” She gave me a snappy salute, making the blue streaks that surrounded her elfin face dance.

I hustled back toward the kitchen, waving and nodding to a few regulars, but I didn't stop to chat. Jackie, in her infinite

wisdom and speed, had packed a pair of to-go insulated bags for me.

“Thanks, Jack.”

“Hope she likes it.”

I paused with my fingers around the handles. “Who says it’s for a she?”

Jackie shot a look over her shoulder then went back to scraping down the grill. “Because you gotta go take it to the new mom. It’s what you do.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Now you’re getting defensive so I know it’s for the chick.”

I swiped the bags off the stainless steel tabletop. “It’s not every day that a baby is born on the premises.”

“Sure, boss. Hope she likes it. Find out the name of the baby, will ya? The whole place has been asking.”

I strode down the hall and grabbed my keys and wallet from my office before ducking out the back to my truck.

What the hell had Jackie meant by that? Food was comfort. It was just being kind to bring her food. And to make sure she was okay.

It was the neighborly thing to do, that was all.

EIGHT



I BACKED OUT OF MY SPACE AND DROVE OUT THE SIDE entrance. It was a bumpier road, but it cut onto the lake road. I headed for my dad's place. His greenhouse was half a mile from his house, and I figured I'd find him at one or the other.

His battered green Jeep was parked beside the old sign for Brooks' Greenery. The latticework layer of the sign had seen better days and needed a good coat of paint again. I remembered doing the last coat just before I'd moved away. God, it felt like another lifetime ago.

However, the stone pavers and flowers were well-tended.

The trumpeting daffodils were being phased out since spring was in our rearview, but a few strong ones were interspersed with his prize tulips. The deep variegated white and purple petals were shiny with a fresh afternoon watering. Baptisia framed the tulips and were fluttering gently in the summer breeze with their delicate lavender petals.

A few pops of yellow and pink flowers I'd forgotten the names of that looked like new plantings peeked up along the front of the stones bordering the flower bed. My dad wasn't very good with change or updates, but he never let his flowers look scraggly.

I dug into the to-go bag for an order of the mac and cheese and barbecue. A bribe for my dad for some flowers might get me a little something extra to take with me to Emma's place.

Gravel crunched under my boots as I crossed the parking lot to the door. The tinkle of the bell brought me back to days

working behind the counter as a kid.

An ancient circular table was tucked near the windows with a pile of look-books with cracked spines. As many babies were born in Crescent Cove, there were still a ton of funerals that happened as well.

Flowers were always a necessity at the beginning or the end of life.

My dad's feature wall was filled with photos of his arrangements from various floral expos, weddings, and a pegboard of thank you notes from happy customers. Beside that was a trio of coolers that held single stem roses in an array of colors, lilies, wildflowers, as well as the greenery fillers he used for quick bouquets.

As usual, the front end wasn't manned. He was probably in the back working on an arrangement or at his favorite propagating bench.

"Dad?" I set the bag on the counter and went around it to the doorway.

The lilting orchestral music he played for his plant babies played softly. He was wearing his usual plaid shirt and a pair of lightweight work pants in deference to the heat. His mossy green Crocs were covered in flower shrapnel and his oiled canvas apron pockets bulged with his usual tools. Shears, knives, and bits of foam he used for his arrangements all had their own pockets.

My dad was old school in every way, even in his tools.

An array of daisies, Black Eyed Susans, and his signature Perfect Pink roses were spread out on his bench with a crystal vase in progress. A pair of cheaters perched on the tip of his nose as he was carefully grafting a stunning magenta rose into one of the stems of a potted Perfect Pink.

When my dad was in propagating mode, he didn't hear anything. His patience was never-ending for his 'babies'. Customers didn't exist when he was in his zone.

Sometimes a delivery of mine could jar him loose.

I returned to the counter and dug into the barbecue, flipping off the top and returning to his work room. I set the carton beside his elbow and waited. Either he'd finish what he was doing, or the scent of food would do the trick.

Either way, rushing him wasn't an option.

I leaned against the doorjamb for all of five minutes before he took a sniff of the air and pulled off his glasses. "Mason!"

"Hey, Dad."

"How long have you been there?"

"Just a minute or so."

"Liar." He peered into the carton beside him. "Bribe?"

"I can't just bring my dad some lunch?"

"Not with the way you've been running around that restaurant of yours lately. And that sparkly new boat." His eyes crinkled at the corners and his sandy hair was disheveled around his strong face.

"Been out to my place?" Surprised, I backed out of the doorway and grabbed the mac and cheese and brought it back inside.

"No, but the Masterson girl started working here two days a week. She's been talking about the impromptu baby delivery on your new toy."

I rolled my eyes. "Damn expensive to be a toy."

My dad's eyes sparkled. "Best kind of toys." He turned to the sink and washed off the dirt. "What did you bring me?"

"Maybe it's for me now."

"Don't get mean now, Mase."

Laughing, I pushed the tub of mac and cheese toward him and stabbed it with a fork. "Your favorite."

"Ahh, you know how to woo me."

Good thing I knew how to woo someone. It certainly wasn't a woman lately.

He took a bite with an audible hum of delight. “Jackie’s mac and cheese, not that pompous ass you hired.”

“Dad.”

He shrugged. “It’s true.” He stabbed his fork back into the still steaming carton. “So, what do you need?”

“Well, you know about the baby. That’s kind of why I’m here. Thought I should send Miss Hauser a congratulations on the baby deal. Something easy for her to take care of, maybe?”

His eyebrow arched. “Miss Hauser, huh?”

I flushed. “Yeah, Emma and she had a little girl.”

“Sure. I can handle that.” He took another bite of the pasta then stabbed the fork back into it as he wandered around his workspace, muttering to himself.

I pulled out my phone to check my emails while he did his thing. A text from my sister-in-law to be popped up as I was deleting spam.

Gina: You free for a chat? I had an idea...

Oh, crap. That didn’t sound good.

Jared and Gina’s wedding had been scheduled, re-scheduled, then moved again thanks to a very welcome pregnancy. My nephew, Caden, hadn’t been planned—exactly. They were pretty private about their troubles getting pregnant, and the minute they’d stopped worrying about it, good old Crescent Cove magic stepped in and made it happen.

Now we were scrambling to get them officially hitched. I cracked open the wedding document and saw the startling items on the to-do list. Gina was trying to plan the brunt of the wedding herself.

She had the Ramos clan helping out. Between her sisters and Bonnie Ramos, former cop central dispatcher, she had all the help she could handle. Of course with that many women, it also meant they kept changing their minds about what they wanted.

This was not the first text I'd gotten with an idea she'd had.

I shot back a quick text that I'd call her in a few.

Finally, my dad came back with an armful of greenery and a wide bowl. I shoved my phone in my pocket and went around his bench to help him. "Jeez, Dad." I took the heavy clay bowl. "I just wanted a simple arrangement."

"Not every day that a baby gets born on your property, son." He hauled up a bag of river rocks from under his bench. "We'll make her an easy to care for dish garden."

"You mean you will."

"Well, yes." He gave me a sheepish smile. "Might mean more if you did it."

"She's a complete stranger, Dad."

Though one afternoon with Emmaline Hauser felt far too big for stranger status. Having my hand crushed as she dealt with contractions seemed too intimate to put into words.

Or flowers for that matter.

"Grab that Pothos."

I picked up the compost cell container with heart shaped leaves and gently pulled out the plant, careful not to damage the roots. Nothing went to waste in my father's greenhouse. It was either composted for soil or reused.

I dug a little hole in the loose dirt my dad had already put in the dish and settled the plant inside, letting the roots breathe.

"And tuck the Nerve Plant there around it. That's it."

Following instructions was easy. I'd put together dish gardens back in my teen years by the hundreds. There was a familiarity to it that unbunched some of the muscles in my shoulders I hadn't realized had been tense for days. I chose a handful of bamboo shoots to fill in the back half of the planter then gathered river rocks as decoration, but also to help with drainage.

“See, there you go. Just like the old days.”

I fussed with a few of the shiny leaves until it made a U-shape. “Maybe something with color in the front?”

“You still got it.” My dad gave me a pat on the shoulder. “Some Calathea should do the trick.”

The trailing purple color of the tiny leaves brightened it up. My dad snipped one of the bright pink blooms off the potted rose bush he’d been grafting from. He tucked a beaker sized bud vase among the bamboo stalks to stabilize it, and settled a stem inside with a trio of blooms on it. One in full bloom and the other two just buds. Then he added a splash of water and plant food to the beaker.

“There we go. Grab one of the cards from the counter and you’re golden.” He picked up his discarded mac and cheese and hummed around another forkful. “Definitely payment enough with this. Don’t you let Jackie quit because of that scoundrel.”

I pulled the clay dish forward. “Stone isn’t a scoundrel, Dad. He’s a three-star Michelin chef.”

“That girl is better,” he said around another bite. “Henry is fine, but...” He hummed out a sigh. “Good stuff.”

“I can have dinner sent over to your place a few times a week, you know.”

He waved me off. “Don’t worry about your old man. I get by.”

I made a mental note to add him to the rotation of deliveries as I washed up at the sink. Takeout had exploded in the last few years with more and more people running out of time to cook.

“There’s some barbecue to go with that pasta,” I said over my shoulder.

“I’ll have that for dinner.” He wagged his eyebrows at me and perched his glasses back on his nose. “Now go on. I have to work on this graft so I can get her under the sprayers in the greenhouse.”

I leaned against the sink as I dried my hands. “Trying for a new hybrid with your Perfect Pinks?”

“Yes.” He fussed with the stems, lightly sinking toothpicks in to stabilize the grafts. “Some rumblings for brighter colors these days. Gotta keep with the times, Mase.”

“Don’t I know it.” I went around the bench again and gave my dad a quick hug. “Thanks.”

“Oh, what’s this?” He patted my back. “Getting mushy on your old man?”

“Maybe a little. Seeing Emma—Miss Hauser—give birth was pretty wild. Made me appreciate things a little more. Especially since Jared and Bee just did it too.”

He peered at me over his cheaters. “Getting that baby bug?”

“God, no. Just in awe, that’s all.” The idea of a baby in my life right now made my back slick with a cold sweat. I hugged the dish garden to my chest. “Stop by The Mason Jar. I’d love to show you the boat.”

“I will.”

He wouldn’t until I dragged him over there myself, but I took the win for now. “Thanks, Dad.”

I headed back through the doorway to the main part of the flower shop and out the door. A woman in a brightly colored dress and sporting glittering rings and chains was just climbing out of her car.

She gave me a wide smile and sailed past me in a cloud of expensive perfume. She looked vaguely familiar, but even I didn’t know everyone in this town these days. And I didn’t have time to figure it out. I’d already spent more time than I’d intended to at my dad’s shop.

I buckled in the dish garden in the passenger seat, then plugged in my phone to use the car play to call Gina.

She answered on the first ring.

“I’m not bothering you, am I?”

“Not at all.” I tapped in the coordinates for Emma’s address on my in-dash screen. I didn’t think there was a road in Crescent Cove that I hadn’t been on at least once, but the population boom meant more housing was popping up all over.

“So, my sisters really want me to have a bachelorette party.”

I winced. I didn’t want to think about my brother’s fiancée partying it up. Especially since I was learning just how loud and rambunctious the Ramos women could be.

“Isn’t this usually the maid of honor’s deal?”

“First of all, with as many sisters as I have, there’s no official maid of honor—period. Just a bunch of bridesmaids driving me crazy.”

I snorted. “I can only imagine. I have quite a few emails from them and your mom.”

She muttered something in Spanish I didn’t catch. At least I thought it was Spanish. The Ramos clan spoke a bastardized version of Spanish and Italian that I could never quite figure out.

“They’re driving me crazy. But I was thinking, maybe I could make it a combo engagement party, bachelorette, bachelor party all in one.”

“Oh.” I didn’t exactly know what I was going to do for Jared’s bachelor party, but I hadn’t figured on a Jack and Jill shindig.

“I know, I know—hear me out. Brooks and I aren’t really much for the partying thing. Between the station house and Caden’s sleep regression, we’re cross-eyed.”

“Sleep what?” I vaguely recognized the term from the baby books. I’d been more worried about learning pre-baby and baby birth stuff than what came next. I’d been a little busy lately and had fallen off on my studies.

“Regression. Every few months a baby’s sleep schedule can go out the window thanks to hormones, growth spurts, or

the freaking planets misaligning. I don't even know, all I can tell you is that I haven't slept in four days."

That sounded heinous. "Not teething?"

"Hush your mouth and don't say that word. We just got a bottom tooth to come in and I need half a second before we go for another round of that, thanks."

I heard the pure terror in her voice and swallowed any other comments on sleeping. "Okay, so what's the idea?"

"Could we use the new boat? Next week?"

Well, damn. That was an idea. Much easier than trying to rearrange The Mason Jar for a big shindig. "I'd be honored to have the maiden voyage be with my family."

"Oh, Mason—don't make me cry."

"It was your idea, Bee."

"I know, but you're just the sweetest. I know it's an inconvenience." Her voice got thicker through the speakers of my car.

"No, not really. I have some things scheduled for the holiday weekend and into June, so this is perfect actually."

"Really?" She sniffled.

"Really. Figure out a theme with your sisters, because I know they probably already have ideas."

She laughed and it came out dangerously close to a sob. "You're right about that."

"And we'll figure it out. I promise."

"I don't know what we'd do without you, Mase."

"You'll never find out. Now give Caden a big hug from me and then email me with details, all right?"

"Yes, more than all right."

"Good. Now, I gotta go make a delivery."

She laughed. "Now you're a delivery guy too?"

"Only for ladies who have babies on my boat."

“Oh, you’re going to see the baby and that new girl? Emmy?”

“Emmaline Hauser.”

“Right, right.” She sighed. “That was wild. Brooks couldn’t stop talking about it when he came home that night.”

Better than my nightmares about what could have happened. I still had them most nights.

“Hey, can you text me the baby’s name? We’re all dying to know.”

I laughed. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Okay, good. And thanks, Mason. Really.”

“No thanks needed. You just saved me from figuring out what to do for my big brother’s bachelor party.”

“Thanks for not making it a big thing. I’m sure you were planning something really nice.”

Oh, how I wished I could actually say that. “We’ll make sure to have something fun for all the guys, don’t you worry.”

“You better not have a stripper on that boat.”

I was about to tell her not to worry.

“Unless I get dibs on picking one too.”

I laughed. “Deal.”

The shrill peal of a baby cry reverberated around the cabin of my truck.

“That’s my cue. I’ll send you that email. Bye.”

“Bye,” I said into the dead air of the phone. She’d already hung up.

I shook my head and stabbed my finger on the button for starting route. Now I had another mom to worry about.

I pulled out and followed the directions away from Main Street and into the new builds popping up just outside of the hub of Crescent Cove. I was pretty familiar with most of the town, but with the rise in population came new homes—or in

this case, a new apartment complex. “Cove Meadows,” I muttered to myself.

Didn’t look like much of a meadow, just a whole lot of cookie cutter buildings crammed together.

I followed the winding road with the series of two and three story apartment buildings. I parked in front of building five and cut the engine, suddenly unsure of my steps.

I didn’t want to wake her or the baby by just showing up unannounced.

I took the bags and hooked them over my arm, then tucked the dish against my side and walked to the covered porch. I tried the door first and found it locked. At least there was some security. Beside it was an intercom system and a dozen buttons.

“Now or never, I guess.” I buzzed her apartment number.

“You wouldn’t happen to have a Big Mac in that bag, would you? I’ve been craving a Big Mac for hours. Did my husband send you?” Came a woman’s sharp voice through the intercom.

Evidently, there was a video feature as well as I heard the lens move up and down my body.

I cleared my throat. “No, but I do have food.”

“Okay, I’m listening. What do you have besides the plant? I’m not really looking for a salad.”

I frowned. She definitely wasn’t going to be eating this dish garden. “Is this Emmaline Hauser’s apartment?”

“Who’s asking?”

“Um, Mason Brooks from The Mason Jar.”

“Oh,” her voice brightened, “we like your food.” A buzz followed by the release of a locking mechanism was my only clue to entry.

I swung the door open. “I’m glad, I think,” I muttered as I fought my way through the door with everything I was holding.

A door down the hall opened and I was met with a statuesque brunette with wild dark curls as I came around the corner. She had her arms folded as if she was guarding the entrance.

She tipped her head and scanned me much like the lens outside. Suddenly, she nodded and took the bags of food. “You can come in, I suppose.”

“Kitty, who’s at the door?”

I heard Emma’s voice before I spotted her, and my stomach pitched as if I was careening down a black diamond ski trail.

And just like that trail, there was no turning back now.

NINE



WHO WAS AT THE DOOR?

My brother had a shift at the clinic today, I was pretty sure.

Maybe.

What day was it?

They'd all blurred into feedings, changing diapers, endless laundry, and the occasional moments of sleep. I wasn't sure when I'd changed my shirt. I sure as hell hadn't brushed my hair.

Or my teeth.

I was still wearing a damn diaper.

Okay, so it technically wasn't a diaper, but it sure felt like one. Because my body sure as hell wasn't my own right now. It belonged to Adriana and so many aches I couldn't think around them for hours at a time.

Currently, my boobs were on fire, and I had two hours before my little girl would be looking for more food.

I should be pumping for backup milk later. I was about to turn around and go into my bedroom when I heard his voice.

It wasn't one I'd forget any time soon. I caught myself dreaming about it when I was extra exhausted. The quiet firmness under the worry. His big hands on me.

I pasted a smile on my face and nearly tripped on a rattle. I caught myself on the arm of my couch. "Hey, Mason."

He hurriedly rushed inside, dropping a bag and a...was that a plant? He set both down on my overcrowded dining room table. He gently took me by the elbow. "Are you okay?"

Kitty stood at the door, her mouth hanging open. Her editing glasses were pushed up on top of her head, a little crooked in her wild curls.

"I'm fine. I'm really sorry." I glanced around at the chaos. Baby shrapnel everywhere. Diapers, clothes, Amazon boxes that came in from my family. There was another tower of them in Adriana's room as well as mine.

My brothers and sisters weren't sure what to do with me being away from Clintondale, so they just bought me things. I appreciated it, but I was drowning. And in the dark of the night, I wondered why I wanted to do this myself.

A piercing cry bleated out of my pocket.

Mason's eyes widened. "Wow."

I flicked the volume down. "She's got her mama's lungs on her. Sorry. I have to—"

"No, no. Don't worry about me." Mason raked his fingers through his hair.

"Do you want to come back and see her?"

"Oh, um..." His blue gaze darted everywhere. "I don't want to impose."

I tugged at his shirt. "C'mon, you can see how cute she is without all the yucky birth stuff."

His neck flushed red. "I'm sure she's beautiful."

"I'm pretty partial." I hurried through the small living room and down the hall to my bedroom. I winced at the twisted sheets and stack of onesies at the bottom of my bed. It seemed like I needed to change them as much as her diapers.

Adriana was kicking and her little fists were flailing as she shrieked from the bassinet beside my bed.

"Okay, sweet pea, you're good." I quickly scooped her up and put her on my shoulder. My eyes crossed as her little foot

kicked my overfull breast. I swayed in that way I was learning she liked, and her shrieks turned to low volume wails. She shouldn't be hungry yet, but it seemed like all she wanted to do was chow down.

The doctor told me to let her eat when she wanted to eat, so that was what I did.

I swung her down and lifted my shirt, only hissing a little as she greedily latched on.

Mason was hovering in the doorway, his eyes darting everywhere but never landing on us.

Taking pity on him, I moved to the small rocking chair I had in the corner and grabbed a receiving blanket to cover us the rest of the way. My boobs were too small to be showing much anyway thanks to the oversized shirt I was wearing.

“Sorry I haven't been in contact.”

He cleared his throat. “You are definitely not to worry about me.”

“Did you give my job away?”

He stared at the ceiling. “About that. I thought I'd stop by to—”

“Let me down easy?”

“It's not that.”

“C'mon, Ace. You know I was born for that position.” I didn't know and I was bluffing harder than when I'd pretended to be a poker champion in Rio. That had been a wild summer and felt like a million years ago now.

I glanced down at my daughter and brushed my thumb over her silky dark hair as she drank down like she was starving.

It felt like a billion years in one whole week.

I looked up and saw Mason had finally stopped avoiding me. His lake-colored eyes were a little wild, but a tenderness was there too. He swallowed hard and licked his lips. “She's so small.”

Her little foot kicked out from the blanket so she was free to twist her ankles. “Not the first baby you’ve seen. Don’t you have a new nephew?”

“Yeah, but he wasn’t that small.”

“Didn’t feel very small when she came out.”

He paled.

I laughed. “From what I’ve heard from other moms, I got off easy.”

Adriana’s head lolled to the side, her little mouth slack. She was already milk drunk. I tugged my shirt down and shifted her up on my shoulder to rub her back. She really was a peanut. Just under six pounds.

I was probably lucky she’d been a week early. If not, I’d be dealing with stitches instead of my insides being rearranged like I’d been in a cage match with an MMA fighter who specialized in kicking.

I gave a regretful sigh when her little breaths evened at my neck. Of course my daughter would fall asleep without evening both of my boobs out. I shifted to keep her on my good side, but the throbbing was getting worse.

I stood up and Mason’s eyes got wide again. “Here, hold onto her for a second, will you?”

His eyes went from wide to wheeling in panic. “Um, let me just go get your...whoever that woman was out there.”

“My sister-in-law.” I shifted Adriana off my shoulder and into his arms. “I know you can handle it.”

“She’s too tiny. I’m going to break her.”

I laughed. “No, you won’t.”

“No. I really—” His big hand cradled Adriana’s head and he cupped her butt in the other.

“There you go. You’re a natural. You probably hold your nephew all the time. And a niece, right?” I draped the receiving blanket over his shoulder. “Just rub her back. She always gets a bubble when she’s just eaten. I’ll be right back.”

“Don’t leave me!”

I rubbed his arm. “You got this. I just need to even out the boobage situation and pee. I’ll be really quick.”

“Even out the...what?” His brows furrowed. “I don’t understand any of that.”

“Even the peeing?” I laughed and crossed to the little bathroom off my bedroom. I grabbed my pump and hooked up my overfull breast.

“Uh, no. I get the peeing,” he called out in a stage whisper. “Jesus, you’re tiny,” he said quietly.

I peered out to see him looking down at my daughter with awe. He was so gentle with her, even if the rest of him was stiff as a board. Adriana fussed a little, then shoved her fist into her mouth and quieted against his chest.

Mason swayed awkwardly, patting her butt.

I collapsed against the counter as the battery-operated pump did its thing. The tightness released with the handful of ounces I pumped. When I glanced up at the mirror, I gasped.

“Everything okay?” he called out.

“Fine. Just fine.” I sighed as I took in the faded blue golf shirt I’d stolen from Clint. It was the only thing big enough for me without going out to find more clothes. Most of my maternity wear had been dresses and I needed easy access to the feeding source.

Now it was stained with spit up and God knew what. I finished pumping and flipped it off and got a whiff of my situation. “You okay out there?”

“Yeah, but you could hurry back.”

I plucked out baby wipes and wiped down everything I could reach. I definitely needed to find a way to get myself in the shower, but it would take too much effort right now.

I slathered myself in lotion and put on a T-shirt that was still sitting in my laundry pile. I was pretty sure it was clean.

At least cleaner than what I'd been wearing. I quickly dragged a brush through my hair and tied it off my neck.

Damn summer was in full effect.

I peeked out one more time and saw him making slow circles as he looked down at Adriana. Her little butt fit in his very big hand.

The pang in my chest surprised me. I'd been overwhelmed with love when Clint held her, but this felt different. Tight and uncomfortable.

Maybe I needed to pump some more.

Instead I quickly peed—well, as quickly as one could in my condition. Someday it wouldn't hurt when I sat down.

But it wasn't today.

I washed my hands and took a swish of mouthwash before I headed back out, bottle in hand. I set the extra milk down on the end table beside the crib in case she woke back up.

“See, you didn't die.”

Mason looked relieved when he saw me. “She's still asleep.”

“Did she give you a good burp?”

“I can't tell. She mostly is chomping on this little hand.”

I laughed and brushed my knuckle over her chubby cheek. Suddenly, a bubble fluttered out of her mouth and Mason's eyebrows soared up.

“There it is.” I gently slipped my hand under his. “Now she'll take that nap.”

“Got her?”

“I got her, Ace.” I transferred her to my chest and cuddled her up against my neck. I was getting pretty good at this. At least when she was sleeping. Sometimes I pissed her off when she didn't get her food fast enough. Or I didn't clean her ass in ten seconds or less.

My little girl liked to be tidy.

I rounded my bed and set her in her bassinet. She stretched out and her arms flailed for a moment. I waited. After hours of watching her, I was beginning to know what she needed.

Just beginning.

But her fist curled against her hair, then eased as she settled into slumber.

“Hallelujah. She decided to show off for you.”

“This is showing off?” He walked around my bed to stand beside me.

“Yep. It’s a fifty-fifty shot whether she fights sleep or lets herself chill out.” I straightened her onesie out so it wouldn’t chafe the inside of her legs.

Her little tongue curled from her lips as she sucked at the air.

“Is she still hungry?”

I glanced up at him. “Pretty sure she’s always hungry.” My stomach growled. “Just like her mama.”

“Oh, I actually brought you food.”

I grinned up at him. “Did you now? Tell me it’s something terrible for me.”

“Salad and chicken.”

I wrinkled my nose. I’d given up on being a vegan or vegetarian when the plus sign landed on that plastic stick.

“And mac and cheese with pulled pork.”

“Now we’re talking.”

He laughed softly. “Are you really okay?”

“Tired. So, tired. But I’m good.” I realized I was leaning against him. “Sorry. I guess I’m even more tired than I thought.”

“How about some delicious carbs?”

“Now that sounds perfect.” I slipped away from him and walked ahead, glancing back at my daughter one last time

before I checked my pocket for the monitor and switched the volume back up.

Mason followed me.

“Sorry, I just kinda dragged you into my room.” Way to be a professional. “Blame the baby brain. And when that little girl wants to eat, there’s no stopping her.”

“No worries.” He moved to the table for the bag.

Kitty popped off the couch. “I really wanted to open that bag. It smells amazing. Even if it’s not a Big Mac.”

Mason laughed. “I’ll remember about the Big Macs next time.”

I rolled my eyes. “Kitty, this is Mason, my boss.”

Kitty’s eyes widened.

Mason’s gaze went heavenward. “I’m not your boss.” He unzipped the to-go cooler and pulled out a series of boxes and a plastic bowl of salad and grilled chicken that did look quite good.

But that would be tomorrow’s good. I took the biggest box from him and flipped the lid. “Oh my God.”

Kitty crowded in next to me. “Exultations are definitely in order.”

“That’s a good thing, I hope?” he asked.

We both looked up at him. “Got forks?”

He held up plastic cutlery.

I snatched one and so did Kitty and we both dug into the box. I filled up my fork and shoved it in my face with a sigh. “I can’t remember when I ate last,” I mumbled.

He shook his head. “Sit down. Let me get some plates.”

Kitty took the box and we sat across from one another. “We’re good,” she announced.

My brother’s wife took a little getting used to, but we’d gotten quite comfortable over the last two weeks of my

pregnancy. I was grateful she'd stayed with me since I'd gotten home.

Even if my mom had been hurt by my decision. I figured she'd show up any day now anyway. My mom and dad didn't really know the meaning of the word *boundaries*.

I wanted to do everything on my own, until it came to actually doing it.

I was so afraid I wouldn't wake up when Adriana needed me. Afraid I was going to break her arm when I changed her onesie. Afraid I was going to overfeed her, underfeed her—I was afraid of every-damn-thing.

Every day, I still wondered if I should pack her up in the car and go back to Clintondale.

I knew that was what my mom and dad wanted. Heck, even my brother, Teddy, who was currently being groomed to take over being mayor, wanted me home.

His was probably for optics. A new baby to coo over in the Hauser clan was great for video and newspapers. Even if I was the unwed mother. One thing about my family was that we'd defend one another until the death.

Who cared if their constituents talked about me behind the sunny smiles they showed outwardly? Who cared if they looked down on my little baby girl?

That was the part I couldn't quite get behind. The part that kept me going every day. The part that kept me from packing things up and going home.

I knew she was amazing and beautiful and perfect.

I didn't want to admit defeat. I wanted to be the mama she deserved.

My stomach tightened at the food and I slowed my roll on the forkfuls as I sat back.

"Everything okay?" Mason unpacked the pulled pork and set the box near us.

“Yeah, it’s great.” *Get a plate and act like a human, Emmaline.* I stood up and went into my galley kitchen. The sink was empty thanks to Kitty’s fastidiousness. Dishes neatly stacked in the drying rack beside my bottle rack that looked like a square of astro-turf. Little places for nipples, bottles, washers, the twisty things that held the bottles together—all the bits and bobs that filled in for me.

I liked to do all the feedings, but I’d learned pumping was as important as feeding and making up some bottles in between made my life easier. And the way she was eating, I was pretty sure I’d have to figure out some supplements soon.

But right now, it had to be about feeding me. If I wasn’t sleeping when she was, I needed to be eating. And showing Mason that I wasn’t a complete mess.

I grabbed three and serving spoons I didn’t even know I had in my drawers. When I returned, Mason had set the gorgeous overflowing plant on my end table and cleared off the cups that littered every space.

I couldn’t drink enough. And I couldn’t eat enough to replenish the calories I was burning off by breast feeding. Clint and Kitty kept trying by plying me with protein drinks disguised as milkshakes.

They were not, in fact, milkshakes no matter what they did to doctor them up.

But I could eat mac and cheese until the end of time. Broke college food for the win—but Mason’s mac and cheese was better than the blue box, that was for sure.

I gave him a bright smile. “I really appreciate the dinner—or is it lunch? I don’t even know what time it is.”

He took the plates from me. “Linner?”

I laughed.

“I understand all about the in-between times.” He built the plates with the easy familiarity of a man who worked with food every day. One of the few jobs I hadn’t tried over the years. “Why I wanted to stop by before the dinner rush at the restaurant.”

I slowly sat down because that was my life right now. I'd managed to do a little pilates this morning to stretch my muscles, but I still felt like I was seventy years old.

"Are you here to soften the blow? That you found someone?" I laced my fingers in my lap. The sudden thought of losing the job I'd wanted so badly made the delicious food sit in my stomach like a kettlebell weight.

Not that he owed me anything.

I was learning that the hard way. Pierre had discarded me for the next shiny thing, even if that twit, Terri, had a quarter of my talent. Double my boobs, maybe, but not my talent.

The stage felt like a million years ago.

And so did Pierre.

What had I seen in his tweed blazer anyway?

"Emma?"

I shook off the memories of my old life. "Sorry. Just tired."

He looked around in that sweetly overwhelmed way. "I should let you rest."

I reached out and laid my hand on his. "No. I appreciate you stopping by. Even if it's to give me bad news. I think you're making a mistake." I let him go and picked up my fork. "I'm the best thing your party boat will ever have."

Bravado.

It was all I had right now. I'd learned that looking like I had everything together was better for everyone around.

I glanced at him through my lashes. That flush was back on his neck. Uncomfortable and not wanting to let me down? Or just downright uncomfortable because I'd literally tossed my kid into his arms and now he didn't know how to get out the door without being rude?

"I'm still interviewing."

"So, I still have a chance?" I forked up some pasta.

“Phased back to work is the preferred course of action.” Kitty piped up, her dark eyes serious as always. “That’s what I’ll be doing when I have my baby.”

Mason frowned. “What’s that?” Then his gaze darted down to Kitty’s middle. “Congrats?”

She bent her lips into an almost smile. Sometimes Kitty wasn’t sure how to handle the niceties of life. Why I loved her so much—you never had to worry about getting the truth out of her. Sometimes even if you didn’t want it.

“Thank you.” She tucked one of her unruly curls back into her messy bun. “I’m due at the end of the year. I’m an editor who mostly works at home, so I know it will be easier for me to go back to work—but it will be on an incremental basis. My husband was very specific on this. He knows I’d probably be working the next day.”

Mason cleared his throat. “Next day?”

She shrugged. “My work only requires a computer.”

I smirked at my plate and resumed eating. “Wait ’til you get to the baby brain part and get back to me.”

Kitty frowned. “Brain fog can be combatted with correct nutrition and cognitive games.”

I laughed. “Is that in one of the baby articles you sent me?”

“Yes.” She took a bite of her food then scooped more of the barbecue onto her plate. “Foods high in Omega-3 fatty acids stimulate memory.”

I laughed. “Is that why I get salmon every other day?”

“Helps your memory, doesn’t it?” Kitty picked up her phone. “With the food, fresh air and exercise also promote blood flow and circulation, which improves brain function.”

“Seems like you need to do a lot of things,” Mason said quietly. “Look, Emma. I do think you’re the best person for the job, but I think you have another job that is more important than me.”

I swallowed thickly. “You’re right. Adriana is the most important thing in my life now, but I also have to support us.”

I really didn’t want to go home and live off my parents.

They’d let me. I had a series of calls and texts from my mom asking me to come home to do just that. My parents had covered my college expenses even when I’d changed majors a half dozen times my first two years. I knew they’d give me plenty of time to bond with my baby and not worry about work.

And knowing that made me even more stubborn about doing this on my own.

It was time I stood on my own.

If not for me, for my kid.

“But if you let me show you just what I’m made of, I think it will be amazing for both of us.”

He leaned back in his chair. “I know how hard it is—”

I arched a brow at him. “Do you?”

The flush was back. This time, he clasped the back of his neck sheepishly. “I do not, no. But I have seen what my brother’s gone through with Gina these last few months. It’s not easy, and they have each other to help out.”

“Tell you what. If it doesn’t work out after a few weeks, we’ll just let you have your I-told-you-so moment.”

“It’s not that.”

“I’ll be there Monday with a baby on.”

His brow furrowed. “What?”

“I have this baby wrap carrier that lets me have her close and lets me keep my hands free. I get the best of both worlds and you get a kickass party planner who will shock the hell out of you. Unless me bringing the baby with me is too much to handle?”

He tipped his head back. “No matter what I say, this is going to make me look like an ass.”

It was playing dirty, but I'd do whatever I had to for me and my kid. And I knew I was perfect for this job.

Maybe even more perfect than I had been for the stage.

I just needed to prove that to him—and me.

“Okay, let me ask you this...did you find someone?”

He sighed. “No.”

“Then what will it hurt to try?”

“She makes a good argument.” Kitty took a bite of her food and smiled.

He dropped his hands into his lap. “Tell you what. My brother and his fiancée want to do a combination engagement, bachelor, and bachelorette party for next week. We've already been working on ideas, so I have some details worked out. How about we use that as a trial run?”

My brain was whirling—shockingly, since the only whirling that had been going on was me watching my dryer in an exhausted stupor. “What kind of party are we talking?”

“My brother is the Chief of Police and he's marrying a woman with a very large extended family.”

I stood and managed not to cry. I'd been too worried about stuffing my face with pasta that I'd forgotten to put my inflatable donut down on my seat. Hey, maybe that meant I was actually on the mend.

Or I just really wanted this job.

I grabbed one of my pretty notebooks on my bookshelf. Instinctively, I picked the bright red one I'd found on sale at one of the shops on Main Street. I couldn't resist a notebook. I plucked my favorite pen out of my mug of sparkly pens, as well as grabbed my inflatable seat donut and sat down. “How many people are we talking?”

“Fifty-ish, give or take.”

I swallowed. In a week?

Nope, I wouldn't freak out. I could do this. I had the weekend to figure out a kickass theme. I jotted down a few ideas that swirled in my brain. Food, funny cop puns, and made a note to scroll Pinterest as Adriana slept.

“What does Gina do?”

“She's a fellow mom. She used to waitress, but now she's staying at home with their two kids.”

“Hmm.” I scribbled a few things. “And you said big family?”

“Yes, the Ramos family.”

I looked up at him. “Bonnie?”

He laughed. “You know her?”

“She was teaching a mommy yoga class. I took a few sessions to keep me limber.”

Mason's eyebrow winged up. “Is that so?”

The quick hit of heat shocked me. At the mere thought of flirting, I shrugged. “Kitty is right. Even when I didn't feel like working out, it helped keep me sane at the end of my pregnancy. I know Bonnie and she's a freaking trip.”

“To say the least.”

I scribbled even more notes. I knew she was proud of her Spanish and Italian heritage. And her babies and grandbabies. Between the cops and the firefighters that were part of the Ramos family, it would be an interesting party indeed.

One that I was going to kick ass at creating.

“If this works out well enough, then we'll discuss hiring you on. If it doesn't, I'll just pay you for your time, no harm, no foul.”

“You won't want to get rid of me.”

His dark blue eyes met mine. And that zing hit me again. I did not need that right now. I was raising a baby alone because I'd stupidly got involved with my professor. I sure as hell didn't need to go and make the same mistake with my boss.

He was definitely going to be my boss—he just didn't believe it yet.

I just had to keep my eye on the prize this time. Not on his broad shoulders, ridiculous blue eyes, or the little buzz between us.

It wasn't about me right now, it was about Adriana and what was best for her. It was time I remembered that.

I closed my notebook and gave him a bright smile. "I'll be there Monday."

Mason nodded. "I'll get out of your hair."

He packed up the food for us and took his empty bags. "You don't need to do much for the dish garden. Just stick it in your sink and let water run through it once a month and it'll stay nice and green."

I turned to look at the lovely plant. "And the rose?"

"That was my dad. He says congrats by the way. As well as the rest of the restaurant. They've been dying to know the baby's name."

My lips twitched. "Gonna tell them?"

"I don't know. I might just let you surprise them on Monday." He grinned and looped the handles of the now empty bag on his shoulder. "I'm really glad you guys are okay."

"Thanks, Mason." My voice was rough with emotion. My crazy emotions were always just a half step away from tears or mania these days.

I really couldn't wait for my hormones to level out. For both of our sakes.

I started to rise and he waved me off. "I'll show myself out." He glanced at Kitty. "Thanks for taking care of her. I feel much better knowing she's got people here with her."

Kitty tilted her head. "People and cats too. I'm trying to convince her to adopt. Cats are far better caretakers than humans ever could be. If not stinkier at times."

I covered my face with my hands. “No kittens. At least not yet.”

“Pets are good for babies. Teaches them responsibility.” She folded her arms and peered up at Mason. “Do you have a pet?”

“Me? I work too much.”

I hid a smile behind my hand at the panic on his face.

“Right. Anyway. I have to go.” He glanced at me. “If you’re sure.”

“I’m sure.” I wiggled my fingers at him before he flew out the door.

“You gotta stop foisting kittens off on people, sis.”

“Never.” She popped a piece of barbecue in her mouth. “So many need homes.”

And then she proceeded to give me her usual dissertation about the extreme need for fosters. I just let her go on. Kitty was nothing if not passionate about animals. And she loved my big brother with her whole heart.

That was good enough for me.

TEN



SUNDAYS WERE FOR CATCHING UP. THIS PARTICULAR SUNDAY required a helluva lot more recovery than most.

Starting with the pile of invoices mocking me. I usually tried to keep up with them throughout the week. However, now I had a party cruise without a director and half a dozen clients lined up with summer plans.

Now that Jared and Gina were doing their big pre-wedding party on the boat, I'd had to jump in with some of my own ideas since I was the best man.

My email program pinged with a new message. Of course it was from Emma. She'd been sending me emails since I left her apartment. Most of her notes contained amazing ideas, though some were definitely out of budget.

It made me wonder just what kind of family life she came from. I got the feeling she had a big family, but she was pretty short on the details. But there was a distinct tinge of money in some of the ideas she had.

"Like ten cases of mason jars," I muttered as I skimmed her email. It was a theme for my restaurant and for the mural on the side of the boat, but the ones she found were classier somehow.

She even thought of fixtures for the boat and for the dock.

I scribbled a few notes on my blotter littered with post-its. I had a vendor that might be able to get the jars at a lower cost. And being friendly with John Gideon from all the renovations I'd done over the years gave me another angle.

I forwarded the email to Gideon to see if he could get the wiring done early the following week. I wasn't sure he worked on boats, but he had an extensive crew who did just about everything in the handyman and contracting game.

My head was throbbing by the time I finished paying my invoices. Since my books were more in the black than the red, I counted it as a win.

I wandered out of my office to look for something to eat. Sundays were dinner only for the restaurant, but it was often the day that Henry was the most creative. I was hoping he'd have something for me to pick at.

Gillian was perched on a stool at the skinny table we kept in the kitchen for staff to eat at during the down times. As usual, she had a snack plate in front of her that would barely feed a toddler.

She was on a perpetual diet.

I'd never understand that. Especially with the chefs we had.

She spotted me and sat up straighter, making sure to push out her chest. With an inward sigh, I came all the way into the kitchen.

"When are you going to let me help you with the MJ2?"

Her voice was petulant and husky at the same time. Did that actually work on anyone?

I caught Henry rolling his eyes as he plated something that smelled divine.

I'd been avoiding telling her that I'd tentatively hired Emmaline for the position. I knew it wouldn't end well for me.

"Eat something. You look like shit." Henry set a plate on the edge of the stainless steel table then dropped a fork beside it. When I didn't react fast enough, he barked out, "Eat."

"Okay, okay." *Twist my arm.* My stomach roared at the scent of garlic and scallops. As the steam wafted up, the tang of lemon made my mouth water. I hadn't even realized I was hungry.

I twirled up some linguini and hummed out a sigh. “Is this the special?”

“Nope. Just was in the mood for scallops.” Henry leaned against the table, his hand cupping a shallow bowl full of the same. “Sure you don’t want any, Cujo?”

Gillian sneered at him. “You know how many calories are in that?”

Henry took a delicate scallop off his fork with a shark-like smile. “I always work it off.”

“Gross.” She took her plate and stalked out.

“Thanks,” I said and dragged her stool over to sit down.

Henry shrugged. “She expects me to make her a damn charcuterie board daily. If she wants a damn lunchable, she can make it herself, for fuck’s sake.” He twirled up a bite. “Of course my meal is cleaner eating, but I can’t convince her of that.”

“Well, I appreciate it. I was going cross-eyed doing invoices.”

“Better than having Bonnie try to tell you how to cook.” Henry grinned. “Gina’s mom is something else. I will get her to give me her empanada recipe though.”

“Good luck with that. You’ll need to marry into that recipe, pal.”

“Think Bonnie will have me?”

I laughed. “She just might.”

We ate in companionable silence for a few minutes. The dining room was starting to come alive with prep for dinner. Sundays we were only open for a few hours to give the staff a bit of a break.

It tended to be more family fare instead of date night busy.

“So, what’s on the menu?”

Henry shrugged. “It’s a nice night out. I thought I might do an old fashioned burger bar out on the patio. Let Jackie have

the kitchen.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Have you been drinking?”

He grinned and took my plate out of my hands. “I’m bored. Thought we might be able to get some summer fare out there. Street corn, burgers and dogs—including the non-carnivores.” He flipped his ever-present towel over his shoulder. “I put an order in with Kayla over at Sharkey’s. She’s been bugging a bunch of businesses to try her vegetarian shit.”

I smiled. Kayla Mills was going to be one of my new relatives when Gina married my brother. We’d gone from a tiny, ramshackle family of three to taking on the Ramos clan and all Gina’s sisters with their expansive bunch of significant others. From three to dozens in a hot second.

It took some getting used to.

“Let me know how it goes over. Especially since she’s going to be one of my sisters-in-law...I think. The branches are getting to be like our big tree out there.”

Henry snickered. “You add in firefighters and we’re going to need to fortify our chairs in the dining room.”

I laughed. “That’s the truth. Well, count me in for a burger.” I patted my stomach. “Even after that delicious carb bomb.”

“Will do.”

The kitchen staff started piling in and I left them to get ready for the dinner rush. I wished I’d known ahead of time about the outside grilling. I could have posted about it, but I’d learned Henry had his own timetable when it came to what he was cooking on any given night.

It worked for us for the most part.

I dug out my phone and dropped a post on the local Facebook page as well as on a few other social media apps.

Maybe the summery evening would bring people out.

I checked in with the staff in the dining room and gave them a heads up about the grilling thing. They didn't even flinch—they were well used to the whims of Henry Stone's ideas.

He might have only been our chef for less than a year, but he was definitely making a name for himself—and in turn, The Mason Jar.

I helped them set up some extra seating on our patio and helped stock the outside bar. I took a break and wandered down the stairs with a bucket of cleanser to check on the picnic tables. Luckily, they weren't in bad shape, and it only took a few minutes to scrub them down.

I wandered down to the rocky beach. The scrubby grass was filling out thanks to the rains we'd had. The ducks were bobbing on the lake, their heads dipping down into the sparkling water for some early dinner.

The days were getting longer and the lake was dotted with sailboats and pontoons. It was still a little cold for the speedboats and jet skis, but they'd be out soon enough. I made another mental note to look into the boat lunches idea I'd come up with.

Then again, I'd have to find someone who was responsible enough to take the boat out for deliveries. Stef might be up for it—he was one of my longest running waiters and I could tell he was getting restless.

Maybe he'd like to take that on.

I pulled out my phone to make a note—because God knew I wouldn't remember it. My head was full of wedding details and now an impromptu engagement party that had me reaching for the Tums way more than I'd like to own up to.

My gaze tripped over to the new dock I'd installed for the MJ2. The old oak offered up some shade for people to enjoy when it was docked. Not every party wanted to worry about the motion of the lake.

But damn, my boat was a beauty. I just had to figure out the rest of the logistics of it.

“Mason!”

I turned, shielding my eyes against the glare off the water. Esther was waving me in from the patio.

My break was over.

I took the steps two at a time and a familiar dark-haired woman was standing on the patio with her hands on her hips. A tall man was standing beside her holding an empty baby carrier.

My gaze bounced around the patio and landed on her.

Wild golden hair tumbled down her shoulders with one lock flirting with her cheek. She wore another one of her long dresses, this time showing just how willowy she really was. Adriana was strapped to her in a soft cloth that wrapped around her from front to back in an intricate knot that kept the baby tucked away save for one tiny pink leg with a bright pink sock on.

Her little ankle twisting as she nestled against Emmaline Hauser.

Seeing her was like a punch.

Emma flipped her sunglasses up like a headband to push her hair back. The exhaustion was still evident on the edges, but it was surpassed with the glow that seemed to be a part of her.

Even through the Zoom interview, I’d seen it.

What drew me into asking for a second interview.

Not just because she was beautiful, there was no doubt there, but there was something about her. A sparkle just like the lake I’d been drawn to all those years ago.

Gillian appeared at her side, sliding past her to the patio. Thunder on her face as she looked from Emma to me.

I set down my bucket, blew out a breath, then crossed to the patio. This wasn’t going to be fun.

My waitstaff surrounded Emma, pushing Gillian out of the way to get a look at the baby.

Esther was first in line, leaning in to gently touch Adriana's foot. "Do we finally get to know the name? Mason wouldn't tell us."

Emma met my gaze with a twinkle in her sky-blue eyes. "You didn't tell them?"

I shrugged. "Figured you did all the hard work, you should be able to tell everyone the name."

Emma gently cradled the baby's head, then peeled back the green cloth to show the dark cap of hair. "Everyone, meet Adriana Kelly Hauser. You're going to be seeing a lot of us."

Esther, Penny, and Gillian all turned to look at me.

I raked my fingers through my hair. "So, yeah. Meet the new director of the MJ2. And evidently, her first mate."

ELEVEN



THE GIRL ABOUT MY AGE WITH BLUE-TIPPED SHORT HAIR squeaked. “Oh, thank goodness. I had a good feeling about you.” She nudged the waitress beside her with her shoulder. “Didn’t I say that, Pen?”

The woman rolled her eyes. “I’m Penny and this is Esther. Glad to have you on the team.”

The dark-haired woman brushed between the two waitresses and only narrowly missed bumping me as she stormed off the patio and back into the restaurant. I remembered her from the day I interviewed.

She hadn’t liked me then either.

I leaned down to sniff at Adriana. “Do we smell?”

Esther snickered. “No. That’s Gillian. She only has two modes. Bi—”

“Esther.” Mason’s warning tone made Esther bat her eyes.

“What? I’m not wrong. Anyway. Don’t take it personally, she always has a bug up her butt about something. But if you come in on time and do your job, she leaves you be.”

“Emmaline will be working with me on the engagement party. Then we’ll see how it goes from there.”

“He thinks this is a trial basis.” I swayed lightly as Adriana stirred. She settled back down, her cheek against my chest. “I’ll prove you wrong though. Think I can have a look at the boat again before you open?”

He arched an eyebrow at me. “As if you could forget it?”

“A little fuzzy actually. Pain will do that to a girl.”

He paled.

I reached out and patted his arm. “Promise we won’t give you a heart attack this time.”

He glanced down at the baby. “Sure you want to take her?”

“Absolutely. Where I go, she goes. And might as well get used to it. I think she’ll like the water. Especially since she was born on it.”

He swallowed hard. “Right.”

I turned to Clint. “Was a little hairy when you guys first met. Clint, this is Mason. My new boss.”

Mason gave me a hard look. “Trial boss.”

I waved him off. “You won’t be able to live without me after this party.”

“That is...safe?”

I swayed and did a little twirl and my baby wrap stayed in place. “This sucker is magic. Took me a lot of swearing to figure it out, but once we did...” The baby gave a little hiccup. “Well, she’s still nonverbal, but she really likes it.”

Mason’s brow furrowed. “How can you tell?”

“She’s not screaming.” Kitty gave us a little wave. “I’m Katherine, but you can call me Kitty.”

I turned to Clint. “Why don’t you guys have a seat? I’ll be right back.”

“Are you guys hungry?” Mason dipped his hands into his pockets. “We’re having a barbecue night if you’re up for it. Pretty sure our chef can make you a very Big Mac-like burger, Kitty.”

“Now you’ve done it.” I patted my little bean absently. “Good thing she’s already married to my brother or she’d steal your chef.”

“Did someone mention chef?”

I turned at the voice and found a ruggedly handsome guy with a brick red bandana covering most of his long-ish hair. The ash blond stuck out from the top in a messy, careless cut that only super hot dudes could get away with.

His smile also reminded me of my ex. A bit full of himself and cocky with it.

Kitty tilted her head in that way of hers. “Can you make me a Big Mac?”

“Darlin’, you’ll never try another burger after mine.”

Clint pulled Kitty closer.

Kitty wiggled away. “Better?”

“Much better.”

“I don’t believe you. It’s the perfect burger.”

“First of all, it’s mostly soy so it’s not even fully a burger.”

Kitty waved that off. “It’s cost-saving, and I don’t care. It’s the special sauce. It’s just a vehicle for it and the perfect level of pickle and lettuce.”

I snickered. “She’s right. Big Macs are the perfect bite.”

“And here you keep telling me you’re a vegetarian.” Clint rolled his eyes then dragged Kitty back against his chest.

She looked up at him. “Not me.”

“No, my sister.”

“I can change my mind.” I swayed with Adriana. “Besides, this kiddo made me crave chicken and beef all day long.”

“It’s a well-known fact that protein is very important for gestation.” Kitty’s voice went into research mode.

The fact that she was a super in demand editor only made her scarier with research. The woman was a word carver for a living. None of us had any hope of getting anything done if she went full Kitty on us.

“Sounds like a challenge,” I said with my most charming smile.

Mason folded his arms. “Meet our chef, Henry Stone. And now he won’t be happy until he makes the perfect Big Mac—thanks.”

“I don’t think it can be done.” Kitty sniffed.

“I can’t wait to prove you wrong. Right after I get the grill at exactly the right temperature.”

“You do that.” Kitty linked her arm with Clint’s. “I mean, I’m going to try it of course, but I don’t believe him.”

The chef shook his head. “She’s a tough one, but I like a challenge.”

He whistled as he sauntered to the far side of the patio where an industrial grill was set up.

“He’s interesting.”

Esther sighed. “Henry knows he’s talented. Maybe knows it a little too well if you ask me.”

“But he puts butts in chairs.” Mason’s voice was decisive.

Esther leaned in to give Adriana another little stroke. “We need to get ready for the dinner rush.”

Penny nodded. “The patio is ready, but we’ll get the inside finished for those who don’t want to be outside.”

“I can’t imagine anyone would want to be inside on a day like this.” I glanced out to the water. The last time I was here, things were a little hazy in my memory.

I’d been too worried about getting the job, and then...well, everything had changed.

Absently, I patted my baby’s back. In so many ways. It looked like my life was going to change all over again because of this job.

Clint set the baby carrier on the table near us. “Want us to watch the baby?”

“No.”

Clint swallowed. “You sure?”

“Absolutely. We’re going to figure this one out together, aren’t we, bean?”

Adriana answered with a sigh and a phantom bit of suction. Even in dreams, she was eating.

Mason looked just as uncomfortable, but he met Clint’s gaze. “I won’t let anything happen to them.”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s a dock and a boat. We’re not going off to war, for God’s sake.” I strode across the rest of the patio to the stairs that led to the dock.

Mason hurried after me. “Wait up. Why don’t you let me go first?”

I shot a look over my shoulder.

He held his hands up in surrender. “Or not.”

Slowly, I made my way down the stairs, glad I’d heeded Clint’s warning to wear sneakers instead of the cute shoes I would normally wear with a dress.

The path to the dock was well cleared with large gray stones that made a meandering trail that could either go down to the picnic tables and the smaller dock, or to right where The MJ2 was stationed.

A massive oak tree filtered the light, leaving a nice bit of shade against the afternoon sun.

“Have you thought about putting string lights up in that oak?”

Mason caught up and walked beside me. “Would be a bit of work to get power out here.”

“Sure, you could run a lead out here or use solar lights. They make really nice ones now. I emailed you a few links.”

His lips twitched. “Which email?”

“I didn’t send that many.”

“I had to make a folder *just* for your emails.”

“Okay, so I’ve sent a few. I can’t help it. I’ve got a lot of ideas.” I paused before the edge of the dock. Memories of

Adriana's rather fraught birth made my heart trip.

"Emma?"

"I'm okay. Maybe we can just walk first?"

He nodded, those dark lake blue eyes missing nothing.
"Sure."

Relief washed over me, and we strolled down to the edge of the beach. The quack of ducks rustling in the tall grasses eased my nerves.

"Ducks are big here."

"In the Cove or here?"

"Both."

"Accurate. One of the moms used my shed as a place to hide out this winter and then we ended up with dozens of chicks taking over the grass. And they never left."

"Oh, that's sweet. Is that why you added ducks to the mural on the boat?"

"Caught that, huh?"

"Didn't quite go with the elegant lights the artist painted, but now it makes sense."

I turned to look at my restaurant and pointed up at the second level deck. "A few ducks there too."

I spotted the wooden carving with the wings spread along the top of the roof and another one on the post. Then I noticed a string of ducklings trailing along the spaces between the rungs of the railing as well.

"Clever."

"I try to use local artists when I can. And all the renovations have been done by John Gideon."

She frowned. "I know that name."

"If you like coffee, you probably know his wife."

"Oh, right. Macy. She had mom-friendly half caff coffee that got me through my pregnancy. Who the heck can survive

on one measly cup of coffee?”

“Not this guy.”

I laughed. “You use Macy’s coffee here too?”

“I couldn’t afford it.” He steered me away from the lapping water. “But we do well enough. Henry and his second-in-command make sure we have an elevated breakfast for those who want it.”

“I really like your place, Mason.”

He smiled down at me. “I’m pretty proud of it.”

The smile made my chest tighten. Not just for a feeding time for once. No way could I have that be a thing, so I shoved the unexpected feelings aside. “Just wait until you see what I do to help you with the party boat.”

“I contacted Gideon about your idea for the lighting inside the boat.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Not sure he does work on a boat or not, but we are a lake town. Can’t be the first time he’s had to do something on the water.”

“Speaking of, I think I’m ready to go back to the MJ2. Thanks for distracting me for a few minutes.”

“No problem.” He gestured to Adriana. “Are you going to be holding her all the time?”

“She likes it.”

“I wasn’t knocking it, just wondering how all this was going to work. I honestly can give you more time—”

“Can you really? Because I don’t know about you, but I think you need me just as much as I need you.”

He tipped his head back. “I just don’t see how this is going to work.” He pinched the bridge of his nose.

“We’ll get creative. It’s what I do. Besides, living in Crescent Cove means babies are just a fact of life. Moms work

all the time and I'm sure no one will even bat an eye at seeing me working with bean attached to me."

His gaze rested on me again. "Bean?"

"That's what I've called her since I was pregnant. Before I even knew I was having a girl."

"I don't know. Logistically, this is a nightmare. What happens if something went wrong with the baby on my property?"

"Okay, that's a valid concern. But is it really any different than having people come in with their kids?"

"You know it is."

"Doesn't have to be. And eventually I'll use a daycare, but it's too early to do that yet and mama needs to get some money under her belt before I can do that too."

He was wavering, I could tell. Mostly because he needed me, and I was very thankful that no one else had been good enough for the job.

I linked my arm through his. "Now, we're going to go on that boat and figure out how to give your family the very best engagement party."

He let me do the steering this time. The wind picked up off the water and his scent mixed with the fresh, sunny breeze, making my stomach flip. He was an attractive guy. Not exactly my usual catnip. In fact, he looked more like he belonged on a sailboat than running a restaurant.

He was wearing a polo shirt, for God's sake.

It was soft and a very nice fabric, but it was still a damn polo shirt.

Work, Emma.

Not his smell or his clothing choices. He was my damn boss. None of that mattered.

"You know, if you did find a way to get some power out here, you could line the dock with some cool lights too."

Nighttime parties in the summer would be perfect for that. Theme nights, or just classy dining.”

“I’ll look into it.”

One foot in front of the other.

It was stupid to be nervous about getting back on the boat. Sure, it was the scene of the crime, so to speak. But it wasn’t like there was actual trauma. I mean, my boss seeing all of my parts was probably not the best way to start a relationship, but I was pretty sure he avoided all the birth stuff.

Pretty sure anyway.

I shook my hair behind me and strode onto the boat.

The varnished deck and pristine white interior were innocuous enough. Memories of us chatting here on the main floor came back in a rush. The pride he had in the converted barge was evident.

I could feel it now as he strode to the bar. And just like that day, he went behind the bar to get me a bottle of water. Always taking care of people.

I wasn’t used to that.

My brother was sweet, but he was often in his head or overworked. His first thought was for Kitty most of the time, and the rest of his energy was often given to the animals he cared for.

I knew he worried about me, but it was different.

He was my big brother and the best of my siblings, but he still had clueless male stamped all over him most of the time.

Even knowing Mason only a handful of days, he seemed to be unlike any man I’d ever known. He worried about his employees, his customers, and me—a near stranger—who had done nothing but give him grief.

And he was giving me a chance.

I wouldn’t screw it up.

Adriana chose right then to fuss.

Because of course she did. I took a quick sip of the water and motioned him to the spiral stairs.

“Think we can do those again?”

“Sure you want to?”

I laughed. “Not really, but we’re going to go up there and talk like grown-ups. While I feed this one.”

His neck reddened in that endearing way. “Emma, maybe we should just go back out there.”

“C’mon, Ace. We’ve done this the hard way, now we can do it the easy version.” I came around the bar and pushed him out the other end to the little pass through that led to the stairs.

Mercy, his shoulders were very...strong.

Much different from Pierre who had been definitely in the realm of the academic. Pale and artsy with more brains than brawn. I’d definitely been in love with his brain and his vision more than anything.

Not that I should be comparing them.

Because Mason was not romantic material. In fact, I didn’t even want to think about any man romantically right now.

Regardless of how delicious he smelled and the muscles stretching across his back.

Adriana chose then to make the power of her lungs known.

Mason twisted to look back down at me. “Whoa.”

“Nothing gets between my girl and her food. If you know what’s good for you, you’ll learn her mama is much the same.”

“Noted.” He hustled up the stairs and turned to help me up the last few as my kid twisted and fussed under the wrap.

I headed for the bench that had been the precursor to this little bean and settled down. Luckily, the boba wrap would let me have some privacy.

I glanced up to see Mason had turned around to give me a minute to get situated.

“All right, all right. Hold your horses.” I shifted my clothing and hissed as she latched on. It was getting easier to feed her, but sometimes the shock of pain got in the way of what was supposed to be this beautiful bonding experience.

“Are you okay?”

I met his gaze. “I’m good.”

He sat next to me—enough room between us to keep it from being too intimate. “Does it hurt?”

“A bit. I’ve read about other moms with far more problems, so I guess I’m mostly lucky.” I brushed my knuckle along her soft cheek as the burning sensation subsided. “Not her fault she got a mom from the itty bitty titty committee.”

He laughed. “I’m sorry. Does that make a difference?”

“Actually, I guess it really doesn’t when it comes to milk production. But man, sometimes I wonder if I’ll be enough for her.”

“I don’t think you need to worry about that part.”

“Funny, I’m pretty sure worrying is the main ingredient of being a parent. I’ve done nothing but worry about her since the moment they put her in my arms.” I met his gaze. “Why I’m driving you crazy about this job. And it’s not just about the money. I really like it here in this town, and at The Mason Jar. It feels right to me. Not exactly what I thought my life was going to entail.”

I focused on Adriana again. She wasn’t in my plans, but now that she was here, I couldn’t imagine any other path. I was hers and she was mine—period.

“But I think both of us were looking for each other.”

Mason swallowed hard, surprise on his face.

“Don’t get nervous. I didn’t mean that way.”

“Right, of course.” He cleared his throat. “But I understand. When you came in for the interview, I knew it. No one had really seen the same vision I had for the MJ2. Not even my employees.”

“It’s an extension of the restaurant, but it’s also legit a floating piece of fun. There’s so much that we can do with it. Well, me and your money.”

He laughed. “I definitely got that idea from your emails.”

“I can learn how to use a budget—at least I’m pretty sure.”

“I saved up for the expenses, but we can’t go insanely crazy. My brother and Gina would lose their mind.”

“There’s a lot we can do without spending a kazillion dollars.” I moved my hungry monster to the other side, and she continued her chow time.

“Good, because I’m pretty sure I don’t have a kazillion.”

“Email me your actual budget and I’ll make it happen.”

“*We* will.”

“This is what you’re hiring me for, right?”

“This is a trial basis for both of us.”

“Fine.” I glanced around at the big room. The last time I’d been in here, there had been paramedics and far too many strangers.

“First order of business, do you want a sit-down dinner?”

He stretched out his long legs and laced his fingers over his middle. His jeans were a nice dark wash that looked more professional than the worn-in kind that I personally preferred.

But this angle certainly showed off just how large he was.

I wasn’t exactly the tiniest woman—I was fairly average all around at about five and a half feet. But the way he took up space made my fingertips tingle.

I was tactile and hugged people on the regular. Mason made me want to slide over and enjoy the slice of sun he was sitting in.

Instead, I cuddled Adriana closer. For the first time in a long time, I wished I wasn’t doing all of this alone.

What would it be like to have someone like Mason in my corner? Instead of the whiny narcissist I’d almost saddled

myself with.

Thanks, Terri—truly. She'd done me a huge favor by being irresistible. She'd learn that Pierre often had a problem with women. I'd ignored the signs of his roving eye, figuring I would be woman enough for him.

But when a man was that selfish, there was no one important enough in the end. He'd always choose himself first. Which was why I'd never told him about Adriana.

Why I'd continue to leave him in the dark. Because she would never come second as far as I was concerned.

I'd been ruminating for so long that I hadn't noticed Mason had been quiet a long time. I leaned forward slightly and noticed his eyes were closed.

Not exactly the answer I was looking for. But now that he wasn't busily moving or asking other people what they needed, I noticed the heavy shadows under his eyes and that his normally well-groomed scruff was on the unkempt side.

I'd bet Mason didn't know what sleep or even what a break was.

I was the same, but for a far different reason. Yet another notch in my column for why he desperately needed me.

I'd have to show him just how much.

I gazed down at my milk-drunk bean. "I bet he's needed help for a long time," I whispered to Adriana.

She answered with a sleepy *coo*, and I twisted her to lay on my chest so I could rub her back.

So, I sat in the sun with my new boss and my other boss on my chest and enjoyed the sunshine.

I didn't have the heart to disturb either of them.

TWELVE



I JOLTED AWAKE.

“Oh, hello there.”

I sat up awkwardly, my shoulders instantly locking up from the position I’d fallen asleep in. I reached back to rub out the knot that had formed. “I’m so sorry.”

“No worries. You just needed a little disco nap.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose, biting back a yawn. “What the heck is a disco nap?”

Emmaline was scrolling on her phone. “I read it in a book once and it stuck in my brain. Just means a short nap so you’re ready to party. Or, in your case, work more. Do you ever give yourself a break, Ace?”

I leaned forward, propping my elbows on my knees as the yawn broke free anyway. “Too much to do.”

“You probably need to hire on some more people. Especially if you want to get this big bish going.” She tapped the bench we were sitting on. “I’m really good at organizing, not so much on the waiting tables.” She pocketed her phone. “Speaking of, you dozed off before you could answer me.”

I peered at her. “What about tables?”

She laughed. “Do you want tables or people to wander around?”

“Oh. I imagine a mix of both. There are some older people in the family that will need seating.”

“Okay. Do we need to worry about accessibility?”

I scrubbed my hands over my face. “All good questions.”

“The downside of a boat. However, the ramp is nice and wide. So, even if we have to worry about a wheelchair, walker, or cane, it should be pretty easy to navigate. Stairs are a different thing.”

“The lower deck has a wraparound railing for people to get a little space from the bar and the noise. I had the boat outfitted with speakers as well. A small band could even play on the upper deck.”

Her eyebrows rose. “Okay, now we’re talking. Can I hear the sound system?”

I stood and peered down at the sleeping baby. “You sure?”

“Oh, yeah. First bit of advice my mom gave me was not to do the whole super quiet deal with a baby. This one will sleep through a fire engine—and has.”

“Do I want to know?”

She grinned. “My neighbor decided to test the strength of her range hood. The response time of the Crescent Cove Fire Department was impressive.”

The idea of her small apartment and a fire made my skin prickle. “Everyone was all right?”

“Oh, yeah. You should see how many sprinklers are in our apartments. Luckily, Mrs. Holt only singed her eyebrows and was pissed her new set got wet.”

I shook my head. The relief hit me a little harder than it should have. I barely knew Emma and somehow I already felt responsible for her and the baby. Maybe having her born right in front of me had a little something to do with it.

I refused to think it could be anything else—especially not those huge blue eyes of hers that saw far too much.

I crossed to the panel behind the smaller bar on this level. “Any requests?” I called out.

“Surprise me.”

“Surprise me,” I muttered. Suddenly cognizant of our age difference, I felt stupid. Did I try to find a cool song, or go with a classic?

I decided on the latter since I hadn’t been cool since I’d opened my restaurant. I used to go to the biggest and best parties in the city. Hell, a million different cities when I worked the cruise liners.

Now I was just a freaking boss.

“It’s not that hard, Mason.”

I flicked through my music app on my phone and settled on a summertime song from a few years ago. It had won a Grammy, for God’s sake. It couldn’t be *too* uncool.

I hoped.

“I love this song.” She stood up and swung around the room, her colorful dress swirling out like a bell around her as she and the baby danced together. Her thick, golden hair caught the sun, and she gave me a huge smile.

The shot to my chest was nearly staggering.

Thankfully, it was a short song, and the glimmer of happiness in her smile faded a bit as I shut down the music.

“We should get back before your brother sends a search party.”

“You’re right.”

I gestured to the other stairs. “We can go down there, and I’ll show you the outer deck downstairs.

This staircase wasn’t covered, but I’d made sure to add treads against the spray of the lake or the elements. She stood at the top of the stairs and looked out over the lake. “It really is the best view. I can see why you’d do this.” She gripped the glossy teak railing. “This isn’t like any boat I’ve ever been on. Not that I’ve been on many, but it sure doesn’t look like the tugboats I’ve seen.”

I laid my hand on her lower back to steady her since it was a little harder to go down the stairs carrying a baby than up. “It

was actually an old barge. I bought it at auction last year.”

Xavier and I had bought it. He’d seen my vision for the restaurant and now this boat. He enjoyed being a silent partner with most of his ventures. He didn’t pressure me for a return on investment, but then again, I pressured myself enough for both of us.

“Oh. Isn’t a barge like a big flat work boat?”

“Yes. I liked the space of it. A helluva lot more square footage for people to mill around. Boats are surprisingly small. Even cruise ships when you think about it.”

“I’ve never been on one.” She pushed a strand of hair back behind her ear. “The wind is something.” She held onto my arm as she took each careful step.

“Yeah, why I wanted plenty of cover. I actually spent years working on cruise liners in the kitchen and dining rooms. Was a great way to travel and learn what people like.”

She got to the bottom step and gave me a grateful smile. “She’s only seven pounds, but it sure feels like more when I do the stairs.”

“Maybe we should have brought over the carrier.”

“Nah. I’m pretty much the carrier. Besides, it’s a good workout. It felt like I wasn’t going to bounce back at all those first few days. I’ve always been really active with the stage productions in school.”

Another reminder of just how young she was. I hadn’t managed to stay in college for long, opting for working on airlines and cruise ships instead. It had been good money and I’d been able to bank a sizable nest egg for the restaurant and then a mortgage that only made me cry a few times a month for my house on the lake.

“So, were you on the production side or were you actually acting too?”

“Oh, I definitely wanted to act. I was good too—but I didn’t want to own up to the fact that I was better at producing.”

There was a tinge of sadness to her expression and in her tone. Again, I had the strongest urge to put my arm around her.

“Anyway, this little bean changed my mind there. Even before I found out I was pregnant, I’d been replaced in the eyes of the director of the drama department.”

“Sounds like a dick.”

She laughed. “You have no idea.”

“Do you miss it?”

She didn’t answer for a few beats. She simply rubbed her hand up and down the baby’s back. “You know, I thought I would, but I don’t.”

“Because of her?”

She looked down with a soft smile. “She’s definitely part of it, but I think a bigger part of me being interested in drama was just me pretending I was someone else.”

Because she didn’t like who she was? I couldn’t see that with how bubbly she was. She had the magnetism part down pat anyway.

She crossed her eyes and made a funny face. “Sorry. I’m sure you didn’t sign up for story time with Emma today.”

“Sundays are our slower days. It’s kind of nice to take a break.”

“I get the idea you don’t do that much.”

I folded my arms on the rail, my attention on a sailboat across the lake. It felt like a million years ago when I’d been able to take time to get on my own boat. So long I’d actually moved it over to the dock at my house, hoping I’d use it more.

Definitely not the case.

I sighed. “There’s always so much to do. And hiring people should be freaking easier.”

“Can’t say I’m mad about that since it means I get the job.”

“Trial basis.”

“Sure.” She patted my arm. “You keep telling yourself that.”

She had no idea how many times I’d had to remind myself. For myriad reasons at this point.

“You hungry?”

Her smile widened. “I’m always hungry, remember?”

“Just like this little one.” I reached down to flick my finger over the tiny foot that was hanging out of the intricate wrap thing she wore.

Her little foot flexed, and I curled my finger back into my hand as I pushed away from the rail. So tiny and fragile.

“Going to try Henry’s Big Mac?”

“As long as there’s fries.”

“Loaded fries are on the menu today.”

She rubbed her hands together. “Now that’s what I like to hear.”

As we walked back down the ramp to the dock, she looked up at the oak again. “Did you read my email about the lights?”

“I did. And I have a few vendors I can talk to that might give us more for a better price.”

“Make sure you give me a list of those people so I can wrap it into my budget.”

“I didn’t give you the budget yet.”

“I’m just practicing saying the word,” she tossed over her shoulder as she strode across the grass to the path leading back to the restaurant.

I laughed and picked up my pace to chase after her. We were both laughing as we climbed the stairs and found Clint and Kitty seated at a corner table under one of the umbrellas.

“There you guys are.” Clint stood. He glanced from me to her and then back to me with his brows snapped down. “What took so long?”

“Relax, Sparky. We were discussing the party, not doing anything nefarious.”

Slowly, Clint sat back down.

“It’s not like they can do anything of a sexual nature for another five weeks or so. Even if there are an abundance of hormones flooding Emma’s system. Did you know if you are turned on, sometimes your milk will produce?”

I blinked. I had no reply for that one. At all.

Apparently, neither did Emma.

Clint shook his head. There was as much horror as affection in his eyes as he settled his hand over his wife’s. “Honey, we talked about this.”

“Right. Not supposed to blurt out every thought.” Kitty turned her attention to me. “I speak to my cats quite frankly and forget humans don’t always appreciate the same.”

Emma gave a delighted laugh. “I really love you, Kitty.” She bent and gave her sister-in-law a kiss on the cheek. “Now help me with this thing. I need to cool off a little.”

Kitty untied the double bow at Emma’s hip. There was a startlingly large amount of fabric wadded up there. Emma swung the baby into the crook of her arm as she shrugged out of the yards of material.

“This thing is amazing, but I need to find some lighter weight dresses while I work in all this sun.”

Clint took the baby and Emma gave him a grateful smile.

I wrapped my fingers around the back of the chair and held it out for Emma. She sat down and the soft curls of her hair brushed my forearm before I could let go. The fact that I instinctively wanted to wrap all those curls around my hand made me back up an extra step.

Clint gave me a hard stare as he cradled the baby in the crook of his arm.

“How was the burger, Kitty?” I was hoping that was a safer topic.

“Chef Stone has the correct amount of ego ratio to his food creation. I would give it four-point-seven-five out of five stars.”

I laughed. “I’ll let him know.”

“Oh, I bet Kitty already did.” Emma took a long drink from the glass of water waiting for her.

Kitty shrugged. “Constructive criticism is what I’m good at.”

Emma smiled up at me. “Kitty is a fiction editor.”

“Oh. Wow. I think you mentioned something about that when I visited.”

Kitty straightened her napkin on her lap. “I’m mostly romance novels now, which is why I see nuance a little better.”

Clint’s hand slipped under the table. Kitty gave him a look and they seemed to have an entire silent conversation before she gave me a smile. “I’d love another order of fries.”

“Me too.” Emma wiggled in her seat. “And one of those Chef Macs.”

“I heard that,” Henry called from the grill a few yards away. “And I like that name.”

“Great, now he’ll be even more insufferable.”

“As long as it puts a big juicy burger on my plate, I’ll allow it.” Emma took her fork and knife in each hand and gave me a startlingly gorgeous smile.

Jesus, she was dangerous.

“I’ll just get those fries for both of you. Clint?”

“I’m good.” His voice was cool.

I wanted to tell him he didn’t have anything to worry about, but that would mean I had to own up to whatever it was between me and Emma.

That just couldn’t happen. Beyond my own rules about dating employees, I just didn’t have room in my life for anything else.

Inside the restaurant, things were starting to pick up. I spotted my usual Sunday servers bustling about. The main dining room was half full and the second level looked to be doing just the same.

It was a gorgeous May late afternoon and our lakefront views drew people in for dates as well as family dinners. Sundays tended to skew toward the latter. The peeling laughter of a toddler had me craning my neck.

My brother and Gina stood at the door with Caden and Sami in tow. Sami was bright-eyed and always full of laughter. I crossed to meet them. “I was expecting you in tonight.”

Jared held the baby carrier with a sleeping Caden tucked inside while Gina held the squirming Sami’s hand. The little girl always wanted to be moving.

“Bee wanted to look around again and I was hungry.” Jared brushed an absent hand down Gina’s hair. “Inside or out?”

“Actually, your timing is perfect. Number one, we’re doing a grill deal today so hamburgers are fresh from the grill on the patio.”

“One vote for patio.” Jared grinned.

“Two.” Gina rubbed her middle. “I’ve been running around all day on only a yogurt and some crackers.”

“Well, we need to fix that up.” I nodded to Esther. “Mark off table eleven for my family.”

“You got it.” Ester put an x through the table diagram behind the front desk.

Gina laughed as Sami dragged her forward. “Okay, guess we’re going this way.”

I followed behind with Jared. “I actually hired on someone to help with the MJ2 and she happens to be here.”

“Well, that’s good timing.”

“Yeah, I was going to have you guys stop in tomorrow, but she made a surprise visit.”

“Does she know about us yet?”

“You’re her trial run. It’s a bit of an unconventional hire.”

Jared’s eyebrow arched. “How so?”

“Remember the woman who gave birth on my boat?”

“How could I forget? Even for Crescent Cove, that was a wild delivery. But that was only a week ago, Mase.”

“I know. That’s the unconventional part. I think she needs the work, regardless of the usual six to twelve week break most moms take.”

“Most moms *wish* they could take you mean.” Jared threaded his way around the tables, smiling and nodding as he went. As Chief of the CCPD, he knew just about everyone’s name in town.

“You bring that little fella over here, Chief.”

Jared sighed under his breath, then made a detour toward a table near the window. “Hi, Mrs. Gunderson.”

“You never bring your beautiful family out anymore.”

“Too busy keeping all you folks in line.” He nodded to her husband. “Pete, how are things?”

The older man gave a shrug and continued eating as Mrs. Gunderson continued to prattle on. She was the town gossip, and her husband was well used to her motormouth.

The guy probably kept a few of pairs of earphones within easy reach.

“When is the wedding?” The older woman fussed over the blanket that was well tucked around Caden. No need to cover up on a day that had already hit eighty, at least as far as I was concerned. “Did my invitation get lost in the mail, Jared?”

I pressed my lips together. Getting my brother extricated from Mrs. Gunderson’s clutches was going to take a minute. “I’m going to go introduce Gina to Emma. Nice to see you again, Mrs. Gunderson.”

I grabbed Rami as she was flying by. “Hey, can you put in an order for loaded fries and one regular fries for table ten?”

She unholstered her mini tablet. “Got it.”

“Thanks.” I was just about to slip out to the patio when I caught Gillian’s death glare from across the room at the threshold to the kitchen.

That conversation was going to have to wait. A niggle of guilt stabbed me, but I’d been clear with Gillian that she wasn’t right for the job. She just hadn’t wanted to hear it.

I avoided a collision with Stef, one of my waiters, as he was headed through the door. “Oh, hey. Can we chat later?”

Stef’s blond eyebrows climbed sky high. He quickly shoved his hands through his wild light hair. “Am I in trouble?”

“Nope. Just want to see if you’d be interested in something.”

“Oh.” He nodded. “Yeah, sure. I’ll grab you before the end of my shift.”

“Great. Thanks.” I slapped him on his arm. “It’s a good thing, Stef. Don’t worry.”

Relief relaxed the lines between his brows. “Okay, yeah.” Then he zipped through the door and into the dining room toward the kitchen.

I found Gina standing on the edge of the patio with Sami on her hip. She was pointing at the ducks on the water and the ducklings that were following around the mama Mallard.

“Can we go?” I heard Sami’s plaintive cry. “I want to feed the ducks.”

I came up beside them. “After you have some dinner, I’ll give you some grapes to throw at the ducklings.”

Gina gave me a grateful smile. “How’s that sound?”

“Fine.”

Sami reached for me, and I transferred her to my hip. “How’s it going, squirt?”

“Good.” Her head tipped to my shoulder. “Do you have dino nuggets?”

I tapped her nose. “I think we can figure out something.” I met Gina’s smiling eyes. “I have someone I want you to meet.”

She drew her long hair back into a low tail against the wind coming off the water. “Does it have something to do with the party?”

“Sure does.”

Her eyes twinkled. “Yay. I’m so excited to get this going.”

“I think you’ll like Emma. The two of you can brainstorm while I get you guys fed.”

We approached the table with Emma, Kitty, and Clint. The laughter between Emma and her brother floated our way and Gina couldn’t help but smile back at them.

Emma noticed us first and her eyes went crinkly at the corners as she stood up. “And who is this?”

Sami buried her face in my chest, but soon enough, she was peeking out and smiling at Emma.

“Emma, meet Samantha, aka Sami, my niece. And this is Gina.”

Emma tapped Sami’s red sneaker. “These are very pretty and sparkly.”

Sami giggled and pushed her nose further into my shirt.

Emma straightened and held her hand out to Gina. “Pleased to meet you. I’m excited to hear your ideas for the party.”

Gina pulled out her phone. “I have so many notes.”

I could only imagine.

Sami kept peeking out to see Emma, who obliged with a bit of peek-a-boo as she held a conversation with Gina.

They spoke of colors and decorations in rapid fire. Suddenly, Sami leaned out, and without warning, Emma snatched her up and threw her over her shoulder.

Sami shrieked with laughter before Emma dropped her down to hook onto her hip. “Where do you think you’re going, young lady?”

Gina’s eyes went huge. “Wow, great reflexes.”

Emma did a similar sway to what she did with her own daughter as Sami settled down. “Toddlers aren’t much different than squirming puppies. I volunteer to help my brother at the kennel sometimes.”

Clint waved. “They all love her at the clinic.”

“My brother is a vet over at Thorny Paw Clinic.”

“Oh, we bring our dog there.” Gina straightened Sami’s shirt which had ridden up in all the twisting. “Dr. Thorn is great.”

“He’s a great boss.” Clint spread his arm along the back of Kitty’s chair. “This is my wife, Kitty.”

“Now that the niceties are out of the way.” I ushered Gina toward the adjoining table. “Let’s get you guys settled.” I grabbed one of the booster chairs for Sami and did a quick check on Emma’s baby, who was snoozing away in her carrier in the chair next to the one Emma had evacuated.

I brushed my hand over Sami’s curls as Gina buckled her in and the women fawned over my niece’s glittery light-up sneakers.

I sneaked away while they were chatting and tried not to notice the laser beam stare that Clint was shooting into my back as I hurried into the dining room.

Whatever he was imagining didn’t matter. I knew the lines and I lived within them for a reason.

All I wanted right now was a damn burger. And a burger I would have.

THIRTEEN



A CUTE WAITER WITH MESSY SURFER HAIR BROUGHT US MORE food while Clint and Kitty were debating names for their impending baby. They didn't know what the sex of the baby was yet, but knowing Kitty, she'd be finding out as soon as humanly possible.

She liked to be ready for every eventuality.

She was perfect for my brother.

I wasn't quite sure how Mason managed to have chicken nuggets in animal shapes, but they came out with a squeezey applesauce that made Gina and Jared's adorable daughter eat every scrap on her plate.

Jared—the Chief, for God's sake—joined us and we hashed out a preliminary list of what they were looking for party-wise. Since there would be a rotation of people in and out thanks to the police department and firemen in their family, we'd opted for a longer than usual party.

Handily, being the brother of the owner of the boat meant we didn't have to worry about a by-hour cost boost to the party budget. I'd have to talk to Mason about that for future parties.

When I'd rented out theaters for plays, there were definitely hourly rates. And if we could book more than one party in a day, it would certainly get his name out there for bookings.

I knew most business owners liked that bottom line.

And I really needed a planner for all of these details. I liked keeping a notebook and paper planner because digital could so easily be fucked up. There were a lot of details to keep track of and I would need all the organizing I could get—and that meant some digital programs as well.

I'd have to do a little research about that tonight after bean went down for the night. Well, most of the night. She woke every three or four hours. Just enough sleep for me that it wasn't as easy to drop back to sleep after Adriana visited the milkbar.

Excitement buzzed under my skin. The last few months of my degree had been a slog. I'd gone through the motions for the final production. Mostly because Pierre had soured my love of theater once I knew how fickle he was.

And hiding the fact that a baby was growing inside of me while my ex fawned over the buxom Terri had been a lot to digest. Luckily, his starry eyes for the new lead had allowed me to fade into the background.

A place I wasn't exactly used to being in.

In the end, I'd finagled the last credits I needed for my degree during the winter semester and graduated early. The idea of walking for my diploma had held little appeal once I'd felt bean kick for the first time.

School and the drama department had been far more fun when I was the darling of the troupe. With a little distance, I'd realized it was belonging to the group I loved more than the acting. Oh, sure I loved the attention—what woman wouldn't?

Walking away had been far easier than it should have been.

Now, sitting here on this patio, I realized I'd been happier in the last week than I had been in the last two years of college.

I peeked over the edge of my carrier to check on Adriana. Most of it had definitely been because of her, but Crescent Cove was definitely a big part of it too. I hadn't realized how much I'd missed Clint and having a community.

But it was different from growing up with the looming shadow of my father in Clintondale. Him being the mayor of the small town meant people were always in our business, but also, my dad was forever looking for a photo opp with one of us.

His huge, perfect family.

And while we didn't have a massive amount of dysfunction, we'd all grown up in the public eye and that had its own set of problems.

Here, no one knew who I was.

Sure, I was being talked about right now but a water birth on a sixty-five-foot barge was going to take some time to simmer down. Eventually, something equally noteworthy would happen and people would forget about me.

In Clintondale, not so much.

I couldn't even get away with breaking curfew with all the eyes that had been on me. Would Jared and Gina's kids feel the same?

The Chief's kids were a bit different than the mayor's kids, but not by much.

The conversation flowed between Jared and my brother and Gina knew just how to make Kitty feel at ease which often wasn't the case with new people. My sister-in-law saw things through a slightly different lens than other people.

It always made our conversations lively, but sometimes people didn't know how to react to her. Gina had a natural affinity with people, which let me relax.

I glanced through the patio doorway to where Mason stood talking to a patron. I stood up. "Mind watching bean?"

Kitty shook her head. "No problem."

"There's an extra bottle in the diaper bag if she wakes up."

"Got it."

I shifted the carrier to my chair so she could keep a better eye on her. Thankfully, my kid continued blissfully napping

while conversations and clinking dishes were the soundtrack to the early evening.

My bladder made itself known, which caused a detour before I went to see Mason. I slipped into the bathroom and sighed at the wrinkled state of my dress. I loved the boba wrap for carting Adriana around, but it left me a melted mess in this heat.

I took care of the most pressing concern first and when I opened the stall door, I found the dark-haired woman from earlier leaning against the counter with her arms crossed.

“Hey.” I smiled, hoping to diffuse the woman’s bitch mode that was obviously set on level thirteen. “Gillian, right?”

Her heavily shadowed icy blue eyes narrowed. “Lisa, right?”

“Emma,” I corrected.

“Right. Sorry.”

She definitely was *not* sorry. Quickly, I washed my hands and raked my fingers through my hair. There was no use. The heat of the day had volumized my already big hair.

“Is this supposed to be an intervention, or are you warning me off your turf?”

Gillian’s raisin-colored nail tapped against her forearm, but she didn’t say a word.

“Oh, are we going with intimidation instead?”

She didn’t blink, just stared at me.

“Okay, well, good talk.” I grabbed a paper towel to dry my still damp fingers and tossed it in the bin. When my hand was on the handle of the door, she finally spoke.

“Don’t get comfy here, Emma.”

I glanced over my shoulder. “I’m not here to make trouble. I’m just helping out Mason with the barge and his brother’s party. Period.”

“I see the way you are with him. He doesn’t fraternize, so don’t get any ideas.”

“Fraternize?”

“Is that too big a word?”

I shut the door and turned back to her. “I’m here for a job. I just had a freaking baby. Whatever ideas you have about me and Mason are colored by your own problems, girlfriend. Maybe you should examine the reason he doesn’t *fraternize*.”

She took a step forward, her hands fisted at her sides.

“I wouldn’t. I have six siblings. I’ll break you in half.” I relaxed against the door. Evidently, I needed to be the bigger person. “Look, we need to work together. No need to pee a circle around Mason, darlin’. I’m here for the paycheck and because this job was made for me. That’s it.” I heard someone in the hallway and opened the door.

Gillian brushed by me before I could make my dramatic exit. She threw a cold look over her shoulder. “Stay away from Mason.”

That was going to be difficult since we were planning his brother’s party together. Whatever. The crazy chick was going to have to deal with me being around. It didn’t surprise me that Mason didn’t dip his nib in the company ink pot.

If he dipped it in Gillian, it might come back out broken and iced over.

I left the bathroom and bumped into Mason just outside the kitchen.

He frowned. “Were you looking for me?”

“Sort of.” I was about to mention Gillian’s she-wolf antics, but I decided I didn’t want the drama. I didn’t want to give him any more reason not to hire me. “Since my brother’s here with me, I figured I could do paperwork with you.”

His eyebrow arched. “Is that right?”

Totally a last-minute thought, but I was going with it. “And maybe snag some more of those fries.”

He laughed. “I think I can handle that. C’mon back with me.” He pushed the door open to the kitchen and held it for me. “Hey, Jack. Can you put some fries down for me?”

“On it.” The woman wore a deep purple tied cap that reminded me of something a surgeon would wear. She was moving around the kitchen with a fluid grace that spoke of years of experience.

Mason motioned me forward and lightly touched the small of my back. “My office is more like a closet, but it should give us a minute of quiet.”

“Gina and Jared are very sweet together. He loves her like crazy.”

He laughed. “They’ve been best friends for years, but we all knew Jare was wild about her. Just didn’t want to take the leap.”

“He’s lucky Gina didn’t get tired of waiting.”

Mason opened his door and held it open. The space was tight and the spicy clementine scent of him made my nose prickle. The memory of it on the boat as he stayed close to me while my contractions eclipsed everything else out of my sphere was now layered with another fresh start.

Both big moments in my life.

My kid was paramount, but there was something about this restaurant—this man...all of it—that felt bigger than I’d been prepared for. Was it just the sense of overwhelm that sat so close to the surface of my life every day?

Maybe it was just getting mixed up with Mason showing me kindness.

I hurried inside and sat down in the ancient chair on the other side of his desk. I gave him a bright smile. “Guess we need to talk salary.”

Mason sat down behind his desk. He pushed some papers aside and flipped through another stack. “Sorry, I wasn’t expecting anyone to actually see my chaos. Between the

wedding, the party, and trying to get the MJ2 off the ground, I don't have time to do my regular paperwork.”

“Don't you have a front-end manager to help out?”

“I've been training Rami, one of our servers, to take some of it off my plate but...”

I relaxed against the back of the chair. “But it's just easier to do it yourself than train someone?”

He sighed. “Got it in one.”

“Same. Why they loved me at The Clubhouse.”

His eyebrow rose. “Was that on your resume? I don't remember it.”

I shook my head. “What we called the small theater on campus. It was as rickety as a tree house and always needed work. But all our money would go to costumes and sets—not much left for upgrades to the actual building.” It was janky as hell, but I'd always loved it.

Mostly because the magic of the short and long programs made the stage come alive. The smallest one-act plays, the vibrant ensembles, and even the solo performances that could be hit or miss—they all infused the space with a different energy. And on the special nights, you just didn't notice that the curtains were fraying, and the stage was worn thin in spots from thousands of feet and sets over the years.

“Anyway, I was usually the one who was roped into doing set direction when we were shorthanded.”

He leaned back into his chair so far that it squeaked. “So, you've been playing manager for years—and not getting paid.”

“I know what I'm worth.”

His blue eyes were darker in the low light of the space. He wasn't lying about the room being close to a closet. It was windowless and probably had been a storage unit at one time. But the man filled the space. Some of it was the chaos of his desk, but there were other things that screamed Mason.

The sailboat on the high shelf with the hand painted *Ship Happens* on the stern, the bobble head doll with the iconic NY Yankees jersey and a head that looked suspiciously like Mason, Mardi Gras beads hanging from a tack on the wall—all a little ridiculous set away from his work. High up where it couldn't be in the way, but also maybe where it wasn't really noticed either. There was also a photo of Mason with two guys mugging for the camera in the front of a waterfall.

He followed my gaze. “Hawaii. When I worked for a major cruise liner who shall not be named.” The crinkles at the corner of his eyes showed just how much he enjoyed the memory. “A rare day where we got to actually go out and enjoy the day. When I worked for them, I thought it would be all-day excursions.” His laugh was deprecating. “Not the case.”

He leaned forward and set his elbows on the desk as papers crinkled. “I know we’re doing a trial basis, and I thought maybe a set fee would be better than a weekly. That way if you want to bounce, you don’t have to worry about paperwork.”

I folded my arms over my middle. “Like a freelancer?”

“Exactly. If we find we like what’s going on between us, I can put you on the books with a regular salary that will reflect what your responsibilities will entail.”

I gave him a bland look. “If you think I’m desperate enough to take a crap pay out just to prove myself, we probably aren’t going to work out.”

He wrote a number on a post it note and tossed it at me.

I caught it out of the air and turned it to face me.

The number was generous—enough that I shot a look at him. “You’re not feeling sorry for me and giving me a handout are you, Mason?”

The chair squeaked again. Before he could answer me, there was a knock at the door and the scent of loaded fries made me want to weep. God, I was going to gain weight if I

worked here. How was I supposed to get the baby weight off if I ate my baby's weight in fries every day?

A harried kid who barely looked old enough to have graduated from high school held a tray. "You ordered fries, Mase?"

"You can set them down there, Mateo. Thanks."

The kid's Adam's Apple bounced as he swallowed and looked at all the papers on the desk.

Mason took pity on him and reached for the tray. "All good, I got it."

The kid nodded and gave me a shy smile before he escaped.

"He's young and I'm not sure if Jackie or Stone will be the one to eat him alive, but he's coming around."

"Kitchen's are no joke," I agreed. "Why I wasn't cut out to be a waitress. Though I did bartend a bit."

"That I can see."

I stared down at the post-it, the numbers blurring a little. I didn't want to turn down that kind of money, but I also wouldn't take advantage. Even if that would be a nice chunk of money to help me get through the next month or two.

Diapers were damn expensive.

Mason tossed a towel over his desk and put down the tray, then dug into the fries. "The first time we met—on that Zoom call—I had a good feeling. I also knew that to get good help, I'd need to pay a better than average wage. You'll earn that money, Emma. I promise you that."

I tapped my finger against the block of sticky notes then set it on the desk and reached for a fry. I popped one in my mouth and the cheese and chives made me moan. I glanced at Mason. "Sorry, these fries are going to be the death of me."

His dark eyes were a bit stormy and the crispy, fluffy potato got stuck in my throat. That he was so attractive was very annoying.

I kept on chewing then reached for a pen out of the Yankees mug on the edge of his desk. I scrawled my signature underneath the number and tossed it back to him.

He caught it against his chest with a grin. “Guess we have an understanding.”

“I guess we do.”

FOURTEEN



THE NEXT WEEK WAS BRUTAL. WE'D ONLY HAD SIX DAYS TO get the barge ready for this party and that included the lights that Emma convinced me needed to happen ASAP.

Which was why I was standing outside the front of The Mason Jar at six freaking thirty waiting for one of Gideon's guys to show up.

Since mine was a last-minute job, I was at the mercy of Gideon Gets It Done's schedule. It wasn't their fault that I'd had to cover the closing shift for the last three nights, or that an order for sixteen pounds of lobster somehow became sixty.

Or that sleep was so goddamn elusive that I'd needed a double shot of espresso this morning. Thank God Brewed Awakening was open early.

It was Thursday and the party was coming at me like a freight train in T-minus three days. I closed my eyes and dragged in a deep breath of water-tinged air. Just a few more days and I could sleep for a whole day.

The sound of tires over the gravel in my parking lot made me open my eyes. I was expecting a truck, but instead the monstrosity of a station wagon Emma drove came up the lane. She parked in her usual spot near the path to the lake.

She spent most of her days on the barge and liked her car accessible if something came up with the baby.

She spotted me and waved.

I crossed the parking lot to meet her. “You didn’t have to come in early.”

“I know.” She ducked back into the backseat where Adriana was strapped in.

I hovered behind her. “Here, let me get her.”

“It’s okay. I got her.”

“I know.” Gently, I urged her back. “But you carry her all day. I don’t mind.” The baby was still teacup-sized and still made my chest tighten just picking her up, but I was getting better about it.

“All right.” She grinned up at me. “Look at you, getting all brave.”

“Oh, be quiet.”

She bumped me with her hip then she went around to the other side and got the diaper bag and her own giant to-go cup of coffee.

I set my coffee on the roof of her wagon and carefully unbuckled the baby. She was wearing a tie-dye onesie with a matching hat and bright pink socks. I still felt huge and awkward holding her, but at least Adriana was getting more baby-sized by the day.

She still mostly fit in the palm of my hands. I transferred her to the crook of my arm and took the diaper bag from Emma when she came back around to us.

“I can do it, you know.”

“I know. But you don’t have to.” I sipped from my coffee. “What’s on the agenda today?”

“Since you have the workers on the boat today, I figured I’d set up the tree.”

I frowned. “What’s wrong with the tree?”

“Lights, remember?”

“You can’t be climbing that tree.”

She rolled her eyes. “I have some help coming, don’t worry.”

“Who?”

Emma rounded to the back of her wagon and opened the trunk. “I stopped at your dad’s place.”

“How did you get my dad to wake up this early?”

She gave me a sunny smile and shoved her sunglasses on her face. “I have my ways. I ran into him at the grocery store last night and we got to talking.”

“Alan Brooks?”

“Do you have another dad?”

“Maybe a doppelgänger. My dad doesn’t get up early for anyone but his orchids.”

“Guess you can count me in on that list now.”

Not shocking. Emma seemed to be able to get anyone to do things for her.

“Anyway, while I was there, I ran into Maddie Masterson. She works a few days a week at your dad’s shop.”

“I know.”

“Don’t get all grumpy. Drink more coffee.”

The fact that she was so chipper before seven in the morning made my head spin, but she’d obviously been moving way before then. “What the heck time did you get up?”

“Miss Fussypants had me up at 4:20.” She hauled out a canvas bag full of eucalyptus. “I remember the days that forty-two meant something far different.”

I snorted. It had taken more than a minute for me to remember those days. “Okay, trade me for the baby. You’re not supposed to be lifting heavy things yet.”

She rolled her eyes but accepted Adriana with that bright-eyed, wide grin that gave me a stab of envy. Not that Emma didn’t smile at me plenty, but there was something so utterly besotted when she gazed at Adriana.

And I was officially going to go soak my head.

I gathered the two canvas bags and another vinyl flat-bottomed rectangular bag that held more greenery and fragile fan-looking things. “What are you going to do with all this?”

“Remember those mason jars we ordered?”

“How could I forget?”

She wrinkled her nose at me. “Well, I want to make a feature out of the grass in front of the oak tree. Maddie didn’t have anything going on today and said she’d help me decorate.”

“Does that include the lights?”

“No, I bribed my neighbor’s grandson to help me with that. He’s a metal artist from the community college. I told him what I wanted to do, and he came up with an even better idea.”

“You just convinced him to help?”

She pushed her sunglasses up on the top of her head where all her golden curls were gathered in a messy twist. “I said bribed, remember? He’s got the hots for Maddie.”

“How do you know that?”

“Me and bean like to hang out at Brewed Awakening. I hear stuff. Maddie started working at the café during her summer break from college.”

“And for my dad?”

She tucked Adriana into the wrap thing she wore daily. Shifting the material until the baby was situated just right against her chest. “Didn’t you have more than one job when you were in your twenties?”

“Okay, true.” I’d had about four.

“Anyway, Jensen has been in every time she has a shift.” She took the lightweight bag from me.

“Jensen?”

“The grandson. Keep up, dude.”

There was no way in hell I'd ever be able to keep up with Emma. She'd only moved to Crescent Cove recently, for God's sake. And I'd thought I knew everyone in this damn town.

"I ran into Jensen at the café when I got coffee this morning—he was just heading home from his studio and stopped for breakfast at Macy's. We got to talking and voila, I have two helpers, and if all goes well, they'll probably have a date by the end of it. I am awesome."

She spun into a little twirl and I couldn't help but laugh at her.

The sound of a truck turning into the parking lot interrupted her little dance.

Lucky Roberts waved from his open window. "Sorry I'm late!" He pulled in beside Emma's wagon. "Baby earache had us up until the wee hours."

"Hey, I didn't expect you. Gideon said you had a job already." I set the larger bag down.

"I know. The countertops got backordered so we were at a standstill on the kitchen remodel." He hopped out of the truck, all nearly six and a half feet of him. He scooped up his long hair and tied it back with a rubber band. "Here I am."

"Emma, meet Lucky. He's done a lot of the work for us at the restaurant."

"Nice to meet you." Lucky came forward and peered down at Emma's precious cargo. "And who is this?"

"Adriana."

His face softened. "I remember when Bella was that little. Now she's a holy terror like her mama."

Emma did her sway thing. "She's a little over two weeks now."

Lucky whistled. "And you're up and around, looking fresh as a daisy? Don't tell Tish that." He brushed the baby's foot then headed back to his truck. "That's my wife, by the way. We—well, she—had twins a few years ago and she still

threatens my manhood daily when I ask about having another one.”

He grabbed his toolbox then met us at the back of her wagon. “Need help with anything else in there?”

“No, but I have to go pick up a few things this afternoon. I might need help then.” Emma tipped her head back. “You are a big one.”

Lucky grinned. “Less need for ladders. Makes me quite handy.”

I rolled my eyes and picked up the other bag. Lucky’s charm was legendary. Between the two of them, their annoying laughter followed us to the dock. How could anyone be that happy at this hour?

We stopped by the tree to offload her greenery and some fluffy, filmy material that reminded me of weddings. I’d had enough events at The Mason Jar that I recognized the bits that went with flowers and bows.

I was generally more focused on the food and making sure there was seating than what was actually part of the decorations.

“So, what exactly do you want me to do today?” Lucky turned around to walk backwards along the dock toward the barge.

Emma slid an arm along the baby’s butt for a little support as we hit the incline of the ramp. “Since the party will be late afternoon into evening, we need more light than is currently wired in there.”

“We put together some mason jar sconces for you already, and we got the gear for them to be lit up, but we need them hard-wired because of the way the boat is set up.”

“Cool. Can do. Handy I got that electrician certification, huh?”

“Did you?” I grinned. “Well, that’s good to know.”

“I’m still technically an apprentice. Takes years to make the big bucks. But I can handle this as long as the boat actually

has power.”

“It does. We have it wired for music and wireless internet.”

“Excellent. Should be pretty easy then. She’s a beauty. I keep bugging Ruby to get a boat since we have a house on the water, but she likes looking at the lake more than being on it.” Lucky stepped onto the deck and turned to help Emma, but we already had a shorthand for onboarding.

Emma gripped my forearm as she held the baby close and stepped over the small gap to the deck.

Lucky gave me a smirky glance and then picked up his tool case.

Emma ignored Lucky, or missed it entirely, and started chattering about where she wanted the lighting. And if she could have extra plugs around on each level for future needs.

The more events we had, the more we’d figure out what the MJ2 needed, and she was smart to think ahead. Exactly why I’d wanted to hire help for this venture.

When I’d commissioned the overhaul on the boat I truly hadn’t known what the hell I was doing. It was delivered, pretty as a picture, but it was a bare bones operation inside, that was for sure.

I was glad the first party would be with family who wouldn’t give me too much shit for any missteps we’d make.

Lucky listened intently to Emma’s directions and made a few suggestions of his own. Within an hour, Lucky had his tools out and the drill going.

I broke down the pack and play crib we’d set up on the second floor while Emma oversaw the first light installation.

She’d been busy. A table was set up in the corner of the second floor with a sign-in station for people to grab a mason jar for their glass. Waterproof black stickers that looked like a chalkboard adorned the front of each glass. A sign behind the glasses said:

Your glass for the night for whatever tastes right!

The wedding party and immediate family glasses were already filled in with fun block lettering, with a bunch of blank glasses set out. I spotted a crate full of more jars peeking from underneath the burgundy tablecloth.

She'd also decorated the table with cedar wood rings to create levels for battery operated candles. Thin wired fairy lights coiled around the wood to hold them together in groups of three.

She'd also tacked a bit of wood around the edge of the table to prevent anything from sliding off from the motion of the water.

Amazingly, the woman thought of damn near everything. I made my way over to where Lucky was working and the two of them were chatting about sleep deprivation.

Emma smiled at me. "I wondered if there was a way to keep the tables from sliding around and Lucky said he could put a few braces either on the floor or the wall where we could lock in the tables."

"I don't know if I want holes in the new teak floors."

Lucky was drilling in one of the sconces. "Or I can build collapsible tables into the wall, then you can just tuck the legs under and lay them flat against the edges of the boat walls."

"Could you do that this week, or do you need to do that in the future?"

"Since I'm holding my butt for those counters, I'm open."

"Go for it then. Just write up the materials for me."

"Excellent. I should have enough pine at Gideon's shop. If you want nicer wood, you'd have to order it though."

"Can we seal it against the elements?"

"I can clear coat it with a few layers of varnish, but it might not be dry in time with how freaking hot it is."

I raked my fingers through my hair. “Yeah, we’re running into that with quite a few things.”

Emma swayed with the baby for a few seconds before she answered. “How about we put them up and use a tablecloth for the party, then we can treat it between the next parties?”

I nodded. “Next party isn’t until the holiday. Does that give you enough time, Lucky?”

He dug out a microfiber cloth from his pocket and wiped off the fingerprints on the brass. “Yeah, five days should be good with the industrial fans we’ve got.”

“Then write it up. Good ideas, both of you. When I got the barge rehabbed, I assumed it would be easy to set up tables when I needed them.”

Lucky picked up another scone. “The lake isn’t exactly rocking like the ocean, but we can get some swells when the wind gets moving across the water.”

“Especially in the winter.” I crossed my arms. “We’ll have to figure out some ways to winterize it too. It’s too big for the covered docks.”

“I’ll look into it.” Lucky grinned. “The wife is a fabricator. We might be able to figure out a way to put some shutters on this big baby.”

That sounded like money. Another reason to make sure I started getting some events booked.

Using the boat for the engagement party was going to be my gift to my brother—as well as the food. Not that he knew that yet, but it was the least I could do for him. Jared had done a lot for me as a kid.

It had just been the three of us growing up and our dad had to work a lot to feed two hungry growing boys. And he’d been hurt by our mom leaving, which left him a bit emotionally absent at times. Jared had done what he could do to fill in, but we’d all been a mess.

Now I could give back to my big brother for all the times he’d done what he could to take the place of our dad.

I slid the strap of the pack and play over my shoulder. “We’ll leave you to finish up. The sound system speakers can pair to your phone if you want some tunes.”

Lucky grinned. “Now that’s what I like to hear.”

“I’ll be right outside if you need me.” Emma had her trusty notebook and planner in hand. “I’ll make you some sketches for what we need then you can measure it out.”

“Sounds good.” Lucky saluted her and gave me a lopsided grin as he dug out his phone. “Now, do we want Metallica or a little Kenny Chesney since we’re on the water and it’s freaking eighty degrees?”

“Mixed bag is my vote.” Emma’s eyes glittered with happiness.

“Mine too,” I answered.

“Okay, that makes me three.”

We left Lucky to his playlist as Emma and I walked back down to the tree. It was barely eight in the morning and the temperature was already soaring. I’d grab one of our pop-up tents for her and the baby while she was working outside.

“Make sure you go inside out of the heat. I’ll help as much as I can, but Thursday starts our busy time.”

She waved me off. “I’ve got plenty of help coming in today. Don’t you worry about me.”

I didn’t do much else but worry about her lately.

“Now tell me what you’re going to do with the tree.”

I listened with half an ear as she gave me the download of what she wanted to do. Between the lights and the mason jars she wanted to use, the tree and the dock would be lit up like a damn runway.

Based on what I’d seen so far on the boat, I had every faith she’d take care of every little thing on her list.

I set up the playpen so she could stick bean in the shade and give herself a break from carrying her around. Adriana

might be under ten pounds, but she had to feel heavy after toting her around for a few hours.

Now that the baby wasn't strapped to her, she looked like a freaking college co-ed. Her long, golden legs were distracting as fuck in the denim cutoffs. She was a flurry of energy as she unpacked her bags and spread out the greenery from my dad's shop.

"I didn't know you were going to see my dad."

"There's a new flower shop on Main Street. I actually almost went in there but then saw your dad's name on the greenhouse a little farther down. Keep it in the family right? Bet my budget dollars can stretch more with a Brooks." She grinned up at me, a fat golden curl slipping out of her twist, and I had the strongest urge to push it back.

Instead, I shoved my hands in my pockets. "Does my dad know about the other flower shop?"

"Not sure. I didn't mention it."

"Good." My dad was pretty proprietary about his status in the town. From weddings to proms, Brooks Greenery was the most enduring flower shop in the Cove. There'd been a few others, but they'd never lasted more than a few years.

"He brought me back to his workshop and helped me figure out what I wanted. Since it's been so hot, we needed greens that would last in the heat. On Sunday, he'll come out and add some blooms to match Gina's colors. Handily, he's doing her wedding flowers, so he knew what we needed."

And I'd bet she charmed him just like she charmed everyone else.

Including me.

"What else do you need? You mentioned you had to go get supplies."

"Did you see the little wood stumps I got for the tables? I need real ones for out here. I want this totally lit up." She pointed up. "We're going to fill the tree and then down here

for photo ops. Will be great for weddings in the future. You do quite a few of them at the restaurant too right?”

I nodded. “You gunning for more than event planning for the barge, Emma?”

She dropped down to sit cross-legged to separate the baby’s breath from cattails. “I don’t think I’m suited for being like a wedding planner. I’d probably punch a bridezilla.”

I snorted. “So, I should worry about difficult clients?”

She froze, with her hand over a bunch of eucalyptus, then went back to her sorting. “No. And that was very unprofessional to say.”

I crouched in front of her. “Wasn’t a test. I promise.”

She met my gaze. “You are my boss—hopefully. It was a dumb comment.”

“You’ll find that we need to vent as much as possible. As long as we aren’t around a patron, that is.”

“I don’t want you to think I don’t appreciate you giving me a chance. Last thing I want to do is to seem flippant.”

I reached to still her hand before she shredded the baby’s breath. “You’re helping me as much as I’m helping you—believe me.”

Her heavy lashes lifted, and those impossibly blue eyes met mine. “Not possible.”

I let her go and stood. I didn’t want her to feel beholden to me. The imbalance between us was already enough to make my shoulders ache. The fact that I felt protective of her already either made me stupid or in a whole lot of trouble.

I had a feeling it was both.

I was saved from trying to fill the heavy space between us by Maddie pulling up in her ancient Jetta. She honked at us as she parked, then she pulled something out of the backseat and ran up the hill with two canvas bags full of more greenery, this time in darker, eggplant purple tones.

She dumped the bags, then she smiled at me. She was still all legs and arms but instead of the coltish teen I remembered, she'd slipped into her early twenties.

Hell, I was pretty sure she was the same age as Emma.

How the hell did that happen?

And it was a rude reminder just how many years separated Emma and I. Was that why I was feeling responsible for her?

No.

That was definitely the problem. I was feeling protective for very dangerous reasons. I had to keep reminding myself of my own rules.

I didn't get involved with people I worked with—period. Been there and destroyed that with fire.

“Sorry I'm late, Emma. Mr. Brooks pulled some more greens for you. Wait until you see the Bells of Ireland he just got in. It's going to look so cool trailing from the tree. Especially with the fairy lights you told me about.” She started pulling bundles out of the bags and the crinkle of cellophane from the bundles brought me back to the days of unpacking deliveries for my dad.

She waved at me with a bundle of purple pampas, the feathery leaves swaying happily. “Hey, Mason. Your dad says hi and he really loved the stuffed chicken you had sent over yesterday. He also said to stop sending them, even though you really know that's not true.”

“You got his number.” I shook my head. “He tells the delivery guy that every day—and then snatches the bag.”

She collapsed onto her knees. “Exactly. I'm really glad you asked me to come help. I love playing with displays. Macy is even letting me pick out the new window decorations. Can you believe it's almost June?”

The quick-fire subject changes left me reeling. “No, I really can't. But let's slow down time for now, huh? We have a ton to do before Sunday.”

“We’ll get it done.” Emma’s voice was firm and determined.

“I know we will.” I met her gaze before breaking the connection to turn to Maddie. “Thanks for helping. We can get you on the books this afternoon and make sure you get paid.”

She waved me off. “Nah, just feed me and keep me in Diet Coke and we’ll be just fine.”

“I can handle that.” I walked over to the pack and play to see Adriana was still sprawled out with her arms over her head sleeping the sleep of the innocent. “I’ll send a few of the guys out from the kitchen to set up one of the pop-up tents for some shade. It’s going to be another hot one.”

“Thanks.” Emma gave me a reassuring smile. “We’ll get it all done. You’ll see.”

“I know.” I gave Maddie one last smile. “Thanks again, Maddie.”

“No problem!”

I turned on my heel and headed for The Mason Jar. Putting a little space between Emma and I was definitely in order.

Problem was, I was beginning to think no amount would be enough.

FIFTEEN



MADDIE'S HAPPY CHATTER KEPT ME FROM DWELLING ON HOW weird Mason had gotten right before he left. What the heck was going on in his head?

I thought we'd had a good day, what with Lucky taking care of the boat and plans progressing outside. Well, after I got all the work done anyway. I could see it all in my mind. A side benefit from years of set design.

The drama department never had enough money so all of us would do the work. I'd gotten very good at finding ways to stretch a dollar, or in this instance, a mason jar.

A few hours later, we had a good system going. Breakfast sandwiches and a white pop-up tent had arrived for our morning break. I even got to eat the whole sausage, egg, and cheese croissant before Adriana woke for another feeding between the next round of naps.

Maddie and I had an assembly line going as we filled the larger jars with the spiky purple shoots, greenery, and fluffy bits of baby's breath. I tucked a battery-operated tea light into the bottom of each jar. They were cleverly linked to a remote so I could set them on a timer for Sunday.

I set the next jar with the rapidly growing pile and gave a quick glance to the playpen where Adriana was blissfully sleeping. The long morning naps were key for getting a lot done. I wished I could lay down next to her. She'd been fussy during the night again. Growing pains according to the baby books and baby reddit I was always on.

Was this my new reality? Not knowing anything?

Sure felt like it.

“Everything okay?”

I blinked out of my think-a-thon. “Yeah. Just tired. Miss Fussypants didn’t know what to do with herself last night.”

“Yeah, Vee, my sister-in-law, is going through another round of sleep regression. I think that’s what she called it. I went over to babysit the twins yesterday for a few hours so she could crash.”

“Twins? God, I’d cry.”

Maddie huffed out a laugh. “Some days she does. Being a mom is hard. I can’t imagine doing that right now.” Her hazel eyes widened. “I didn’t mean—”

“It’s okay. I couldn’t imagine it either. Definitely wasn’t what I thought I’d get with my college diploma.” I glanced over at the crib again. “Now I can’t imagine a different path.”

“Bet you didn’t imagine a path with a big boat.”

I laughed. “I sure didn’t.”

The squeak of an axel that definitely needed some tending announced the arrival of Jensen. He had a secondhand truck that had seen better days. But the back of it had exactly what I was looking for.

I only winced a little when I got up this time. Things were starting to heal up finally. “Can you watch bean?”

“Sure, go ahead.” Maddie was looking at the truck when she answered absently.

Good sign. I crossed the grass to meet him beside my wagon. “Hiya, Jensen.”

He slammed the door of his truck, the hinges making a mighty squeak in protest. “Hi, Em. Sorry it took me longer than I thought to fabricate what you wanted.” He turned to reach into the bed of the truck.

“No problem. We’re just working on something else while we wait.” Manners be damned. I rushed to his side of the truck. “Oh, it’s perfect!”

He grinned. “Yeah?” His hair was sticking up and I was pretty sure he had a weird powder in his sideburns. A black streak across his cheek made his angular face even more interesting.

Artsy guys used to be my catnip. Now I didn’t even have so much as a heart flutter. Had Adriana broken my girl parts or something?

He gathered the heavy chain links gently with the mason jars welded into the links along with Edison bulbs for some difference in light. “I’ll come back for my big ladder.”

“Hey, let me help you with that.” Lucky came loping down the slope of grass.

“How’s the boat coming?” I asked.

Lucky unhooked the ladder from Jensen’s truck, then grabbed his own long ladder. “Good. Just was breaking for some chow. Mason told me to head to the kitchen when I got the grumbles.”

I hated to ask since he’d been working all morning on the boat, but his height would come in handy. “Would you mind helping us with the tree?”

“Sure.”

Jensen gave me a hopeful smile. “Maybe I could get some food too?”

“You most certainly can. Tell you what. You guys start and I’ll go get you some food. Anything you hate?”

“Pickles.”

I blinked. “Okay. I think I can work with that.” I laughed. “Lucky?”

“Nope. I’ll take his pickles even.” He waggled his eyebrows.

I shook my head. “Maddie knows what I want.”

“Maddie’s here?” Jensen’s Adam’s apple bobbed as he stole a glance at the big tree beside the dock.

“Sure is. She’s helping out. You okay with that?”

“Yeah. Definitely. I mean, sure. No problem.”

Lucky glanced at me then the kid with a snort. “C’mon, loverboy. Let’s go.” He held the two ladders, one in each hand at his sides.

Jensen flushed, but he followed Lucky up the hill to the path. I resisted the urge to check on my kid again. She’d be fine for the few minutes it would take for me to hit the kitchen.

I patted my pocket to make sure my phone was there and sent off a quick text to Maddie to let her know where I was going.

Just in case.

The lunch rush was in full swing as I veered off toward the restaurant while the guys headed for the tree. I smiled at a few regulars I was starting to recognize. The ever-present Mrs. Duncan who was always asking questions about the MJ2, a few older dudes who came in and split a club sandwich every day.

Most restaurants didn’t allow shared plates, but Mason wasn’t that kind of guy. In fact, they often sat at one of the best tables in the dining room.

I sneaked around Patty Duncan before she could see me and threaded my way around the tables. It felt good to not knock into everything anymore. At the end of my pregnancy, I’d been a walking nightmare of clumsiness.

I was just heading into the kitchen when I caught Mason leaning over something on the bar with Gillian pressing into his arm. She had her hand on his back, and I had the strongest urge to rip it off at the shoulder and beat her with it.

Where the hell had that come from?

I shook it off and pushed my way through the swinging door. Jackie was the chef on duty until Henry came in for the

late shift. Her squad of minions deftly took part in the ballet of a well-run kitchen.

“Hey, guys. Can I put in a ticket for our two-day laborers?”

Food had to be accounted for in said well-run kitchen.

“Yeah, go ahead. Mase gave me the head’s up.”

I went back outside and found Esther and flagged her down. “Can you put some sandwiches in for me for the guys helping outside?”

“Sure.” She tucked a flyaway lock of blue hair around her ear. “How’s it going out there?”

“Good. Lucky is adding a ton of really cool features to the boat for us.”

“Oh, he’s dreamy. His wife is scary as hell, but Lucky is one tree I wouldn’t mind climbing. You know, if he was single.”

I laughed. “He is objectively hot.”

She snorted. “Long hair and big muscles not your deal?”

My gaze tracked to Mason at the second level bar before I could control it. “I’m usually an artsy girl.”

Esther’s eyebrow arched as she snuck a quick look at where my attention had drifted to. “Or tall dudes with a hint of ginger?”

“What? No.” I cleared my throat. “What’s the lunch special today?”

“Lobster rolls since we got a ridiculous batch of lobster yesterday.”

“There are worse things.” I wasn’t sure what Maddie liked, but I decided to get three of them and a double batch of fries for us all to share.

Esther put my order in and dragged me over to the side out of the flow of traffic. “You know Mason’s not into Gillian, right?”

“I don’t care who he’s into. He’s just my boss.”

She rolled her eyes. “Right. He doesn’t date people from MJ’s though. But I don’t know...”

“Handily, I’m dating no one so that doesn’t bother me.”

“Hmm.”

Rami came over to see what we were talking about. One thing you could count on in The Mason Jar was the girls liked to gossip. “What’s going on?”

“I was just telling Emma that Mason isn’t into Gillian.”

“Oh, God, no. Gillian doesn’t seem to get that through her thick skull. Pretty sure there’s some blood of her enemies under that silky straight black hair. Probably blocks the signal.”

“Guys, I don’t care.”

Rami’s eyes crinkled at the corners. “Sure. That’s why you keep glancing over there with daggers for eyeballs.”

I ground my molars together. “Can you have one of the guys run the food out when it’s ready?”

“I’ll have Mason run it out,” Esther said as she sashayed away.

Rami cackled. “Esther likes to play matchmaker. Don’t mind her. I remember how a new baby kills any romantic feelings. But you guys sure do look good together.” She winked before she rushed back out onto the floor to take care of a table.

I had a party to finish and no time to moon over Mason. Not that I was mooning. Even if my fingers kept fisting as Gillian tried to superglue herself to his side. Didn’t he even notice how close she was?

We didn’t stand like that.

Well, except when he helped me get Adriana out of the car. His spicy mandarin scent was distracting, that was all. I didn’t really want to take a big bite out of him.

Much.

Ugh. I stalked out of the dining room and through the patio door to head back to the oak tree. Adriana was awake and she looked like a little football in the crook of Lucky's meaty arm.

With his other hand, he was directing Jensen in the tree. Maddie was feeding Jensen the heavy links of chain.

God, it was even more perfect than I'd imagined.

The old oak was massive, and I knew the branches would obscure the lights if there weren't a huge number of them. But this added a hefty detail that would be amazing at night.

The large mason jars had oversized bulbs inside to go with the Edison bulbs. The thick wire for the electricity blended right in with the heavy links of chain, making it seamless.

"Guys!"

Lucky turned with a big grin on his tanned face. "Hey. I stole your kid."

"I see." I picked up the pace as I got to the top of the path. "It's so perfect."

"Like it?" Jensen asked from the tree branch. "Where's the rest of the lights? I can start weaving them in while I'm up here."

The scent of lobster and butter hit me just before the warmth of Mason came up behind me. "I've got them on the loading dock."

I tried to block the shiver that raced down my spine at his voice. I turned to him. "I should have taken a box with me when I came back out."

"No, you're not lifting those boxes. They're thirty freaking pounds." His eyebrows furrowed. "You know you're not supposed to lift anything over twenty for another few weeks."

"I'm fine."

"You'll continue to be fine because you aren't picking anything up heavier than Adriana."

His voice was firm and there was a tiny spark inside of me that wanted to yell back at him, but there was another that

couldn't help but get a little weak in the knees that he cared.

"C'mon down, kid. I smell food."

"Don't have to tell me twice." Jensen inched his way over to the ladder and slid down faster than I was prepared for.

At my startled glance, Jensen laughed. "I've been training to become a fireman."

"You have?" Maddie's voice picked up. "I didn't know that."

He rubbed the back of his neck, his thick hair falling forward boyishly. "Yeah. My art isn't making much money yet. I need to pay the bills."

Okay, they were adorable. Artist *and* fireman? Yeah, Maddie was going to be in trouble.

Lucky made his way over to Mason and I. "Your daughter is beautiful."

I swiped my nail along the bottom of her foot and grinned as her foot flexed and twisted. "She wasn't screaming for food first thing? You must have some sort of magic."

"We found a bottle in your bag. She's got a pair of lungs on her."

"Oh, I'm sorry." I looked up at him, guilt stabbing at me for leaving her behind.

"No worries at all. Made me miss feedings with my twins." He transferred the baby to me gently, then stroked a finger over her hair. "They're at the age where they'd rather fling mac and cheese at me and demand Goldfish crackers."

"Speaking of food, you guys want to eat here or over on the patio? It's starting to slow down." Mason lifted the handled bag, his gaze tracking to me as I tucked Ariana into my wrap. When the baby was settled, he seemed more at ease.

I tried to push down the buzz under my skin from his protectiveness. He simply was protective of everyone at The Mason Jar, that was all.

“I could get out of the sun for a bit.” Maddie said as she stood.

“Agreed.” Jensen stood close to Maddie, who was smiling shyly at him.

“Jensen and I can get the lights while we’re over there,” Lucky said.

Mason nodded. “All right. Bring me up to speed on the boat?”

Lucky filled him in, and I listened with half an ear as we trailed behind them. Things were coming together for the party. I couldn’t help but be relieved.

This needed to work out. Not just for Mason and his family, but for me. Proving I could do this and continue to take care of my baby was more important to me than even the job itself.

My hip buzzed and I pulled out my phone.

MOM:

Please come home. You’ve proven your point.

I shoved my phone back into my pocket. I got two of those a day.

She was starting with the mom tone for the first one. The next one would be cajoling—that she wanted to see bean.

Each would come with varying levels of guilt.

I couldn’t think about that right now. After this big party, I’d take a drive out to Clintondale and let them meet the baby.

If I didn’t, they’d descend on Crescent Cove and probably bring all my siblings along too.

Mason threw a glance over his shoulder, his brow furrowed.

I don’t know how he always knew something was up with me. I gave him a wide smile and the lines eased as he smiled back.

The real smile kicked me in the chest—hard.

I didn't get to see that one all that often. He was usually worried about some order, a staffing issue, or juggling too many things at once.

But *that* smile was trouble.

I threw myself into enjoying lunch with my crew. Lucky was hilarious and seemed to have an endless trove of stories. He and Jensen had a quick back and forth together.

And a ton of ideas for monkeying around the tree.

I still needed to see what we were working with, but my daughter needed a bit of tending. I took bean into the bathroom for a quick clean up.

On my way out, I ran into Mason.

“Hey—I'll get out of your hair. Thanks for feeding Maddie and Jensen. They've been a lot of help.”

“Worth it.” Mason stepped a little closer to get a look at Adriana. “Is she okay with all this heat?”

“She loves it. Mama is a little wilted, but she's snug as a bug.” I patted her back as she slept on.

“You sure you don't want to take the rest of the day off? I can supervise—”

“Oh, really? Between the sliver of time you have before the dinner rush and your twenty employees needing your time?”

He sighed. “More like thirty on a Thursday night.”

“See?”

“I just don't want you overdoing it.”

I laid a hand on his upper arm. “And I appreciate it, but I'm fine. Truly.” He didn't need to know that I could literally lie under the tent and sleep the rest of the day. Instead, I batted my eyelashes at him. “Can I see the lights?”

“Fine. They're back here. But if you even think about trying to pick one up, I'll have you booted off the property.”

“You think so?”

“I know so.” He crouched until our noses almost touched.
“Beyond you being stubborn, I don’t want you hurt.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Handy for you, bean is in the way right now.” God, his eyes were such a deep blue. I swung around and headed through the kitchen doors before I did something stupid.

You know, like kissing my boss. And ruining everything.

SIXTEEN



WHAT THE HELL WAS I DOING GETTING THAT CLOSE TO HER?

She probably thought I was being overbearing. Truth was, I just wanted to drag in more of that fresh laundry scent that seemed to stick to her, the kind that made you want to shove your face into her neck to get a deeper whiff.

Not at all a smart move.

I followed her down the hallway. “Through here.” I pushed the door open from above her head and she sailed through the door.

“Holy crap.”

“Yeah. It’s for deliveries but we have lots of decorations back here for each season as well.”

She spun around, her gaze bouncing around to the labeled tubs stacked on the steel shelves. “Do you have anything in there for me to steal for the MJ2?”

“Maybe. We have some wedding stuff—”

“Yes!”

I laughed. “From weddings where they didn’t want the decorations back. I figured some of it would come in handy.”

“You figured right.”

“Let me show you the lights and then you can dig through the rest.”

“Okay, but I really want to see that one.” She pointed at the box on the middle shelf that was eye level with her. She tipped the top off and started pulling it forward to peek in.

The avalanche of boxes behind it started to tumble her way. I lunged and swept my arm around her waist, dragging her and the baby against me and out of the line of fire. The jolt startled the baby awake and her little fists flared as she wailed.

I turned them both around and into my arms.

“Shit, shit, shit.” Emmaline ran a shaking hand over the baby’s head. “You okay, bean?” Her huge summer sky eyes filled. “So stupid. I’m sorry.”

“Hey, it’s okay.”

“I didn’t even think. I just wanted to look and *ugh*.” Emma sucked back a breath. “She still has this soft spot.” Her lashes starred with unshed tears. “That could have been so bad.”

I gathered her closer as the baby hiccupped a little then settled in between us. “It’s okay. I promise.”

Emma tipped forward to rest her forehead on my chest. “Can you just...for a second. You know?”

“Hold onto you? Yeah, I can do that.”

Her hair brushed my chin. It smelled of sunshine and honey. The golden waves were so inviting, I had to tell myself not to lean in more. She just wanted a little comfort, not me perverting on her.

She blew out a breath. “I’m sorry. I know I overreacted, but she was so fussy all last night and I’ve had like four hours of sleep. Then it scared us both.”

“Hey, it’s okay. You’ve been dealing with a lot.”

Her hand brushed my chest as she cupped Adriana’s head and kissed her, then she looked up at me. She was so damn beautiful. Up close, she was even more lovely. The color returned to her cheeks and her lips parted. Her focus dropped to my mouth then swung back up until our gazes collided.

I lowered my head, then I stopped just a breath away from her lips. I pressed my forehead to hers, then stepped back. “I’m sorry.”

She backed away another step and bumped into the box that fell. Something jangled inside, obviously broken and a warped, metallic tune drifted out.

“Think that might have been the creepy nutcrackers.”

Her hand came up to cover her mouth.

“No, really. You did me a favor. I hate them.” I crouched down to open the box and sure enough the animatronic head was in two pieces.

“Then why did you buy them?” she asked as she swayed with the baby.

“I didn’t.” Gillian had. I didn’t think I needed to mention that. I stood with the box and pitched it into the large trash can. Then I pulled down the bin for her and flipped off the top so she could look through it safely.

She came closer and peered down. “I know it’s not exactly Christmas, but I figured there might be...” She picked up the oversized stars. “Exactly what I wanted.”

“Tree?”

“You got it. I can have the guys hook them to the chain and let them drip down for a perfect photo.”

I was more of a spatial vision kind of guy. I could tell you how many tables would fit on a patio or in a dining room. I could even decorate a Christmas tree evenly. Anything else was beyond my scope.

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“It’s gonna be great.” She pushed aside some other things, but it seemed like the stars were what she was really after.

I took her over to the box of lights and she whistled. “No wonder you said I couldn’t get the boxes.”

The lights were wrapped on a huge spool. I knew she’d need a lot to cover the massive oak, and this was far cheaper

than buying a bunch that needed to be linked together.

“I got one with cool lights and the other two are warm. Figured some contrast.”

“I can’t wait to get them up there.”

Lucky pushed through the door to the storage room. “There you are.”

I shoved my hands into my pockets. “We were just talking about you.”

“Yeah?” Lucky grinned. “Good or bad?”

“Depends on how you look at it.” Emma lightly kicked the boxes. “We’ve got lights.”

Lucky’s eyebrows shot up. “Well, then. We better get moving. I got the SOS to pick up the kids from daycare at three.”

Emma pulled out her phone. Her smile faded for a second before she recovered and stuffed it back in her pocket. “We’ll make the most of it.”

I moved to the bay doors and opened them up. “If you want to bring your truck over, we can load them up for one trip.”

“Sounds good.” Lucky hopped off the dock. “I’ll be right back.”

Emma’s gaze tracked to me with an arched brow.

“He knows where he’s going. Lucky has been all over this restaurant during the remodel.”

“Ahh. Gotcha.”

“C’mon, let’s get you back into the restaurant. Do you guys want to take a quick nap in my office?”

She nibbled her bottom lip.

“It’s going to take us a half hour to load what you need into the truck and then get it back up to the tree.”

“Would you mind?”

“Not at all.”

“Disco nap.”

I laughed, remembering the term she used before. I’d read that new moms needed to take naps when they could. And I could use a few minutes away from her myself.

I’d come damn close to kissing her.

She padded toward the door, murmuring to the baby as she went. When she was gone, I raked my fingers through my hair. So freaking stupid.

I checked my email on my phone as I waited for Lucky. If I went back into the restaurant, I’d be sucked into doing something on the floor. Five minutes later, he was backing up to the dock.

We loaded everything up and Lucky gave me a few side-eyes. I really didn’t want to talk about it, but the man was nothing if not a chatty Cathy.

“So, Emma.”

“Don’t go there.”

Lucky held up his hands in surrender. “I mean, why not?”

“Because she works for me.”

“Who cares? Most relationships start at work. Better than a damn dating app.”

“I’m not going on those either.” I went back to the Christmas box and put it back on the shelf. I reached for the second tub in the back where I knew more of the oversized stars were stored.

“She’s a cool chick.”

“She has a baby.”

“C’mon, that’s not a problem for you.” Lucky took the tub from me and slid it onto the flatbed of his truck.

“She’s also almost ten years younger than me. What the hell would she want with me?”

Lucky opened his mouth, and I knew he'd argue the age difference as semantics.

"I'm too busy. It's not fair to a woman to come in second to my job."

"That's on you, pal. You can make those changes." He hopped down and slammed the tailgate closed. "All I'm hearing are excuses."

I put my hands on my hips. "Ever think she's the one who's not interested?"

"Maybe." He shrugged and opened the truck door. "Let's go."

I shook my head and closed the bay doors before jumping down. The timing was crap for both of us. It was better to put the mere idea out of my head all together.

I got inside and we drove around the building.

Thankfully, he didn't give me any more shit about Emma. I really wasn't in the place to talk about the situation.

And right now, there wasn't one.

Maddie and Jensen were talking by the tree when we pulled up. They came down the hill to meet us.

Maddie waved. "Where's Emma?"

"She's taking a siesta with the baby in my office." I got out and unhooked the tailgate.

"Oh, good. It's a hot one and they could both use a rest." Maddie took the smaller box.

Lucky and Jensen took the bigger spools, leaving me with the oversized tub that was annoyingly sized, but not too heavy.

I needed to get back to the restaurant, but I found myself lingering to help with the lights. An hour later, we had the whole tree wrapped.

Emma came out to supervise halfway through and we all managed to convince her to sit in the shade and yell out directions.

She was really good at that.

Finally, I had to go back inside, leaving the rest of the decorating in their capable hands. It was barely an hour before the early bird customers would start coming in for dinner.

I went over the schedule with Gillian, again. Not that I needed to. She was usually the first one to take charge, but since Emma had begun working, Gillian was asking me to help her with every-damn-thing.

I figured she was still pissed that I wouldn't give her the position, so I gritted my teeth and answered the unnecessary questions about staffing.

Rami and Esther finished up the midshift, as the second wave of waiters and bartenders came in. By then, the day ramped up and I didn't get a chance to go back out and check with them.

I got a text from Emma that she'd see me tomorrow.

That was the last thing I'd noticed before sun set. The patio was alive with our bi-weekly trivia game. Now that we didn't need the outdoor heaters, the tables were all packed.

It was firemen against nurses tonight, which made for a lively group.

I took out a few sampler trays to the last round of winners and was struck by the tree now that it was dark.

The whole tree was lit up, sparkling against the night. The stars we'd found in storage were just right against the larger Edison bulbs and frosted mason jars.

The lighting bounced off the lake behind it as did a runway of lights they'd fashioned on the dock.

The boat was softly lit to show off the new jewel of my business. Even from here, I could see the lights that had been added inside. She'd even added strings of the frosted mason jars to the upper deck where we'd have the band playing for the party.

Everything was finally coming together, thanks to Emma's vision.

This was the important part, not my ill-timed libido coming alive this afternoon. I had to keep my eye on the prize.

Period.

“Mason?”

I turned to Gillian’s voice. She came up beside me and looked out at the lights. I smiled down at her. “What do you think?”

She lifted a shoulder. “Looks nice.”

“Nice?”

“Okay, so it’s classy. Whatever.”

I sighed. “Did you need something?”

“You don’t have to get defensive. It’s just some lights. Not like Lisa is a magician or anything.”

“You know very well her name is Emma.”

She crossed her arms. “Like it matters. She’ll be gone soon enough.”

Gillian had been getting more bitter by the day. Had I been blind to it because we were so busy or because The Mason Jar felt lighter with the addition of Emma?

Lighter to me anyway. Not so sure Gillian would agree.

“Did you need something?” I knew my voice was cool, but I was getting tired of her bullshit.

She shot a look at me, her eyes narrowing. “Never mind, I’ll take care of it.” She turned and stormed across the patio.

She bumped into Stef on the way by, and he barely saved his tray full of beer from toppling.

I tipped back my head and counted to ten, then I allowed myself one last look at the new additions along the lake.

Good things were coming. I just needed to focus on that.

SEVENTEEN



Sunday 10AM

“THERE’S SIX BOTTLES IN THE FRIDGE. YOU SHOULD BE ABLE to get two feedings out of each one. Her favorite socks are in the dryer now. If she gets fussy, she likes a little Taylor Swift—specifically the *Evermore* album.”

“Emma...”

“She really likes ‘No Body, No Crime’, she’s totally a murder podcast junkie in training. Oh, God. Does that make me a bad mother?”

“Emma—”

“The schedule is on the fridge and next to her bassinet.” I turned around to make sure I’d actually put up the schedule. Sometimes I thought I’d done something and then just left it in my notebook.

“Emmaline!”

“What?” I blinked and focused on my brother.

“Take a breath.”

I took a long, slow, cleansing breath. I’d done yoga twice this morning to try and calm the fuck down. I hated yoga, but I’d figured I needed centering.

Obviously, it hadn’t worked.

“There we go. Breathe out.” Clint stood in front of me and took my hands. “Adriana is going to be just fine. Remember this is to help us out as much as it is to help you.”

“I know. Practice for your own kid. But I’ve never left her for more than an hour before.”

He shook out my hands. “While I’m sure you’d love to carry her around in that kangaroo contraption like usual, I think it’ll be easier for you to deal with the party without worrying about her.”

“You’re right. I know you’re right.” My heart was pounding in my ears. What if she needed me?

What if she got sick?

“Okay, you’re spiraling.” Clint let my hands go to squeeze my shoulders. “You’ll have your phone, and I packed a bonus charger pod in your bag. I can reach you at any time.”

“Right. And you’ll call me if you need to, right? Don’t hesitate.”

Kitty came up next to Clint and dragged me in for a hug. Proving just how dire the situation was, since Kitty wasn’t exactly a hugger. “I know it’s scary.” Then she pushed me back firmly. “You’re going to be fine. And we’re going to enjoy the baby all day.”

I laughed. “Okay, okay. I know you will. She was just so fussy last night.”

“At three weeks, she’s probably about ready for another growth spurt. At least according to the books. So, we’ll just do a little slow dancing to Taylor Swift. I can be a Swifty for a day.”

“Don’t let her fool you. Kitty loves her some Taylor.” Clint grabbed my bag. “You have snacks, water, your pump, and a shit ton of chocolate.”

“Aww, you didn’t even blush this time when you said breast pump.”

“Shut up.” He reddened when I said both words.

“You made the kid, you don’t get to blush at the terms for what’s coming at you, pal.” I went up on my toes and kissed his cheek. “But thank you for helping out today.”

“You know Mom would be all about this, right? I mean, she texts me daily trying to get me to bring you home.”

“I know. I get all the texts too, Sparky.” And the guilt ate at me again as I went over to check on bean for the fiftieth time. Part of me wanted to go home and let my mom take over.

Some days, a *large* part.

A full night of sleep sounded amazing. Someone else walking the floor at three in the morning to get a fussy baby to sleep.

A shower that lasted more than three minutes.

So many things I took for granted. But I loved this job, and I knew it was exactly where I was supposed to be.

The Mason Jar was exactly what I’d been looking for.

And the owner, you hussy?

I ignored that extra voice. I’d been avoiding Mason since the almost kiss in the storage room. There was enough to do on my never-ending checklist for the party that I’d been too busy to think about it.

Much.

It seemed like I didn’t even remember what a kiss was like. After Pierre, I’d shut down. Then I’d found out about bean and dating had been the furthest thing from my mind.

That had to be why I’d almost kissed Mason.

Or he’d almost kissed me.

He’d been the smart one and stopped it. I guarantee one hundred percent I would have kissed him if he’d leaned in a little farther.

Ugh.

So much for becoming a mom making me smarter—or more logical.

I stroked my finger over her pink cheek. She was sleeping perfectly as per usual in the daytime. Nighttime? Not so much.

I checked the monitor to make sure it was working, then I stopped in the bathroom for one last pump to get me through at least the next few hours. I glanced in the mirror and swore.

I still had the stupid strips under my eyes to stop them from looking so puffy.

“Way to go, Emmaline,” I muttered.

I peeled them off and added a little blush and a swipe of mascara. It was going to be in the 80s today, but at least that meant there would be no rain.

A little more deodorant probably wouldn't hurt.

Ten minutes later, I'd deposited a fifth bottle in the fridge and managed to get out the door without checking on Adriana. Mostly because I didn't want to wake her up, not because I didn't want to pick her up and hold her tight.

Since I was baby-free, I was able to pick up the flowers from Brooks Greenery on my way. I parked with the hatch closest to the door and met Alan at the door.

“Hi!”

“Oh, Emma. I was hoping I'd have all the buckets outside before you got here.”

“I wanted to help out. You shouldn't have to haul them on your own.”

“And you shouldn't be picking them up anyway.”

“Oh, not you too. I've been doing Pilates every day.” I patted my lower stomach, which was tightening up, thank God. I'd started doing the pelvic floor exercises as soon as I could. Not only for getting my body back into shape, but it was super annoying not to be able to lift more than a ten-pound baby.

“Yes, well, I'm under strict orders from Mason and Jared.”

“Fine.” I crouched in front of the white pail full of blooms. “They look amazing.”

“A few of them are Gina's wedding flowers.” He touched the linen-colored cabbage roses. “Like these and the peach

dahlias in that bucket over there. Otherwise, I used summer blooms.”

Roses in varying shades of pink and peach were paired with the sweeter daisies that would make all the mason jars so perfect.

“This bucket is full of some extra greenery if any of the ones we set up need refreshing.” He put his hands on his hips. So much Mason in that stance that it gave me a moment. “Are you sure you don’t want me to come out and put these together for you?”

“I’d be happy to have you, but I don’t think you need to stand out there and bake today.”

“Oh, and you should?”

“I live for the heat.” I bumped his hip. “And these will be beautiful no matter how I put them together.”

“Oh, speaking of that.” He hustled to the front desk and picked up some papers. “I made a few sample arrangements that you can copy. Or, you know, can make your own.”

“No, this is amazing. Saves me so much time.” I took the color printouts and paged through them. “I have a pretty good eye, but I’m better with color combinations than floral ones.”

“Good. I’m glad to help. Sundays are my busy day, or I’d shut down. With you taking Maddie, I just can’t.”

The idea of finishing today without Maddie made my stomach clench. “Oh, do you need her?”

“No, no. My idea of busy is quite different than a big party.” He sighed. “Sales have been a little sluggish with that new floral shop down the block. Infernal woman keeps having special sales. I don’t know how she’s turning a profit.”

My eyebrows went up. “A Flower A Day?”

“Yes. She thinks if she has a different flower special every day, it will make people come in.”

I pressed my lips together against a smile. “Sounds like it’s working. Maybe you need to do something a little different?”

“Why should I change how I run my business? It’s worked for thirty years.”

“Change isn’t a bad thing.”

“Bah.” He waved me off. “You sound like Mason and Jared.”

“Can’t have that.” I went on my toes and kissed his cheek. “I happen to like how you do things. But it can’t hurt to do something out of the box. Gets people paying more attention to see what you’ll do next. Maybe you could do a free arrangement class. Lots of people don’t know how to put flowers together from their garden.”

His bushy eyebrows knit together. “Maybe.”

I rubbed his arm, satisfied that I’d planted a seed. “Let’s get these loaded up, shall we?”

He nodded. “You take those light ones right there.”

“Okay, okay.”

A few minutes later, the back of my wagon was full of blooms and smelled like heaven. I passed the back door where Adriana’s empty carseat mocked me.

I reached into my pocket. Maybe I should just check on her.

“You’re all set.” Alan slammed the hatch down.

I shoved my phone back into the pocket of my summer dress. “Thanks so much for all of this. Gina will love it.”

“I hope so.” He wiped the pads of his fingers on his thigh, leaving a streak on his dirt brown pants. “Feels like I didn’t do enough.”

“You most certainly did. And Gina and Jared will just be happy to have all their friends and family there tonight.”

“Yes, you’re right. I want to get spiffed up for tonight. Show my boy I can go out without dirt under my nails.”

“He’ll be thrilled. Both of them will.”

“My Mason is a good man. I don’t think he realizes just how good he is.”

“Because he has a kind dad.”

“You’re a lovely girl. But I’m afraid I wasn’t there enough for either of my boys. All I can do is make it up to them now.”

I gripped his hand. “They love you. Mason just wants to make you proud.”

“I am.” His blue eyes, so much like Mason’s, got a little red-rimmed. “I’m so proud.” His voice was a bit thick. “Okay. I gotta get some work done. Go on now. Drive carefully.”

“I will.”

“Oh, I forgot to ask. How’s that pretty little girl of yours?”

“Growing like crazy.”

“Happens so fast.” He opened the driver side door for me. “Faster than you can ever imagine.”

I got in and swung my legs under the steering wheel. “I’m learning that. It feels weird to be out without her.”

“Who’s the lucky one babysitting today?”

“My brother. He and my sister-in-law are having a baby later this year. They tried to make me feel better by telling me they wanted a bit of practice.”

“Take the help when you can, Emma.” He winked at me. “Besides, these are the days when the babies sleep most of the time. You have fun today.”

“I’ll try.”

He shut the door, and I rolled down the windows against the heat that was already rising. “I’ll see you tonight.”

“See you tonight.” I waved and pulled out onto Main Street.

The Mason Jar was just outside the main part of Crescent Cove, on Lakeview Drive. I smelled the water before I spotted Crescent Lake. Just the scent alone helped to even me out. A few minutes later, the sprawling restaurant came into view.

The water was perfectly calm today. It might be hot as hell, but the wind wasn't up, so thankfully, we wouldn't have to worry about things sliding around. The three levels were slowly revealed as I got closer.

And now with the barge taking up its own dock, it showed just how impressive the space was. The restaurant was closed today, but the parking lot was buzzing with staff and deliveries.

Henry and Jackie were covering the food, but Sugar Rush was handling the confections. Tabitha was married to one of the police officers that worked with Jared. Helped our budget that she was offering the towers of sweets as her gift to the couple.

Maddie was directing people on the grass. She'd become invaluable to me with the party. She had an organized soul and loved to help out with bean. Not that she had a ton of experience with youngsters other than her nieces and nephews, since she was the youngest child of five. But she was great with kids so having her to help here and sometimes with Adriana was a total win-win as far as I was concerned.

I honked for some help and parked in my usual spot.

Maddie and two of the kitchen guys came down to help me with the pails.

"Wow, these are amazing. So many gorgeous blooms. Mr. Brooks really outdid himself."

"Hopefully, we can put the jars together and make him proud." I glanced over her shoulder at the barge. "How's Mason doing?"

"Little stressed." She grunted as she pulled out a container full of roses. "He's not the only one. My sister-in-law has a baby not feeling well at home."

The mere mention of a sick kid made me want to check on my bean. But it hadn't been much longer than an hour yet. I had to wait unless I wanted to be labeled the most freaked out new mom ever.

"Oh no, really? Hope it's nothing bad."

“Nah, just usual baby stuff. Harmony has some ear thing.” She yanked at the container and nearly toppled it before the cavalry arrived.

“I’ve got it, Maddie.” Stef came up behind her and wrapped his long arms around the bucket. “Inside or outside?”

“Thanks.” Maddie glanced at me for confirmation.

“How about we put them all in the shade near the tree for now? We’ll assemble them outside then decorate everywhere.”

“On it.” Stef trudged up the hill to where the tent was still set up.

Maddie handed off another bucket to the other guy from the kitchen. He didn’t talk much, but he was always happy to help. He followed Stef up the hill, leaving us with the two smaller white pails.

“We had a late addition. Since it’s so hot, Mason hired this cute thing called The Boozie Bus. It does both alcoholic and virgin drinks. Mason had a few of the guys bring over some picnic tables so people can spread out.”

“Good idea. Makes the oak tree more of a focal point for pictures and videos when it gets dark.”

“Exactly. Mason also brought a truck full of sparklers for tonight.”

A little pang of hurt hit me. He hadn’t mentioned that to me. In fact, he’d said very little to me since the almost kiss.

Maybe Gillian was right about Mason being sensitive about the fraternization thing. I didn’t want to ruin anything we had going on because there had been a buzz between us for a nanosecond.

Dammit, I could control myself.

I scanned the busy dock. A mix of people from the restaurant and some catering people I didn’t know were hauling in chairs and tables. I spotted Lucky talking with Mason on the second level deck.

Gillian was hovering close to Mason. She was wearing a slinky black tank dress with a slash of magenta across her impressive chest. The only time my tits were impressive were when I needed to use my pump for milk for bean.

And now my cute navy dress with little daisies felt too simple. The empire cut felt maternity-ish. It wasn't a maternity dress, but it did flatter my still-recovering body. Before bean, I'd worn tight little dresses just like that.

Except for the breasts part.

I'd never had those. Being a card-carrying member of itty bitty titty committee had never bothered me before. I knew I had great legs and an even better ass. At least that part hadn't changed much with Adriana.

And that didn't freaking matter. What the hell was wrong with me?

Who cared if he found me attractive or if Gillian tried to get his attention? I was here to plan and execute the best engagement party I could. Full stop.

That also meant I had quite a few flowers to arrange, and the day wasn't getting any shorter.

"Ready to show off your flower skills?" I asked Maddie.

"Ready and willing."

"One last thing."

She grinned at me. "What's that?"

"Tell me you have coffee made somewhere."

Maddie snickered. "Thermos is waiting under the tent. I made some cold brew last night for us."

"Goddess."

We waddled up the hill with our buckets and ended up laughing at all the bloom shrapnel around us as we finally got down to work.

Suddenly, music filtered out of the barge. The kind that would keep our hips swaying and our hands moving. We sang

along to some old Journey classics as we filled jar after jar with peach, cream, and deep purple blooms.

It took a little longer than I was hoping, but we decorated the oak with flowers, even hung a few from chains to frame the tulle arbor we made as a backdrop for photos with friends and family.

We added fat cabbage roses and dahlias with sprigs of the deep purple wispy fan leaves to a few of the mason jars that lined the dock leading to the barge. Then we started the process of decorating inside the boat.

By the time we were done, I was ready to jump in the lake. It was definitely a hot one. Of course we were running around making sure everything looked perfect as Gillian supervised and barked orders to the catering staff.

Mason was getting as sweaty as we were as he and Lucky installed the tables he'd finished the night before.

In the end, we had an hour to clean up, take a break to eat, and change before the guests were due to arrive.

I took a few precious minutes to disappear into the bathroom with my bag and pump as I cleaned up.

One thing I didn't love was taking time out of every few hours to take the pressure off. It was far different when I was holding Ariana to feed her than to put a stupid battery-operated machine on me to do the same.

I did take a moment to call my brother as I ate one of the breakfast bars Clint had stashed in my bag. He didn't answer, but he texted me back that he was feeding bean so I gave him a pass.

I pushed aside my makeup bag and found a rolled-up dress at the bottom of my bag.

"Bless you, Kitty." My brother certainly wouldn't have been smart enough to put a change of clothes in the bag for me. Kitty had even added a few pads so I wouldn't have any boob accidents through my dress.

Clearly, I had the best sister-in-law in the history of sisters-in-law.

I swapped my wilted dress for the deep plum-colored dress. It was simple and lightweight with silvery leaves embroidered along the neckline. A perfect day to night dress. Bonus points, it didn't cling to any of my fluffy parts.

Someday I'd have my waist back. Hopefully.

The dress fell to just above my knees and showed off my best feature—my legs. I found a nude pair of heels in the bag as well. For the first time in weeks, I felt like a woman and not just a mom.

I tucked the bottle into the tiny cooler on the side of my bag and finished cleaning up with some baby wipes until I almost felt human again. I even fussed with my hair until the curls looked less like duckling fuzz and more like wild curls.

A dab of makeup and concealer freshened me up and I was good to go.

Showtime, whether I was ready or not.

EIGHTEEN



I WAS BONE DEEP TIRED. I'D BEEN WORKING ON LAST MINUTE details on the barge the night before. Instead of going home, I'd crashed in my office.

Not on purpose, I'd simply fallen asleep with my face planted on some invoices. Because while this party had been my focus for weeks, I did still have a restaurant to run.

Creating this party had shown even more cracks in my process. I kept taking on more things, but I didn't hire enough people to help me.

While I did have Emmaline's help for the barge, I didn't want to overwhelm her with all the things that needed to be taken care of behind the scenes. The ordering of food and catering staff, shuffling money for all the decorations, the unexpected cost of the built-ins for the boat itself.

All of it had to be put on the books for the unsexy things like taxes and permits. Hell, I had to worry about a spot check visit from the Health Department any time now.

But now, as I stood in the center of the second floor of the barge, I couldn't believe it was the same place.

Fold-down tables in strangely perfect octagon shapes jutted out from the corners. Right now, they were hidden under tablecloths in the peach and deep purple of Gina's wedding colors.

The rest of the boat was white walls and glossy teak floors with mason jar accents all over.

I couldn't help but smile as I found one of the extra duck statues that were all over the restaurant had been hung over one of the lights.

A nod to the creatures that had made their home on my property. When I spotted a few ducklings peeking from random light fixtures, I knew Emma had been the one who'd added the ducks. Her whimsical sense of humor had been so much a part of the planning of this party.

Two of the tables were full of the mason jars and small plates for finger food. A third had a charming section to write a note to the new parents or the bride and groom—the same couple, but they could address the notes however they wished. The last table held a bunch of instant cameras for some candid shots to stick on a board to give to Jared and Gina at the end of the night.

With the nature of my brother's job, it was hard to get all the family and friends together in one gathering so we wanted to commemorate it with some physical proof.

A photo on your phone was all well and good, but it was rare for people to actually print them out anymore. We lived in a digital world these days, and it was good to have something to actually hold onto.

The barge was strangely quiet. Everyone had headed off to get ready for the party or to take some downtime to eat. The rest of the night would be a blur, and I knew firsthand how easy it was to forget to eat when things got too busy.

I should have gone to the restaurant with everyone else, but walking around and seeing just what we'd managed to put together in such a short, chaotic time was far too much of a lure.

A door opened behind me, and I turned to find Emmaline standing just outside the bathroom. Her wild, golden hair was mostly contained in one of those clip things she was never without, but the rest framed her face.

She'd done something with her eyes that made the blue glow in the late afternoon sun. She'd changed into a flowing

dress that flirted with the tops of her knees and showed off her endless legs that made my mouth water.

She tucked her bag under the bar then walked toward me, the click of her heels echoing in the empty room.

“We did it.”

My lips curved. “Mostly you.”

She stopped in front of me and lifted her fingers to my forehead. “That little dent says otherwise.”

I tried to duck away from her touch. It was getting harder for me to ignore the pull toward her. Ever since I’d gotten her in my arms in the storage room, I couldn’t get her scent or the memory of her skin out of my head.

And not just Emma.

Holding her close to me with the baby between us had felt right. As if she’d belonged right there with me.

Things I shouldn’t be feeling about anyone I worked with, let alone someone who’d just had a seismic life event.

“Mason, did I do something?”

“No.” I averted my gaze.

“You’ve been avoiding me since... Thursday.”

Since I’d almost kissed her. The memory sizzled between us. She frowned at me. “I’m sorry if it got weird between us. It doesn’t need to be. A little fear and some residual baby delivery intensity made for a sprinkle of lust, that’s all.”

God, my chest was tight.

I fished my hands at my sides. “A sprinkle?”

“Yeah. Relationships that start under intense circumstances, they never last...”

My gaze shot to hers and I tipped my head. “Did you just quote—”

“*Speed*? Why, yes, I did.”

“I’m pretty sure that movie is older than you.”

She laid her hand on my chest. “Yes, but hot Keanu has no limits.”

“Emma.”

“I mean, am I wrong? And that’s peak hot Sandy too.”

I swallowed. “I do love Sandy.”

She slipped her hand away and walked around me. She had to be able to hear my heartbeat. Maybe even she’d felt it under her hand.

“So, don’t worry about it. I can get over it if you can.” She tossed a look over her shoulder, the wry curve of her mouth making my jeans far too tight.

“I have rules.”

Slowly, Emma walked across the boat to fuss with the stacked dishes and napkins that had shifted with the ever-present motion of the water. “I may have heard about that.”

I followed her to the starboard side. “From whom?”

“People talk.” She moved to the side with the best lake view and rested her arms on the windowsill. “I get it, sleeping with people you work with is messy. How Adriana came to be. Even messier when you sleep with your professor.”

I stood next to her. “Pardon?”

“Yep.” She brushed her hair back. “I was actually engaged to him. Pierre Lambert. I don’t know what I was thinking. He was so pretentious and full of hot air. But he seemed exciting while he was extolling the genius of Shakespeare. Then again, if you go with actual history, Shakespeare was probably the Queen and her consorts. Pierre would get a pinched buttock when I mentioned that part though.”

I laughed. It wasn’t the first time she’d mentioned her drama background, but it sure as hell was the first time for the professor. I just assumed she’d had a falling out with a boyfriend.

Not sure what that said about me.

“So, I get why you want to ignore this thing between us.”

I blew out a breath. “I had my own break-up. I was the manager of a resort restaurant, and she was the owner’s daughter.”

Emma hissed in a breath. “Ouch.”

“She was young and used to getting what she wanted.” I shrugged and mirrored her stance at the window. “She wanted me until she didn’t.”

Lauren had been nothing like Emma, but there was a part of me that saw the writing on the wall. I might be exciting for a little while, but Emma would get bored with a guy who spent sixty hours of his week looking after a restaurant and now a barge.

It was better not to crack the door open.

“I can’t imagine someone getting tired of you, Mason.”

I glanced down at her. “Oh, really? What’s so enticing about an overworked restaurant owner?”

She lifted a hand to cup my jaw. “The fact that you can’t see it is exactly why.”

I lifted my hand to cover hers. I meant to pull it away. I meant to push her away. Then she went on her toes and brushed her lips right beside my mouth.

I closed my eyes and whatever strength I had about stopping her slipped away on the summer breeze coming off the water.

It started as a nibble. Just a brush of her lips over mine. I turned my head to meet hers fully. Nearly chaste in the softness of it. Her nose bumped mine lightly as she smiled against my mouth and a sigh drifted between us.

“We should stop,” I said against her lips.

“Definitely should.” Then her fingers slipped up to tangle with my hair as she turned me fully toward her.

I crushed her to me, my arm banding around her lower back, my fingers twisting in the slippery material of her dress.

The kiss went from searching to demanding from one breath to the next.

She hooked her arm around my shoulders and clutched me just as tightly, her tongue twining around mine to draw me deeper. She was all softness and smelled like a Sunday afternoon.

And just like a Sunday afternoon, I wanted to spread her out and leisurely take my time finding every place on her that made her sigh. Then another few hours making her moan my name.

It had been so long since I'd wanted to take the time.

Wished for time.

Distantly, I heard people downstairs. The shouted orders of Henry, and impatient sharpness of Gillian.

I tried to draw away, but instead, I went back for another taste. Her lips swollen from my kisses, slightly pink from my scruff. Her blue eyes blurry with pleasure and sleepy happiness.

"People are coming," I said against her lips as I tried to push her away.

"Let them see your master class in kissing, Mr. Brooks."

I groaned and pulled her against my hardening cock. "I've wanted to do that since your smart mouth put Carol in her place during your interview."

She touched my lower lip with the tip of her nail. "Even though I was nine months pregnant?" She groaned and kissed me again, this time nipping my lower lip. "Sweaty and in labor."

"Smart and capable. And you looked like a slice of summer in that bright dress. The first bit of color I've noticed in so damn long."

Crap, I was waxing poetic like some lovesick pup.

She walked me back a step toward the stairs at the bow of the ship's deck. I could hear people setting up food on the first

floor. Someone would be up those stairs in minutes.

The spiral stairs at the front of the boat were too hard to bring things up. They'd definitely come up right where we were. But then she slipped her tongue in my mouth again and I couldn't help but suck it deeper into mine.

My hand went down to cup her ass. God, so damn firm and perfectly filled my palm. She moaned and I realized I was pressing her against my cock. This deliciously sexy woman who'd just had a freaking *baby*.

"Sorry," I muttered against her and pushed her away. "Sorry, you...this is way too soon."

"Not soon enough for me." She advanced on me again.

"Too soon for you." I cupped her shoulders. "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

She frowned. "Hurt me?" Then her brow smoothed. "Oh. Yeah." She giggled and pressed her forehead to my chest. "Yeah, there's still an out of order sign on all my parts."

"Yeah." I moved my hand to cup the back of her neck. "Not that it's just about..." I trailed off.

That I'd forgotten myself and wanted to drag her onto the nearest horizontal surface was both dangerous and stupid.

"About the fact that I haven't had sex in...way too long."

"Not as long as me," I muttered.

She laughed and looked up at me, then slid her hand down to cup my straining cock. "That seems a shame. You have a lot going for you."

"Cripes, Emma." I looked over my shoulder before I gently drew her hand off my shaft.

"Mase, you up there?" Henry's voice boomed up the stairs.

"Yeah," I yelled back. "I'll be just a sec." I gritted my teeth. "I have to go in the bathroom and take care of this."

Her summer sky eyes widened. "Should I help?"

“Fuck.” I had to laugh. “No. And not that kind of take care of. I meant to soak my damn head.”

I’d probably be soaking my whole body in an ice-cold shower tonight. But right now, I just needed to get away from her so I could get rid of this hard-on.

“Why don’t I take care of Henry instead?” She gave a delighted laugh. “You should see how your nostrils flared right there.” She tapped the tip of my nose. “I mean, I’ll see what he wants.”

“Right. Fine. Yes, please. I’ll be back.”

She smirked and turned with a sway of her hips as she stalked the last few feet to the outer deck where the stairs were. “Hey, Henry. Whatcha need?”

I crossed the boat as quickly as I could with my jeans trying to strangle me and ducked into the bathroom.

The second I was in front of the mirror, I gripped the edge of the sink. “You are so fucked,” I said to myself.

Now that I knew the taste of her, how the hell was I supposed to resist her?

NINETEEN



I RAN DOWN THE STAIRS, MEETING HENRY AT THE MIDWAY point. “What’s up?”

“Where’s Mason?”

“Think he was running to the bathroom before everything gets nuts. What’s up?”

Henry paused with one foot on the step below me. “Think the better question is what’s up with you, smudged lipstick?”

I touched my mouth. “That’s not what I asked.”

He smirked. “Uh huh.”

“You wanted something? Or do you actually need Mason?”

“No, you can handle it. Just wondering how many people you think will be at the earlier shift of the party. So I can figure out how many carts to send over for appetizers.”

“Oh. Yeah, it’s definitely going to be in shifts. I’d say fifty max. The evening will be the highest traffic.”

“Okay, cool. Just hit me up if that changes. I have all the appetizers set up, just depends on how many ovens I need to have going.”

“Will do.” He turned on the stairs and headed back down. “Might want to check that lipstick, Hauser.”

I rolled my eyes, but I rushed down the stairs after him. At the bottom of the stairs, I used my phone to check my face and

yikes. I didn't have a Kardashian level set of lips, but it sure seemed as if I'd been trying to pull off that kind of look.

I grabbed a napkin and did what I could to clean up. While I had the phone out, I sent a quick text to check in on Adriana. I got a picture back from Clint with a happily eating bean.

I hearted the photo and stuffed my phone back into my pocket. Not only had Kitty found me a cute dress, but it had pockets.

The next thirty minutes was a flurry of activity.

The bars on each level were prepping ice and massive stations for drinks. It was already a hot one and while the light breeze off the water helped, it was already getting uncomfortable.

Luckily, Mason had thought ahead there and had installed cabin fans. I directed Stef to have them turned on to keep the boat cool for people's arrival.

I went outside to check on the final touches. Maddie seemed to have that in hand and a few guests were already arriving. As I headed down the dock, Mason caught up with me.

"Hey."

I bit my lower lip against a wide smile. "How's it hanging, boss?"

"Don't start with that shit."

I snickered.

"Behave. We have a bunch of smart cops headed our way."

"Are all the cops on the force so big?"

He frowned down at me. "And why does that matter?"

"Just noticing is all."

"And they're almost all spoken for."

I bumped him with my hip. "Relax. I'm only interested in one ginger."

"I'm not a ginger."

“Did I say it was you?” I lengthened my stride to meet Gina as she came up the path.

“Guys!” Her eyes were already watering. “I can’t believe this.” She covered her mouth and spun around, taking in the decorated oak, the dock with her wedding flowers, and the barge all shined up with catering staff rushing around inside.

All of it for her and Jared.

She headed for the oak first and ran a shaking hand over the tulle wrapped arbor. We didn’t use a full arch. Instead, it was a simple frame with draped fabric, lights, and flowers.

The cedar logs were layered with flameless candles and mason jars full of blooms. It made a wide u-shape that looked just as lovely in the sunshine as it would in the nighttime.

We had a photographer who would be roaming around through the party to catch candid and a few formal photos. Since things had been so busy with their new baby, the happy couple hadn’t had the chance to get formal engagement photos done.

Instead, they’d opted for family photos, but I knew they’d want some that celebrated Gina and Jared as a couple, not just as parents. I knew full well how important the baby was once he or she entered our lives, but someone had to remember the bride.

And that would be me.

Jared came up beside me as Gina spoke to the photographer. She was wearing a simple sheath dress in peach and her dark fall of hair curled around her neck and down her back.

“She’s beautiful,” I said quietly.

“She is.” His face was creased with a happy smile at how the photographer fussed after her. He turned his attention to me. “Thank you for doing this.” He looked over my shoulder at Mason as he approached. “Thank you both. It’s far beyond what we were expecting.”

I could feel him standing directly behind me. My skin prickled at the memory of him holding me. And wowsah, that man could kiss.

“We wanted to make it special.” Mason’s voice rumbled from behind me.

Do not shudder.

Do not.

“You succeeded.” Jared passed me to engulf Mason in a hug. “I can’t thank you enough. We thought it would just be a fun summertime thing.” He squeezed Mason’s upper arms. “This is beyond.”

Jared turned toward me. “And I know you had a lot to do with it.”

“*Oof.*” I laughed as he pulled me into a hug. My goodness, the Brooks men were built with wide chests and shoulders. “Wait ’til you see inside the boat.”

He let me go. “That look on her face says everything.” Jared grinned at us then went to meet Gina in front of the oak.

“Guess we done good.” I resisted the urge to lean into Mason. Instead, we stood side by side and basked in the happiness of his brother and future sister-in-law.

Well, we got to bask for about five minutes. Then the rest of the Ramos clan arrived, and things got very intense very fast.

Bonnie Ramos, the matriarch, was dressed in a floral explosion of color. She ran to us with all the insane energy she seemed to have in an endless supply. “Oh, Mason. You took care of my girl. I won’t forget it.”

Mason seemed uncomfortable at the effusive hugs that came his way. Gina’s sisters were right behind their mother. The chic Frankie who lived in Brooklyn wearing a dress that I was certain had not come off a rack. The baby pink color made her olive skin glow, as did the gold at her neck, wrists, fingers, and ankle. She even had gold-wrapped heels on. Erica was in head-to-toe black, showing off her abundance of curves and

cloud of black curls. Gabby brought up the rear in poppy red with her pin-straight hair cut in a blunt short cut that skimmed her shoulders.

All of them stunning and just as loud as their mother.

At least in this instance, they were happily chattering about the boat, the Boozie Bus, and the photo ops.

Mason seemed shell-shocked when they all surrounded him. His brother was marrying into quite a family.

For a moment, I wondered how he'd handle the Hausers. If he thought the Ramos clan was overwhelming, he'd be in even more trouble with my huge family. Especially since on top of the general chaos that came with them, our parents were always concerned about the optics of literally everything.

Not that I should be thinking about any of that in relation to Mason. It was one kiss.

Okay, a few kisses, but nothing more than that. Just fizzy lust, I was pretty sure.

Quickly, I sidestepped the overwhelmed and manhandled Mason. He shot me a panicked look as I left him and made a quick stop at the Boozie Bus.

“Hi. Could I have a pitcher of...” I skimmed the menu and grinned at the names and descriptions of the summer drinks. “Watermelon Sugar?”

“Coming up,” the perky dark-haired woman replied. She had bangs and blue eyes the size of saucers. “Our pitcher serves four to six.”

“Maybe I should get two. The Ramos clan is sounding pretty hyper already.”

She laughed and put two scoopfuls of ice into hefty pitchers. “On it.”

I looked over my shoulder at Mason, who was currently shooting a look my way with huge, help me eyes.

The woman set the pink pitchers with mint sprigs and chunks of watermelon in front of me. “I had a feeling these

would be a big seller.”

I glanced at her name tag. “Thank you, Rachel. Anything with Harry Styles in it says party to me.”

She laughed. “Exactly.”

I made a mental note to find some cash for her tip jar and stuffed a sleeve of plastic cups under my arm, then took the handles of the pitchers in each hand as I headed toward the Ramos family. The fumes from the alcohol wafted my way, making my eyes sting. “Ladies, I think it’s time to get the party started. I know you’re just the ones to get it going.”

Frankie took the sleeve of cups from under my arm. “You got that right, *amigazo*.”

Gabby took one of the pitchers and sniffed. “Ooh. This is gonna be dangerous.”

Erica took the other one and started pouring into the cup Frankie held out to her. Frankie took a sip and whooped, then she held out the cup to Erica to try.

Erica’s big brown eyes got even wider. “How much vodka is in this thing?”

I flashed a bright smile. “Probably best not to ask.”

She snorted and filled the second glass Frankie held.

Bonnie took a glass and then the whole sleeve rapidly disappeared as cousins and wives came forward.

Somehow a glass ended up in my hand and I shrugged and held it up for a toast. “To love.”

“To love!”

A smattering of Spanish and what I was pretty sure was Italian salutations and cheers went up. Gina and Jared came down to see what was going on and the toasting started up again.

The pitchers were emptied in no time.

And while I loved Harry Styles as much as the next woman, I would not be drinking that again. I had no tolerance

any longer.

The pack of them surrounded Gina and hauled her back up the hill to the oak tree while they all fawned over the decorations and flowers.

I could already hear the tearful declarations all the way over here.

Mason came up next to me. “Way to handle the Ramos family.”

“I’ve had lots of practice.” I grinned up at him. “You should see my family.”

“Big as them?”

“Probably bigger.”

He swallowed hard and I laughed. “C’mon, let’s get inside and make sure everything is running smoothly.” I hooked my arm through his and hauled him up the path before the Ramos women started offering me more of those delicious watermelon drinks.

I had a very long day ahead of me.

TWENTY



I WAS THANKFUL THAT THE PARTY WAS GOING SO WELL. AS THE sun went down and the music got louder, so did the conversations. Laughter was the star of the show, along with endless stories about my brother.

Gina had been drinking with her sisters all evening, and she'd lost her shoes sometime between dinner and dessert. She was having the time of her life and that was all that mattered to me.

She kept dragging my dad around with her from friend group to family group, introducing my poor, introverted father to dozens of people. I could see the wheels turning there. He'd be sneaking out soon.

He was much more comfortable with his plants and cuttings.

I was about to go save him when Emma swooped in and stole him for a dance. Alan Brooks wasn't the smoothest of men. A bit ruffled and awkward on his best day, but he straightened as Emma lifted her hands to rest on his shoulders.

She had that effect on many a man.

When I heard him laughing, I couldn't help but smile at them.

Jared nudged me. "Emma is pretty amazing."

I tried to school my features, but my brother just thumped me on the back of my head as if we were teens again. "Hey."

"Don't be an idiot."

I rubbed the back of my head. “An idiot about what?”

“She’s amazing, and you should catch a clue.”

“A clue about what? She works for me, for God’s sake.” I sipped at the bottle of water I’d been nursing for the last hour. And she tasted like sunshine. “And she’s a new mom.”

“Sounds like excuses to me.”

“As if you should talk. Gina is your best friend, and you took years to get your head out of your ass.”

“I know, but you should do better than me.” He took a long drink from his bottle of beer. “Learn from my mistakes. You haven’t dated anyone since The Mason Jar opened, for God’s sake. What are you, a monk?”

“No. I’ve dated.” Sort of. I never seemed to have the time to go on more than a few dates before the women got sick of my lack of availability. A few had even ended up with a naked nightcap, but the restaurant had been my sole focus for so long it was hard to make anyone see I was worth sharing.

Because The Mason Jar was definitely my wife these days.

But Emma was the first one to make me wonder if maybe I wasn’t making the best choices.

“What happened to that teacher?”

“Melinda?” I hadn’t thought of her in months. God, was it a year now? I counted back in my head, but the only way I marked the days was in milestones for the restaurant. And it was before I’d bought the barge at auction.

“Yeah.” Jared frowned. “At least I think that was her name.”

“Left me a voicemail that a relationship didn’t include text message excuses about work.”

He whistled. “She’s right.”

I was about to open my mouth and remind him how much work I’d been doing when he held up a hand.

“Listen. You’ve done a lot of amazing stuff here. And this boat—or barge, or whatever it is—is amazing. And you made Bee the happiest I’ve seen her since she found out we were having our little boy.”

“I’m glad. She’s important to me too.”

“I know it. Just think about shuffling some responsibilities. I know it’s not easy. Believe me, I know better than most, but I’ve noticed you watching Emma.”

“She’s—”

“She’s awesome. And I get it. I know she’s young and has her own entanglements, but time passes fast. I turned around to find a lonely house because I was clueless. Bee and Sami smacked me awake.”

“I’ve only known her a few weeks, Jare. Bring it back down.”

“Even if it’s not Emma, you need to look up once in a while, man.”

Hearing that made my gut twist. Not just at the idea of her, but that I could lose her before I’d even had her. Right now, it was just a nebulous maybe.

Though that kiss was anything but a maybe. I could still freaking taste her.

“We miss you. Sami asks where Uncle Mason is all the time.”

Guilt ate at me. I’d managed to see my family a handful of times since Christmas. Juggling the restaurant, staffing, and the barge had left me little time for sleep, let alone seeing my family.

“I know. Things will be better now that I have some help.” My gaze tracked to Emma again. She was making our dad laugh and she just sparkled under the mason jar lights she’d convinced me to add to the MJ2. From her hair to her smile and all that golden skin in between, she was simply golden.

And warm and outgoing.

Everything I needed for this job, sure.

But more than that, she'd made me sit up and take notice as well. Rules be damned at this point. I didn't want her to leave.

To leave *me*, never mind the job.

The music ended, dragging me out of my spinning thoughts. Emma was standing on a chair near the bar with a microphone in hand.

Where the hell had she gotten a microphone?

"Since it's such a lovely night, we're going to have dessert and sparklers out on the lawn near the oak tree. You can't miss it." She winked. "It's lit up like Christmas. We wanted one more way to celebrate these two crazy kids. Give it up for Jared and Gina." The space erupted into clapping. "And both their families as well as friends for coming out to show them how much they mean to us." She lifted her mason jar. "And bring your drinks. Just don't even think about taking them to your cars or you'll end up in cuffs."

She hopped down and made a beeline for me. "Hope you got as many sparklers as it looked like you got."

I laughed. "I did."

Jared whacked me on the arm then gave Emma another hug. "Thanks for making the party so special. We should have hired you to do the wedding."

Emma laughed and hugged him back. "Not on your life, pal."

"Smart woman. Even doing mostly everything ourselves, I'm freaking tired of hearing about swatches and cakes and fish versus chicken verses a damn steak."

She snorted. "Always the steak."

"See? Thank you." Jared gave me another hard look.

"Go get your almost bride, please." I pushed him toward where Gina was scanning the crowd for him.

Emma laughed as he went.

“You’d never know my brother was a grumpy asshole a few years ago. Now he acts like a golden retriever with a tennis ball.”

“Love makes us all a little crazy.”

I glanced down at her. “Did it make you crazy?”

She searched my eyes before answering. “I don’t know. I’m still figuring it out.”

“Mason! Did you lock up the sparklers somewhere?” Stef called from the dock.

“We better get down there.” Emma grinned and headed for the stairs.

I tried not to growl as I was transfixed by her swinging hips. Life was a lot easier before I let lust start making decisions for me.

We both rushed down the stairs from the second level to the main deck. On our way by, Emma grabbed a water bottle out of the melted ice in the metal tub and drank deeply as we hustled down the dock.

“I’ll meet you at the tree.” Emma dabbed at her mouth with the back of her hand, and I wished I could taste that cool wetness on her lips instead.

I was seriously in trouble.

Her eyes grew heated as she gripped my hand for a second before disappearing into the crowd to make sure the desserts were being passed out. Sugar Rush had made a cake as well as petit fours for those who liked a more bite-sized treat.

I met Stef on the grass, and we headed for the trunk I’d locked up for safe keeping. I handed him the fireworks that I’d buried inside.

“Think you can take these out on the lake and set them off?”

“Sweet!” Stef’s face lit up.

“You’re not going to blow a finger off, right? If I remembered right, you helped for the Fourth of July festival.”

“I did. My dad is in charge of them. If you’d given me a head’s up, I would have gotten you a better deal.”

I sighed. “It was a very impromptu thing, but we’ll discuss it for the Memorial Day party.”

“You got it.” Stef took the boxes. “Mind if I take Penny?”

“Nope, not at all.”

Stef loped off in that long, lanky stride of his and I went back to organizing the sparklers into bundles. People were gathered around the tree and the photographer was getting family photos as well as a few of the engaged couple.

I shoved lighters into a reusable bag with a long strap.

“Need some help?”

I glanced up to see Emma bathed in the glowing lights from the tree. “Hey. Yeah, actually.” I handed her the bag. “Think you can handle some fire?”

Her lips tilted up at one corner as she took it. “I can definitely handle some heat.”

“I walked into that one.”

She laughed, the sound of it almost bawdy with her delight. Fuck, she was so hot. And I needed to get a damn grip.

She spun and her skirt flowed out around her thighs, making my dick twitch again.

Longing for a woman who had just given birth was a personal all-time low, but here we were. She was damn near irresistible.

But I kept trying anyway.

I stood up and started handing out the extra-long sparklers. Thankfully, this was a kid-free party, so we didn’t have to worry about anything other than a few slightly drunk people.

When I got to Gina and Jared, I handed them their sparklers. “When you see the signal, light up.”

Gina laughed. “I’m getting married to the Chief. Pretty sure lighting up isn’t recommended.”

“Again, I walked into that one.” I laughed.

“What’s the signal?” Jared asked.

“You’ll know it when you see it.”

It took me about fifteen minutes to hand them all out. I heard the motor of my speedboat as I finally reached my dad.

“Here you go. Did Emma give you a lighter?”

“She did. You two really are doing the most.” He laughed. “I tried to sneak out, but Emma wouldn’t let me.”

“She’s nearly impossible to say no to, isn’t she?”

“Yes. I’d like you to know you have my blessing there if you get your head out of your ass.”

I blinked at him. “Have you been talking to Jared?”

“Not about this, no. But that just goes double for you to snap her up. She glows like a sunflower in August, my boy. She won’t be single for long, with or without a baby.”

My chest tightened again. She deserved a guy way better than me, but I was selfish enough to own up to the fact that I wanted it to be me.

I scanned the fifty or so people who were left at the night shift of the party. It was mostly the younger set of cops, paramedics, firefighters, and their significant others. Bonnie was out-partying her daughters and flitting from group to group.

Bonnie Ramos knew everyone and liked to have a good time as much as any of the younger people.

Finally, I spotted Emma trying to hand Gillian a lighter. Instead of taking it, Gillian shoved the sparkler back at her and stalked off toward the barge, away from the partygoers.

Instead of being offended, Emma just rolled her eyes and stuck the sparkler in her bag, then she went on to the next cluster of people. This one was made up of off-duty paramedics still in their uniforms.

Gillian tossed a venomous look over her shoulder before she disappeared inside the boat. She was becoming a larger problem every damn day.

She wanted Emma's job, but she couldn't even fake pleasantries while doing her actual job. How was I supposed to trust her to deal with clients for a party? Unsupervised, no less?

Another reason why Emma was perfect for this job. She made everything easy. From gathering materials to calling on her endless wealth of ideas, there was no drama.

And *she* was the one who was an actual actress. If she had to deal with a difficult customer, she could fall back on her arsenal of acting skills to handle it with aplomb.

Lately, Gillian had absolutely no aplomb.

The first whistle of a firework shot into the sky just before a smattering of silvery sparks exploded.

It didn't matter how old you were, or what kind of day at work you'd dealt with—fireworks made everyone happy.

Everyone turned toward the lake and watched the mini display of gold, silver, and a smattering of blue light up the night.

The first sparkler ignited as Jared and Gina started off the chain of gold through the crowd.

Laughter flowed with the glowing circles made by people writing in the air. My gaze landed on Emma as she slowly edged into the darkness, her sparkler a beacon in the night.

She ducked behind the tree with a smile just for me.

I didn't think. I simply followed.

While everyone was distracted with the sparklers and desserts, I let myself be distracted by her.

"Emma?"

Her hand came out of the darkness and she dragged me close to her. Then her lips were against mine. I crushed her close.

She tasted of something fruity and cold and smelled of fire.

She lit something in me that had been dormant for so damned long. The last of the fireworks on the lake backlit her golden hair.

“You make me want to break every rule.”

“Rules are made to be broken,” she said against my mouth. “Now kiss me before someone finds us.”

And I did.

Again and again until both of us lost our breath.

Then her pocket went off.

She moaned. “No. Just a minute more.”

“Is that you buzzing or me?” I asked and kissed her between the words.

“Me.” She tore her mouth away as the buzzing became an actual ringtone. “Wait.” She fumbled in her pocket. “Wait, that’s Clint’s ringtone.”

I stumbled back. “Is everything okay?”

“I don’t know. He wouldn’t call me if it was.” Her fingers shook. “Hello?”

I drew her close, hoping to offer some sort of comfort but she pushed me back and paced away, plugging her other ear to hear over the party.

“How high?” I heard her ask.

I tried not to be hurt that she pushed me away. It was obviously about her daughter.

“And you tried a cool bath? No, I’m sure you did. Right.” She turned to look at me.

“Go. I can handle the clean-up.”

“I’m on my way. Yes, go to the urgent care in Kensington Square. I’ll meet you there.” She stuffed her phone into her pocket. “I’m sorry. I have to go.”

“No, go. Don’t worry about it. Is Adriana okay?”

“I think so.” She shoved her hair away from her face. “I don’t know exactly. She has a fever.” She sniffed. “I don’t know, Mason.”

I pulled her close. “It’s okay. Babies get ear infections or little colds. It happens so quickly.”

“I know, but she was fine when I left. I mean, she was fussy last night, but she’s always a little fussy at night now.” She sniffled again. “What if I missed it? I was so tired.”

“Baby, that’s not it. She’s growing every day, and you can’t know every change.”

“But what if I missed it because I wasn’t paying attention?”

“You didn’t.” I eased her back. “You are a great mom.”

“But I left her alone and now she’s sick. She was probably so scared.” Her voice broke and my throat went tight and hot in reaction.

“Let me drive you.”

“No. You have to take care of everyone. I’ll be fine. It’s just the next town over. Clint knows the people who work at the clinic.” She laughed. “Even the vet knows the good doctors in his town.”

The laugh sounded a little hysterical. I didn’t want to let her go alone.

I dug for my phone in my pocket. “Let me find Stone. He can button everything up.”

“No.” She gripped my hand. “I know this is important to you.”

“You are too.”

A little sob left her. “God, you’re such a good man.” She sniffed and straightened her shoulders. “I’ll be fine. I promise.” She went onto her toes and kissed me lightly. “I gotta go.”

Then she ran off and left me in the dark.

About so many things.

TWENTY-ONE



I TOOK OFF FOR THE BARGE, MY HEELS SINKING INTO THE grass in my haste.

“Emma?” Maddie’s voice was right behind me. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah.” I paused on the dock. “Just the baby. She’s sick.” I swiped at my cheeks at the tears that kept coming.

I’d been having the time of my life, and my little girl was sick. I should have known. Shouldn’t I have gotten some mom ESP or something?

“Oh, no. I’m sure she’ll be okay.” Maddie squeezed my hand. “Vee’s kids are always getting sick. Look at Harmony with that ear thing I mentioned. Beefs up their immunity in the end.”

I nodded with a snuffle. “I just wasn’t there, you know?”

She grabbed me in a fierce hug. “Yeah, but you will be now.”

“I will. I told Mason. He’s going to need help.”

“Don’t worry about it.” She dug her chin into my shoulder and swayed a little. Kind of how I soothed bean. And that thought had me tearing up again. “We’ve got it. Most everyone is getting ready to go home anyway.”

“Okay.” I pulled back and gave her a watery smile before I hurried up the dock for my bag. I needed my keys and ID and insurance cards.

I stepped onto the MJ2 and saw the text from my brother that they were almost at the urgent care.

The boat was mostly empty save for the catering staff cleaning up. I crossed to the bar where I'd stashed my bag and inwardly groaned.

Of course. Just the capper to the night I did *not* need.

Gillian was sitting at a barstool with a tall glass with clear liquid in it. Somehow I didn't think it was seltzer. Or just a splash of it with whatever else she'd poured.

"Where do you think you're going?" She peered down at me as I crouched behind the bar.

"Family emergency." It seemed better to keep things simple.

"What family? Your baby daddy finally show up?"

I narrowed my eyes at her, my spine stiffening. "None of your business who my baby's father is."

"No one knows. Just you flitting around in here with that stupid baby strapped to your chest. Thinking you're better than the rest of us."

"I don't have time for this." I dug into my bag for my keys.

"Of course you don't. You saved the day. Party done and now you'll leave us to clean up." Gillian stabbed at the ice in her glass with the thin stirrer straw. "Too good for that too?"

A few people looked up from what they were doing. Most of the catering staff were from an outside vendor, but there were still plenty of people from The Mason Jar working as well.

I went around the bar to stand close to Gillian. "I know you hate me for some reason, but for your information, my baby is in the ER."

Instead of looking contrite, she doubled down. "What, you don't take care of the kid when there aren't people around to see? Just for show?"

My mouth dropped open.

Gillian drained the glass. “Maybe you should focus on your kid instead of trying to get in Mason’s pants.”

I reeled back as if she’d physically slapped me. Close enough. “You’re too busy trying to do that for the both of us.”

Gillian slid off her stool. “I earned my space here. I’ve been with him since he bought this place when it was little better than a shack. You haven’t done the hard work. You’re just sweeping in with all that blond hair and the sexy smiles, charming everyone. I know what you really are. I know your kind.”

“My kind? You’re delusional and drunk.”

“Instead of worrying about what’s best for your kid, you’re here getting all the attention. Thinking you can have everything. You can’t.”

The jabs hit. I knew not all of them were true.

But here I was, trying to have it all. Pretending I was just a carefree twenty-something like I’d been not that long ago. And my daughter was paying the price. I should have been there with her, not here playing like I had time for romance.

Like this party meant more than my actual responsibilities to Adriana. My little bean who was all alone.

I swung the bag over my shoulder and the keys dug into my palm. “You’re right.”

Her chin lifted, and her eyes narrowed.

I expected her to crow when I agreed. Instead, her suspicious gaze only deepened.

My eyes burned as I quickly looked around at all we did. All the hours I’d spent here making it perfect. Maybe Adriana got sick from being with me all the time.

Around so many people.

Outside all day while I worked.

Maybe I wanted this too much. Wanted to prove to everyone that I could do both.

I couldn't worry about that right now. My daughter needed me and that was more important than arguing with Gillian.

She won.

And I just didn't care.

You do care. You care so much.

I ignored the whispers at the back of my mind as I rushed back down the dock and across the grass.

"Emma," Mason called after me. "Emma, wait."

I didn't wait. I couldn't.

If I did, I might do something stupid like beg him to come with me. Selfishly, I didn't want to do this alone.

I had Clint and Kitty.

I had my true family.

I jumped into my station wagon and put it in reverse. When I looked up, Mason was hurrying across the grass, then stopping with his hands on his hips, worry etched on his face.

My stomach clenched, but nothing was more important than Adriana.

I didn't remember getting to the urgent care. Some part of me managed to find the name of it on my maps app and I parked. I wasn't even sure it was a legal parking spot, but I'd deal with a towed car later if need be.

The waiting room was eye-searingly bright. The waiting area was empty save for an older man with a cough in the corner. I went to the intake desk, and no one was there either.

I peered over the edge of the desk and caught the gaze of a woman. She held up a finger, on the phone with someone.

I gnawed on the corner of my thumb and paced away from the desk, then back. Were they already in an exam room?

Did she have to get admitted?

Was it even worse?

A shrill cry echoed from the back of the office. I didn't think, just ran for the cry. I knew it well. Had shushed it hundreds of times at this point. Sung to her until she stopped, sometimes I even cried with her some nights.

My breasts physically ached at the sound of it. I'd waited too long to pump because of all the excitement at the end of the party.

"Miss!" The nurse chased after me.

"That's my baby." I snaked my way around the curtained off stalls. "Clint?" I called out.

The curtain at the far side of the room moved and my brother's head peeked around it. Relief and worry warred on his face.

I ran to meet him, taken aback when I found Kitty in there with him, wearing a surgical mask.

"She wasn't sure if Adriana was catchy and her being pregnant..."

I waved him off. "Understandable."

Adriana was on the exam table, her little arms and legs flailing as she shouted off the roof of the building.

"Bean, *shh*. It's okay. I'm here."

The young doctor looked at me. My daughter was freaking out, and he was cool as a damn cucumber. "Are you the mother?"

I nodded, my eyes filling. "What's wrong with her?" I just wanted to hold her.

"Well, this little one decided she wasn't going to eat. Just scream for her mama."

The spike of guilt made my eyes well over. "I was out. I'm so sorry, bean. I'm here now. I won't leave you again."

Clint came up behind me and rubbed my arms. "She started spiking a fever after her dinner." He was talking to the doctor, but he was still soothing me. Just like he always did.

Always looking out for me.

“We put her in a tepid bath to try and bring it down.”

The doctor glanced at Clint. “And didn’t give her anything else?”

“No.”

“Good. We don’t like to give babies this young any Tylenol. But smart on the bath.” He turned to me. “Are you breastfeeding?”

I nodded. “She doesn’t take any formula. Just me.”

“Okay, so she should have plenty of antibodies going on.” He set gentle hands on Adriana’s belly. “A little distended, but she’s probably been getting herself all worked up for a while, huh?”

“Yes, she hasn’t really stopped crying since we left.”

I slapped a hand over my mouth against a sob. So long?

He checked her heart and her ears. “Mom, why don’t you come over here and see if she’ll quiet down a little with you.”

Gratefully, I went to her side and cupped her head. “Hey, lil bean. What’s the drama?” I bent down to brush my nose against her cheek. “This nice doctor wants to check you over, okay?”

“She’s a little over three weeks, correct?”

I nodded as the tears tracked over my nose and onto the exam table.

“Has she been colicky?”

I looked up. “She’s been fussy late at night. Doesn’t like to settle down some nights until dawn.”

Clint sighed. “Why didn’t you tell us?”

“I just assumed that was part of the mom deal.” I turned my focus back on Adriana. “She’s so good during the day. The best sleeper throughout the day, actually.”

“I don’t think she has anything other than a touch of colic. I know the fever is scary, but it’s very low. We’re going to take

a quick panel to make sure everything is okay.” The doctor settled a hand over mine. “We’ll get her all checked out. Don’t worry, okay?”

I nodded. “Can I hold her now?”

“Absolutely.”

I scooped her up and put her against my chest. Immediately, some of the panic inside me started to calm.

He handed me a thin blanket. “If you can get her to eat, that would be great too.”

I nodded and sat in the corner. Or whatever the corner equivalent was of a curtain. Her little face was all screwed up as she bowed up.

“We can do this, bean,” I whispered. “Just have a little snack, okay?”

The dress had a deep enough vee that I could shove material aside and finally, she naturally turned into me. It took a minute for her to settle enough to latch on, but then she was sniveling for a second before easing into a feeding.

“There we go.” I stroked her cheek as she got greedy as usual.

The doctor smiled as he crouched in front of me. Now that Adriana wasn’t trying to shout loud enough to be heard from space, he was able to do his job.

An hour later, we were sent on our way with colic drops and orders to take bean to her regular pediatrician to get a thorough look-over.

Lucky for me, he didn’t find anything else wrong with her. Even luckier, at the three-week mark, a baby could start to get colic. She might grow out of it in a few months, but if not, I might be in for a lot of sleepless nights.

Which meant I needed to choose her over my job right now.

Maybe for a good long time.

“I’m sorry we scared you,” Kitty said quietly as we were walking back to the parking lot.

“You did everything right. I’m just sorry your first outing as babysitters probably scared you two right back.”

Adriana was buckled into her carrier. My first instinct had been to bundle her up in her wrap against me, but I knew she needed her rest.

She’d cried herself into exhaustion, and we’d take the win to get her back to my apartment.

“Not going to lie, that was intense.” Clint sighed. “But I’m glad it wasn’t worse. I just wish you’d told me she’s been fussing at night.”

“What could you do?”

“I don’t know. Stay with you?”

“You have your own life and a crazy schedule. It was bad enough that I asked you to watch her tonight.”

“You’re allowed to go out too, you know.” Clint stopped beside my station wagon.

“Maybe after a few months. I really thought I could do this, but it wasn’t fair to bean or to you.”

“It was one night.”

I opened the back door and clicked her carrier into the carseat. Bean gave a little hiccup before she settled back into slumber. I cupped her head where her dark hair swirled at her crown. Her downy soft hair was a reassuring comfort.

Quietly, I closed the door. “Yes, but that job isn’t going to get any less intense. Mason has a whole slate of parties for this summer. It’s not fair to him either.”

“You were doing it though.”

“Was I?” I peered down at her in the backseat. “I could have gotten her sick by having her around a ton of people. No, this was a wakeup call.”

“We can help—”

“I appreciate it. I really do. But I think I’m going to take Mom up on her offer. She wants me to come home.”

“Clintondale?”

I nodded. “At least for a little while. Until she’s older and I can do daycare easier.”

Or maybe not at all.

Maybe I’d have to find a work from home job to support us.

Bottom line, she came first, second, third. Maybe I’d allow myself to come fourth when she was a little older.

“What about Pierre? He should be helping you monetarily at the very least.”

I shook my head. “No. I made the decision to do this on my own. I can’t go running back on that the first time it got hard, Sparky.”

“You don’t want to go back there any more than I do.”

“I don’t hate it as much as you do.”

I just hadn’t ever wanted to picture myself going home as a single mom. But this really wasn’t about me.

I wrapped my arms around my brother’s neck. “I’m going to be fine, Sparky. I promise you. And hey, Mom wants to spoil her too.”

He hugged me back. “She does.”

I could feel the relief in the way he held onto me. I knew he’d been worrying about me since I moved to Crescent Cove.

I eased back from him and hugged Kitty.

“You guys have been amazing.”

“It feels like you’re saying goodbye forever.” Kitty held on for an extra moment, her voice tinged with unhappiness.

“Not at all. You know I’ll be bugging you guys all the time.” I patted her little bump. “Besides, our kids have to grow up together, right?”

“Right,” Clint said firmly.

“But for now, we’re going home to sleep.”

I really hoped she would stay that way for a few hours at least.

“Do you want us to follow you home?”

I shook my head. “No. We’re just going to go home and sleep.” I gave my brother a peck on the cheek and got into my car before I started bawling.

When we pulled out of the parking lot and Adriana stayed asleep, I took a deep breath and plugged my phone in and dialed a number I’d been avoiding.

“Emmaline?”

My mom’s voice came through my speakers and the tears I’d been holding back bubbled up again.

“Mom?”

“Is everything okay? It’s late.”

“I know.” I swallowed down the lump in my throat. “It’s okay. I just...” I bit back a sob. “Mom, can I come home?”

“Oh, baby. Of course you can. We’ve wanted you to since you told us you were having a baby.”

“I know.”

“You don’t have to do this alone.”

“I know.” The lump got bigger. “I’ve been trying so hard.”

“I know, baby. Needing help doesn’t make you a bad mom, so get that out of your mind right now.”

I laughed and it came out close to a sob. “You sure about that?”

“I’m completely sure. Do you want us to come get you? We can leave right now.”

“No. I need to get us all ready. Bean has some colic. At least we think. So, we need to let her sleep for now.”

“We’ll come in the morning.”

“You don’t have to.”

“We’ll be there bright and early, baby.”

The road wavered in front of me as the tears squeezed out.
“Okay.”

“Good. That’s decided. We love you, Emmaline.”

“I know.”

“I’m just going to stay on the phone with you until you get home, okay?”

“Okay,” I said on a broken whisper.

And she did. The whole way back to my apartment, she chattered on about colors and the nursery theme she had waiting for me.

As if she knew all along.

TWENTY-TWO



I CHECKED MY PHONE FOR THE FIFTH TIME SINCE THE NIGHT before. I got one text from Emma at midnight that the baby was fine, and they were home.

No other details.

False alarm? Or antibiotics for the win?

I knew from Jared and Gina's kids that ear infections, random coughs, and any version of the flu known to man would and could derail a night.

But the radio silence felt like it was more than that.

“Anything?”

I looked up from my phone at Rami's voice. “No.” I stuffed my phone back into my pocket.

“She might just be overwhelmed. When my little one is sick, there are just tears, sleep, and delirium.”

“Yeah. That's probably it.” I cleared my throat. “Did you need something?”

She played with the ends of her hair. “There's someone here to see you.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“Not if you ask me. He doesn't look like he's from around here actually.”

I frowned. “Okay, that sounds interesting.” As interesting as it could be on three hours of sleep.

After overseeing the party breakdown and dealing with a belligerent Gillian—who'd I had to drive home—I'd spent the rest of the night staring at the ceiling.

Usually, I crashed hard after work. Sleep was one of the few things I was actually good at when I actually went home. As if my body knew it needed to power down and go into recovery mode.

Last night, not so much.

“He’s on the patio. I put him at table eleven.”

“Got it. Thanks, Rami.” My phone buzzed and I quickly checked it as I crossed the dining room.

Instead of a text from Emma, it was Gillian calling off for her shift.

Great.

I shot off a quick reply that we'd cover for her. Mondays were generally light anyway.

On my way to the patio, I was stopped by Patty Duncan who asked about the party.

Nosy woman always wanted the details to everything. I promised her a recap when I got a moment, then I escaped to the patio.

Two of our usual bartenders were prepping for happy hour. Now that summer was on our doorstep, even our Mondays could get a little busy. Longer days of sunshine meant when people got off work, they felt like they had more of the evening to enjoy.

The Mason Jar being on the water was a big draw.

There was a small gathering of people around a man at table eleven. He was signing something glossy for Jensen.

As I got closer, I heard him murmur in a dazed voice, “Thanks, man. I’ve been reading these since my junior year.”

“Thanks for making me feel old.” The man with shoulder-length black curls capped a silver Sharpie and tucked it back into his portfolio.

Who went around with silver Sharpies in their arsenal?

Jensen tucked the graphic novel under his arm. “Sorry to interrupt your meal.”

The man waved him off. “Not a bother. I don’t usually get recognized when I come home.”

“I can’t believe you’re Maddie’s brother. That is so fucking cool.”

“Hey, Jensen.”

He glanced over at me, his neck going red. “Hey, Mason. I’ll get out of your way. I just came by to pick up my truck. I had to Uber it home last night. That Boozie Bus was dangerous.”

I laughed. “The Ramos sisters are still cursing at me.”

“I believe it.” Jensen smiled at the dark-haired man. “Thanks, Mr. Masterson.”

“Penn,” he said and held out his hand to shake Jensen’s hand.

“Penn.” Jensen’s tone was full of awe.

Just who was this guy?

“Did he say Masterson?” I asked no one in particular. “As in Maddie?”

“Yeah, she’s my baby sister. She couldn’t stop talking about the barge. Actually, she and Christian were gushing about it at our family dinner Saturday. You know it was a good party when my mom changes family dinner from Sunday to Saturday.”

“Maddie was invaluable to us. She and Emma, our...”

Was Emma anything for us anymore? She’d run off without talking about any future events.

I’d technically only hired her for the engagement party.

“Emma and Maddie made us look good. We’ll just say that.”

“Exactly why I’m here. Can you sit for a minute?”

“Sure.” I pulled out the chair across from him. “Did you order yet?”

He nodded. “Maddie told me I had to have the loaded fries.”

“They are at the top of the menu for a reason.”

“I’m down for that.” Penn laced his fingers on top of his book—now that I was paying attention, I noticed it was a sketch book.

“What can I do for you, Mr. Masterson?”

“Not you too. They don’t even call my dad Mr. Masterson around here.”

“Penn, was it?”

He nodded. “As I mentioned, I was in town for my monthly family dinner. I live in Chelsea.”

I whistled. “Bit of a hike.”

“It is. And I realize it might be a little unorthodox to do a release party out of the city.”

My eyebrows shot up.

“Let me back up. Sorry, I’ve been planning this launch party for my new publishing house for over two years. It seemed like it was never going to get off the ground, but things are finally coming together. Since two of the main graphic artists live in this area, I thought it would be a fun and artsy thing to do.”

“Two?”

“Yes. Ryan Moon lives in nearby Kensington Square and Nolan Devereaux, who is a fairly new transplant to Crescent Cove. And of course, I’m from here as well, though I moved to the city when I was twenty.”

“Devereaux?”

“Yeah, he’s a metal artist and illustrator. He bought the old factory on the edge of town. Turned it into a macabre candy store.”

“Oh, right. Tricks and Treats. His Halloween display last year was insane.”

“That’s the one. You should read his graphic novels. Makes my stuff look like a cotton candy dream. I’m trying to sign Vanessa McNeill, but she’s a wily one. Must be something besides babymaking properties in that lake. Lots of artists out this way.” He nodded to the still lake.

“I never believed in those stories until my nephew was born.” The little boy who was rapidly changing every time I saw him.

“Whatever is out there, I’d love to bottle it. I can use all the capital I can get these days. The publishing game is not for the faint of heart.”

I laughed. “I haven’t read a graphic novel since I was fifteen, sneaking off to the manga spinner at the bookstore.”

Penn opened his leather portfolio and pushed one over to me. “Well, this is me. That’s not out yet. It’s the first pressing of my new series.”

I looked down at the dark, claustrophobic ink with a few pops of neon purple. The eyes of the main character had that ethereal purple and stared right into your damn soul. Angular and sketchy, the figure invited you closer while also urging you to pull away while you still could.

I flipped it over and saw the logo at the bottom corner. A scrolling D and P wrapped around a dissolving pen.

“Clever.”

Penn smirked. “I am that.”

“And because I’ve poured a disgusting amount of money into this venture, I don’t really want to spend a zillion dollars on a fancy Manhattan place for my party.”

“Zillion, huh? Technical term?”

Penn snorted. “It’s damn close. But that boat is a statement. And my entire crazy family is up here. It’s a solid way to make everyone happy. Do you think we could make it happen?”

Getting The Mason Jar and MJ2's name out there with a bunch of city people was beyond anything I'd ever imagined. I held my hand out. "We'll make it happen."

Penn's grip was firm, and his smirk slid into an actual grin. "Now let's get down to details."

"Lay it on me."

I wished Emma was here to help me out, but I'd handled things before her and would do so again if I had to.

I'd been building The Mason Jar for years and this was just one more milestone. Even if it felt a little hollow this time.

We spoke about what Penn was looking for, the guest list, and the day he was looking to have the party. The very end of August. I'd managed to throw a decent party in a week, I should be able to do this one in a few months.

By the time Penn left, as well as signing me over a very healthy deposit, the sun was low in the sky and reflecting on the lake. Still no reply from Emma to my texts.

I stopped in the kitchen for a big container of her favorite fries, then checked in with Esther. For once, the evening shift was decently staffed, and things were as calm as they could be for a steady dinner rush.

"I'm going to head over to Emma's to make sure she's okay. I don't like how she left last night."

Esther was updating the marker board for tables and plugging in a handful of pagers. "Oh, good. We've been wondering about her and that little bean of hers."

"Yeah, she's not answering texts."

"Keep us updated."

"Will do." I headed out to the parking lot and aimed down the side path where I'd parked my truck.

I wasn't one of those guys who'd ever used the read notifications on my phone, but right now, I wished I was. I didn't even know if she'd read my damn text. I just hoped it wasn't anything too serious.

Babies got sick so easily.

The drive to her apartment complex took less than ten minutes. I didn't see her station wagon in the parking lot. Maybe Clint had taken it to get groceries.

And maybe I was acting like a fool.

I still got out and buzzed her apartment, even though I knew there'd be no answer. Taking a chance that her neighbor was home, I buzzed the number across from Emma's place.

It took a minute for a reply. Long enough, that I almost turned away.

"Yes?"

The older voice made me curse my own impulsive nature. "I'm sorry to bother you, ma'am. My name is Mason, and I'm looking for Emma."

"Oh, she's not here. Here, let me buzz you in."

I pulled open the door and found a woman who didn't even clear five feet. She was waiting just outside of her door.

"Sorry to bother you, Mrs. Turner."

"Oh, no bother. My grandson Jensen talks about your place all the time. I'm afraid Emmaline left this morning. A great big man came and picked her up. I don't think I've ever seen someone so big in all my years, and I've been on this Earth for eighty-seven of them."

Who the hell picked her up?

"Are you sure you don't mean her brother?"

"Oh, heavens no. I've met Clint and Kitty plenty of times. He even fixed up my Roxy when she got into my yarn. I keep telling her it isn't a chew toy, but she doesn't listen to me."

A small dog yapped from behind her through the door.

"See, there she is. Noisy as a Rottweiler and the size of a teacup, that's my Roxy."

Impatience threatened, but I managed to bite my tongue. "About Emma?"

“Oh, right. Yes, she bundled up that little one of hers with bags of clothes and diapers. I’m pretty sure she even took the bassinet. And off they went before ten this morning, I think.”

“Ten?” I’d definitely texted her after that.

And who was the man?

The father?

I didn’t know much about Pierre, but I got the feeling the professor wasn’t exactly a mountain of a man.

She’d just left without telling me?

“Is the baby okay?”

“Oh, yes. Poor thing has a touch of colic. I don’t envy Emmaline with that one. My Timothy had it, and oh, the sleepless nights.” She *tsked* with a shake of her head.

“Thanks for the information, Mrs. Turner.”

“You’re welcome. Sorry I couldn’t be more help.” She went back inside, and I could hear her murmuring to her dog as she closed the door.

Would she really go without talking to me at all?

And where had she gone?

I went back to my truck and got in. I popped open the to-go container of fries and ate one. I’d missed lunch, as usual, while talking to Penn.

On a hunch, I opened my email and sure enough, there was something from her there. It had only come in an hour ago.

Mason,

I loved working with you. Your family is amazing, and I wish every happiness to Gina and Jared on their upcoming wedding.

First of all, Adriana is fine. However, she will need far more attention from me than I can give her and

work with you. I'm sure you understand that my little bean has to come first.

I know my job was a trial basis and I'd hoped for more time.

More time with you.

Even more time with your beautiful restaurant and the MJ2, but especially time with you.

My mom and dad have been asking me to come home, but I'd hoped I could stand on my own for once. I guess this was a sign that it wasn't the right time for that.

I don't regret anything between us, but I do regret putting Adriana second even for a night. I just can't let that happen again.

I hope you understand.

Emma

PS: Don't work so hard all the time. Maybe that was the lesson for both of us.

I tipped my head back and bounced it on my headrest a few times. Every reason I'd told myself not to hire her was here in black and white. But it didn't make my chest hurt any less.

I tossed my phone into the cup holder and started my truck.

I couldn't fault her for choosing her kid above me. Above The Mason Jar or the barge even.

I drove back to the restaurant, but instead of stopping there, I kept driving around the lake and parked on the grassy hill and stared out on the lake until the sun slipped into the tree line, and finally dropped out of view.

The streaks of purple and hot pink spoke of another hot summer day coming.

Good for business.

That was the important part, not the ache under my breastbone. Not that I already missed her soft skin, and those big blue eyes full of playful joy.

Or the baby who was as much a part of her as her breath.

I sat in my dark truck for a damn long time, but instead of going back to The Mason Jar, I continued driving to my little house on Crescent Lake. The house I barely saw these days.

I parked and walked down the dock to my sailboat. I stepped onto the deck and down the steps to the mini bar. I grabbed the bottle of moonshine from Brothers Three and brought it back up topside and dumped myself in my hammock.

I only drank a quarter of the bottle before the motion of the water helped me drift off with a pair of blue eyes following me into my dreams.

TWENTY-THREE



August

I HELD ADRIANA UP AND SHE SQUEALED WITH LAUGHTER. AT least her version of laughter. Bean was still figuring out what sounds were. As well as the difference between her grandpa's booming laugh, which still made her jolt sometimes, and the laughter in the park.

I lifted her and lowered her a few more times. She was the perfect fifteen-pound weight. And she thought it was hilarious when I used her like a dumbbell.

I sat up slowly and tucked her in between my legs, crisscrossing them to keep her stable against me. She hadn't quite mastered the keeping her head up thing yet.

I reached for her favorite *Winnie the Pooh* book and held it up for her to see the pictures. Who knew my acting classes would make me the best storyteller in town?

We were on a blanket under the shade of an old oak. One very much like the oak beside the MJ2. This one was a bit older and much bigger, but the spot of dappled sunshine was my favorite place to hang out with my kid. On the lonely days, I let myself think about the lake and the man I'd left behind.

She gave a squeal as Tigger showed up on the page. I couldn't help but laugh back at her and lower my voice through the growl in the recital of the story I'd read a hundred times. She was growing alarmingly fast, and I loved seeing the little changes.

When she grabbed the page and twisted, I encouraged the way she tried to touch Tigger's face. I guess I'd have to pull that one out of the legion of stuffed animals in her nursery.

She was just starting to care about her toys for something other than stuffing in her mouth.

The summer days had been long with even longer nights, but the colic was showing signs of lessening. I even managed to get five hours of sleep at a clip sometimes.

"Emmaline!"

I looked up at my mom's voice. "Hey, bean, it's grammy."

"Ugh, don't call me that horrible name. I'm not eighty."

I laughed. My mom was barely in her fifties and looked as if she could pass for forty. She dropped down on the blanket and gave me the grabby hands.

I held my girl out to her, and my mom's eyes filled as Adriana made bababa sounds. "They're almost words." She clutched bean close to her face, kissing her chubby cheeks relentlessly.

For her trouble, she got a face of drool.

I snickered and handed her one of the receiving blankets. "What are you doing here? I thought you had a lunch with the rotary club."

"It's not the rotary club," she said on a huff. "It was the Beautification Committee."

"Same difference."

My father was the mayor of our small town and Leah Hauser took her job as social maven very seriously.

I leaned back on my hands and tipped my head up to the warmth of the sun. "What's left to beautify in our fair town?"

"I know you're only asking to mock me."

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. "I'm not mocking you, Mom. But seriously? Look around. There's nothing left to work on around here."

I waved my hand toward the town square which was across from the park. Even the statue of the first Clintondale Hauser was glistening with a new polish.

He had his hands on his hips looking at Town Hall in all his bronze glory. The stance reminding me of Mason, which made me sit up and busy myself with picking up the various toys and teething rings that were scattered on the blanket.

It was annoying how much he still snuck in to my thoughts when I least expected it. I'd been home for a few months now, and you'd figure his image would fade.

I could barely remember what Pierre looked like and I'd almost married him, for heaven's sake.

"Well, I'll tell you even though you don't care. Maude and Jerry's store is an eyesore in the middle of Clintondale Street."

"M&J's is a staple in this town. I'm pretty sure Jerry's family goes back almost as long as ours." I tossed the toys into Adriana's diaper bag.

"And it looks like it. However, they're retiring, and their son Thomas is taking over. He wants to tear down the front windows and put a whole new automated set of doors on it."

"The horrors."

"Emmaline Michelle."

"It's okay to change, Mom."

"It won't match the rest of Clintondale Street. It will look like one of those city stores with no character."

"It's a door, Ma."

"It starts with a door, then we'll have a WalMart moving in."

"Okay, Debbie Drama." I shook my head.

Clintondale wasn't exactly known for its forward thinking. My family, and most of the townspeople, liked everything to be just like it was a hundred years ago.

Which was why so much of the younger generation was moving away. And yet, here I was, back in the same town.

“Afternoon, Miss Leah.” A woman in her early thirties pushed a stroller on the path near us. She glanced at me with a pinched face before her lips smoothed into a social smile. “How’s your granddaughter?”

My mom turned Adriana out and made her little hand wave. “She’s getting bigger every day, thanks for asking, Caroline. How are you?”

Oh, gee. Another Carol judging. Just like from my interview at The Mason Jar.

“Me and Peter are going to have another.” She patted the slight curve of her belly. “My husband is thrilled that we’re having a boy this time.” She reached into the stroller and fixed the blankets over the little girl inside.

Blankets? It was almost ninety today.

“Congratulations.” My mom nuzzled Adriana’s neck. “You sure are brave having two under two.”

I rolled onto my knees. “If you ever want to come to my Pilates class at the community center, there’s always a spot for you.” I patted my flat stomach showing above my shorts. “Two kids that close together? Your pelvic wall will thank you.”

Caroline’s cheeks reddened. “I don’t need to worry about any of that. I have a husband. And I don’t need to trap one like you do.”

“Caroline.” My mother’s voice was sharp with reprimand.

“I’m sorry, Miss Leah.”

No apology to me, of course. “It’s fine. I’m a single mom, no getting around that one. But Pilates isn’t for your husband, Caroline. It’s for you. Makes it easier to get around after the baby when you have a toddler and a newborn.”

Because I bet along with her snotty traditional values, her husband was as useful as tits on a frog.

Adriana must have picked up on my annoyance because she started fussing. And to be a little more annoying, I settled bean against me and moved the bikini top I was wearing. When Caroline's eyes bulged, I flicked the receiving blanket over the baby and let her eat.

She quickly pushed the stroller down the path away from us.

"You did that on purpose."

"As if she doesn't breastfeed." I sighed. "Sorry, it just pisses me off when they act like it's so important to be married. This town—" I broke off before I looked like a complete bitch.

"This town is a little more conservative, that's all. Besides, Caroline couldn't wear a bikini before she had her child. She's just jealous that you're secure enough in yourself to wear one."

I wasn't secure about anything. I was living with my parents again and didn't know what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. Coming home was not only two steps back, it was more like twelve, but there wasn't much I could do about it right now.

I slid the blanket away from bean's face since it was hot even in the shade. When she'd had her fill and she dozed off in her milkdrunk haze, I settled her on the blanket under the screen I used.

"I'm sorry I'm bitchy."

"I understand. You're just in the in-between time. Things will get better."

"I don't want to sound ungrateful, Mom. I appreciate that you took us in."

"There's no taking you in. You're our daughter and she's our granddaughter. You always have a place with us."

"I know. I just thought I could manage, that's all."

"There's no shame in regrouping. Having a baby with colic is hard when there are two parents, let alone doing everything

yourself and trying to work.”

“There are women who do it.”

“Because they have to. You are allowed to use your support system. I had your father and a nanny when Clint was born, and I was still drowning. Trying to go to all your father’s social engagements with a little one at home was hard.”

“You had a nanny? Why didn’t I know that?”

“Because we only had her for the first year with Clint. I was young and didn’t know how to juggle being the Mayor’s wife and a new mother. It takes time and patience to do it all, Emma. And moms get it wrong all the time.”

My eyes burned as I crawled across the blanket to hug her. “I’m sorry. I know I’m being a brat.” I sat back down in front of her. “I love being Adriana’s mom. I do.”

“But you want it all.” She cupped my cheek. “You’ve always wanted more.”

I did. And I’d left him behind, along with the job.

I blinked away the tears that wanted to come. They didn’t help anything and just gave me a stupid headache.

“Okay, so about the store.”

My mom sighed. “Emma.”

“No, hear me out. Instead of just going with some ugly metal door, why don’t you see if Thomas can have the windows upgraded.”

Thoughtful now, she tipped her head. “Go on.”

“Those windows are really beautiful, I agree. I mean, it might not be cost effective which was what made Thomas go for just tearing it out. But there are a lot of people who like to do restorations.”

I reached back for my phone and peeked in on bean. She was passed out. I saw a text message from Rami and left it unread so I wouldn’t forget.

“I saw this metal artist on social media. She loves to redo old buildings. Maybe if Thomas let her film it, he might get a deal on it. And hey, free advertising for J&M.”

“Sounds like you have a project.”

I looked up from my phone. “Maybe, yeah.”

“Why don’t you walk over to the store and talk to Thomas?”

“I’ll check with the artist first—make sure it can happen.”

She patted my hand. “Whichever way you think is right.” She rolled to her knees. “I don’t know about Caroline, but I’m glad you convinced me to start those classes with you. Now I can crawl around on the floor with my grandbaby.”

“She’s not crawling yet.”

“I bet she’ll be just like her mama. You couldn’t wait to get moving.”

I laughed. “Where you headed?”

“I have another meeting. This time with the Historical Society. They’ll be happy to hear your ideas about J&M’s Grocery. Might get everyone off my back for a few weeks.” She winked at me. “See you at home.”

“See ya.”

I inched back to the other side of the blanket and drank some water and had a snack to replenish my body from feeding time. While I nibbled on my granola bar, I checked my texts. The group chat was popping.

RAMI:

Help me

RAMI:

I won’t look good in orange.

RAMI:

Will you smuggle me in cigarettes so I can sell them for my hair oil?

ESTHER:

Save us.

PENNY:

Can we pool our tips to get you a nanny? Please come back.

I laughed as I scrolled through more grievances. Eventually, I scrolled back far enough to find out what the problem was.

RAMI:

Hottie McChelsea is coming in for a meeting with M.

ESTHER:

G is wearing stilettos and a black dress.

RAMI:

The meeting is at 1

PENNY:

She wants him to sell him on vegan fusion.

What the hell was vegan fusion? Gillian had taken over for me when I'd left. I'd been kept in the loop about the parties that had happened during the summer. The Memorial Day opening day had been mostly a success. Then again, even Gillian could figure out how to make a barbecue happen.

Our—*their* chef was a genius. I missed Henry's arrogance and Jackie's quiet competence for the food choices. But where Gillian fell short, was the community aspects.

Inviting the town to The Mason Jar and to check out the barge meant they needed stations to keep folks interested in sticking around. Games, prizes, giveaways to local businesses, things for kids.

I'd sent my ideas to Rami, making her promise me that she'd pretend it was their ideas. Gillian would rather go makeup free with a hair mask on during a busy Friday night than take my advice.

Evidently, it didn't matter—Gillian knew best.

And for the subsequent five parties through the season, she'd gotten progressively more rigid. Blowing the budget on stupid things that were more for image than to make the event a success.

Like for the Book Club Summer Fling, she'd spent hundreds of dollars on keychains, bookmarks, and massive signs instead of doing fun games and using some of the money to give away a new waterproof E-reader. And it hadn't occurred to her to make zones for different genres and to get books from the library.

I'd had a million ideas for the book club, but Gillian's version had ended up falling flat. And then to make it worse, Gillian had insulted the client, telling her she expected too much.

The client always expected too much, it was our—*their*—job to show them options and get them excited about it.

I flopped onto my back and opened my photo gallery. Rami had sent me a photo from the party with Mason and I during the sparklers part of the evening. I hadn't even known the photographer had taken it.

A totally candid shot that made my heart ache.

I was smiling so widely, and he was so close.

Ugh. I clicked my phone off and laid it on my chest. I missed him. He'd never replied to my email.

The girls didn't give me details on Mason, just begged for ways to circumvent Gillian's less than stellar ideas.

Did he miss me too?

Did he even think about us? It had only been a few stolen kisses. And of course, the whole baby birth thing. He was probably glad I'd left. He wouldn't have to make excuses about why we wouldn't work out when the lust faded.

I rolled onto my side to look at bean. It was better this way.

I opened my phone.

No prison orange for you, R. Go convince Jackie and Henry to talk to Penn about the menu before Gillian and M's meeting. Zoom is your friend. Pump up Henry's ego. He's a Michelin Star chef FFS. Get him revved up and he'll put Gillian in her place, I promise.

I miss you guys.

Resolutely, I sat up and looked for a contact for the renovations girl. If I was going to be staying in Clintondale, I needed to figure out ways to become part of the community.

It wasn't Crescent Cove, but it was my hometown.

I could make it work.

I hoped.

TWENTY-FOUR



I MOVED ANOTHER PILE OF INVOICES AND KNOCKED OVER A Diet Coke bottle that was on another.

“Fuck.” I kicked back my chair as I tried to grab it and splashed it across my front of my jeans. “Motherfucker.”

I reached for the roll of paper towels I kept on my filing cabinet, but I’d used it up and not replaced it.

The mountain of paperwork I’d gotten behind on slid forward and into the puddle under my desk.

Pissed and frustrated, I kicked my desk, then I tore out of my office and down the hall to the employee bathrooms. I shoved the door open and nearly banged it into Henry’s nose.

“Jesus, man. Where’s the fire?”

“Sorry.” I raked my fingers through my hair. I’d forgotten to get it cut—again. “I just dumped a soda on me.”

“I was hoping you hadn’t pissed yourself.” Henry grabbed a wad of paper towels from the dispenser. “Even if you look like you spent the night with a bit more than a Diet Coke.”

I dabbed at my crotch and swore again. I was going to have to go home and change. I’d worn my last spare set of clothes last week when I’d slept in my office.

“Nope, just the spreadsheets for Penn’s party. Did you get the final numbers on food for the guest list I sent you?”

“Yep, sent to your email this morning.”

“Shit.” I washed my hands and then scrubbed my face with my wet hands to clear out the fog. “Sorry. I haven’t been getting much sleep.”

He handed me a fresh towel. “You don’t say.”

I tossed it in the trash. “I’ll check my email.” I grabbed the handle to get back into my office. Now I’d have to push my vendor meeting because Penn was coming in this afternoon.

“Mason.”

I paused. “Yeah?”

“Gillian isn’t the one.”

She’d never been the one. In any way. But I knew what he was talking about. “I know it’s been difficult—”

“The Perry party cancelled and asked for a refund.”

I closed my eyes. We’d already ordered the alcohol for that event. Now I had three cases of wine I’d have to figure out what to do with. Things happened and we couldn’t control a cancellation, but I had a feeling it wasn’t for any other reason than Gillian’s less than professional attitude.

I’d had to bribe three of my vendors in the last month to keep us on as customers. It should be the other way around, dammit. She was difficult on a good day, but stress made her meaner. Handling the schedule for the dining room was one thing, but her being an event planner was quite another.

“Mrs. Perry came in to discuss the budget, and Gillian copped an attitude.”

“Why didn’t you find me?”

“Gillian said it was her call. And we were better off without the booking since she was so particular.”

“That’s *not* her fucking call.” The door trembled from my grip or maybe that was just my shaky hold on my composure. “Until I can figure out what I’m going to do, come to me or Rami about anything for the MJ2.”

“Got it, Boss.”

“Thanks, Henry. I should be on top of this. It’s not your job to do anything other than cover the kitchen.”

“We all look out for each other. Well, most of us.”

I’d been failing completely on that front. Sleeping for shit was only part of the problem. I’d been cleaning up behind Gillian for months, and I couldn’t get my head above water to even try and find another event coordinator.

The one I wanted wasn’t available.

Sure, it’s the event coordinator you want.

“We all miss her, Mason.”

I glanced back at Henry. “Yeah, well, she’s not coming back.”

“Did you tell her we are here when she’s ready to come back?”

How could I tell her anything when she didn’t talk to me? The anger bubbled up with the tired and now Gillian trying to kill my new venture even before I could get it off the ground.

“No. She’s got her priorities, and they don’t include us.” My voice was clipped.

“Jesus, Mase. She loves it here.”

“She loves her kid more. As she should. I wish I had a mom half as amazing as she is, and she’s freaking just starting out.”

Henry’s eyebrows shot up. “Tell me how you really feel.”

I moved back into the bathroom and let the door shut. “I’m sorry.” I let my head clunk back against the door. “I’m fucking up left and right here.”

“Look, I don’t do the feelings thing.”

I laughed. “You don’t have to worry I’m going to break down. Or crack. Though the cracking part probably isn’t too far off.”

“Yeah, well...I don’t *usually* do the feelings thing. Emma is worthy of a little truth bomb for you. Don’t fuck it up.”

“There’s nothing to fuck up, Henry. She went back to her hometown to raise her kid.”

“She was doing just fine here.”

I gave him a bland stare. “No one was doing just fine here.”

“Okay, okay. You got that right. The problem here is that you’re expanding faster than you can catch up. It’s called growing pains. The restaurant you stole me from had the same problem. However, what my old place didn’t have was you.”

“Good thing.”

Henry snorted. “Actually, it was a bad thing. You actually give a fuck. When these restaurants lure you in with the, ‘It’s a family’ bullshit, they never really mean it. They just want you to work your ass off with no support so they can cash in. Oh, and they dump all the work on us. You’re the exact opposite.”

I folded my arms. “You lost me.”

“You work harder than three people and don’t delegate enough. Rami and Esther should be the front-end managers so you can handle the other stuff like schmoozing and buying. Gillian—she’s gotta go.”

My arms dropped to my sides. “She’s been with me since I opened.”

“I bet she sucked then too.”

“She’s always been here to help out.”

“No, she’s been here to get you. I can’t believe you’re so damn blind about it. You’re the meal ticket for her.”

“I’ve made it abundantly clear that I’m not interested.”

“No, you have your no dating people you work with rule. Women like Gillian think they’re always above the rule. Your loyalty is your best asset and your biggest fault. Not everyone deserves it, bro.”

Someone tried to open the door and I finally pushed off of it.

Stef stuck his head around the door. “Everything cool in here? Bloodshed?”

I laughed. “No bloodshed. Yet.”

“Did you piss yourself, Boss?”

I rolled my eyes. “No, Stef. Soda explosion.”

“Lame. Gillian is looking for you. I thought I heard you down here.” Stef went into the stall.

“Good. I was just about to go find her myself.” I glanced at Henry. “Thanks for the talk.”

“You best go get Emma.”

“Dude.” Stef called over the top of the stall. “We need her back really bad, Boss.”

“I can’t make her come back to Crescent Cove, guys.”

“Sure you can. Go get her.” Stef finished and flushed and came out of the stall. “Clintondale isn’t that far away. Like what, an hour and a half, tops?”

“I have a restaurant to run, Stef.”

He went to the sink and washed. “I know. But we can handle it for a few days.”

“Days?” My jaw might have hit the tile floor.

Henry leaned his hip against the sink. “Gonna take some time to convince her to come home with you.”

“There’s no way I can leave the restaurant for days, guys.”

Henry handed Stef a paper towel. “I’m going to start looking for tips.”

Stef snickered. “We’ll all chip in. It’s for a good cause.”

“This will give Rami and Esther a trial run at being backup bosses.” Henry gave me a hard look. “It’s time.”

My heart kicked double time. I couldn’t ask her to choose us over her kid. I hadn’t been kidding about Emma being a better mom than my own. She’d skipped town before I was even walking. Emma would never do that.

But if I delegated...

“Look at his brain working. It’s smoking.” Henry laughed and went to the door. “I gotta get back to work. Go get her, tiger!”

The door closed behind him, and Stef gave me a snappy salute. “What he said. We really do miss her, Mason. She made the restaurant fun again. Not that it wasn’t—”

“It’s okay, Stef. I get what you’re saying.”

He huffed out a relieved breath. “I can pick up some extra shifts if you need me to.”

The urge to go look at the schedule was like a screech in my brain. I had to let people handle things besides me. “Check with Rami.”

“Got it.” He checked his messily tousled hair in the mirror one last time and shrugged at me with a smirk, then he was gone.

A bathroom therapy session was not on my to-do list today, but for the first time in months I felt steadier.

Stickier, but steadier.

Now I just had to do the hard part.

I left the bathroom and headed down the hall toward the kitchen. I grabbed a bottle of water out of the mini fridge and drank half of it on my way into the dining room.

Gillian was at the check-in desk with Rami and Esther. What the hell was she wearing? We were pretty lax on the uniform for the dining room. Most of the waitstaff wore a Mason Jar shirt and comfortable shorts or pants depending on the season.

They sure as hell didn’t wear dancing dresses at barely two in the afternoon.

The pinched expression that had been commonplace on Gillian’s face suddenly smoothed as she spotted me. She left Rami and Esther mid-sentence.

I caught Rami's wide-eyed-what-the-fuck look. Esther patted her arm as they went back to discussing table assignments.

Gillian came right over to me—standing far too close, I might add—and smiled. For the first time, I noticed that her smile was more like a shark circling prey than friendly. Even her makeup made her look sharp and unapproachable.

“Penn isn't here yet. He contacted Rami and said he'd be about an hour late.” She twisted the ring on her middle finger as her nostrils flared. “I'm not sure why he talked to her instead of me, but we have some time to go over the details before he comes in.”

“Sure. Why don't we go into my office?”

Her gaze narrowed. “We can talk on the patio. It's quiet out there.”

“I need some paperwork in my office.”

She stopped twisting her ring. “You never want me in your office.”

Dammit, she might be the worst when it came to dealing with customers, but she was intuitive when she wanted to be. I avoided being in enclosed spaces with her as often as possible lately.

“Fine. Let's go out to the patio.” I didn't want to do this in public. She might have gone downhill as an employee, but she had been loyal to me for years.

Mostly anyway.

She put her hands on her hips. “What's this about?”

“It's about the MJ2.”

She lifted her chin. “I guess you heard about the Perrys?”

“I did.”

“It wasn't my fault. She was a shrew and thought she was better than me—than us.”

I glanced around as conversations quieted. “Gillian. In my office.” My voice was steely and brooked no argument.

Unless you were Gillian, evidently.

“No, we’ll do this right here.”

I gritted my teeth. “There are customers.”

“I don’t fucking care.”

It was my turn to spark with anger. “You might not care about my business, but I do. We will not discuss this on the floor.” I turned to head to the kitchen door.

She grabbed my arm. Suddenly, her face was contrite, and tears shimmered along the heavy black lines around her eyes. “I’m sorry. I’m just stressed. I’ve been working a lot of hours.”

Be strong.

“We’ll talk about it in my office.”

The tears cleared like magic. “What, so everyone won’t hear you berate me?” she asked just loud enough for the room to hear.

I stepped closer, my voice low. “I haven’t berated anyone in my life, even if you’ve deserved it for the last six months.”

She jerked as if I’d slapped her. “I’ve done everything for this place.” She tried to curl her long fingers around my wrist. “For *you*.”

“No that would be for you, Gillian. Everything you do is with yourself in mind. I was trying to do this kindly and quietly because you have been an employee here since we opened. But I think it’s time for us to part ways.”

“You’re firing me?” Her voice rose.

“Effective immediately. Get your things. I’ll deposit your last check and two weeks’ severance into your account tonight.” I turned away from her again.

This time, I reached as far as the kitchen door before her voice lashed at me from behind.

“You can’t fire me!” She literally stomped her heel into the hardwood floor. “You need me.”

I stopped with my hand on the door. “No, Gillian, I really don’t.” Then I walked through it.

The kitchen was deathly quiet. Everyone was staring at me, breaths held.

Henry started clapping with a sly smile.

“Don’t.” I pointed at him with a warning. “You’ll be the one helping me to fix all of this.”

Henry held up his hands, smug smile still in place. “You got it, Boss.”

I glanced at the rest of the people in the kitchen. “Show’s over, people.” Then I stalked down the hallway to my office and grabbed my keys.

Before I could get back out of my door, Rami and Esther appeared in my doorway. Blocking me in.

“I can’t believe you did that.” Rami’s dark eyes were wide with shock.

“Unfortunately, it was long overdue. Did Penn really call to push back the meeting?”

“Actually,” Rami played with the end of her braid, “I called him.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “Why?”

“Look, don’t be mad.”

I tipped back my head. “Why won’t I be mad?”

Esther took over. “Okay, so don’t be mad for real.”

I looked from one woman to the other. “I really don’t like the sound of that.”

“Okay, so we’ve been getting help from Emma this whole time.” Esther laced her fingers together. “We knew Gillian was screwing up and we couldn’t think of anything else to do.”

“*What?* Why didn’t you come to me?”

“Mason, you’ve been a mess. Either silently brooding or beating on things in your office. I mean, at least you don’t yell at us, but you really should have been yelling at Gillian. She’s been a real B.”

Rami nodded. “You have been. We didn’t want to give you any more stress.”

“So, you went to Emma? She doesn’t even work here anymore.”

“I know, I know. We were just talking to her at first. Checking in with her and the baby. But then we got to talking about the parties.”

I closed my eyes. “I should have known the ideas you guys came up with sounded familiar.”

I thought back to the interview when Emma had started spouting her ideas about the book club, about games, about anything and everything that had to do with community and fun with the barge. All the things I’d wanted to do.

And everything that it had failed to be with Gillian in charge.

Even when I knew she wasn’t the one for the job, I’d just let her run over me because I’d been a shitty boss for the last few months without Emma here to keep the spark alive on all the plans I’d had.

All the plans she’d made even more exciting with her endless ideas.

“I’m sorry, guys.” I bowed my head. “I thought I was keeping it together enough. I let you down.”

Rami threw her arms around me. “Oh, Mason, we know.” She squeezed me tightly, and I patted her back. “If it was just the restaurant, you would have pulled it off. We’ve known you were stressed for a long time, but this just was...” She stepped back with a pained look on her face.

Esther patted my arm awkwardly. She wasn’t much of a hugger. “Gillian has been getting worse since you’ve been distracted with the MJ2. We tried to handle it.”

“You shouldn’t have had to.” I pushed at my hair. I really needed to get it freaking cut.

“We love it here. And we wanted to help.” Rami lowered her voice. “We miss Emma.”

“I do too.” I swallowed down the lump in my throat.

“We know you do.” Esther glanced down the hall. “Look, I shouldn’t tell you this, but she misses us too. I know it.”

“Did she say that?”

“No.”

The hope in my chest flickered out. I knew going out to see her would be a mistake. I’d just figure something out.

Rami caught my hand. “But she didn’t have to. She isn’t happy back home. But...I had an idea.”

I frowned. “Taking care of her child isn’t something we can just work around.”

“Well, we kinda can. Handily, you just fired your highest paid employee. You just need to give that money to Emma. She can afford daycare and her baby is past the three-month mark. All of us moms are back to work by then. We’ll just make it a more flexible schedule.”

She rushed on. “And I think Penny wants to do more entertainment things. Emma could train her to be her helper. That way we’d actually have a backup. And—” She poked me in the chest to shut me up. “Wait. The summer is almost over, so we’d have time to train people and she’d have plenty of time to take care of bean.”

“What if she doesn’t want to come back to Crescent Cove?”

Or to me.

We hadn’t nearly had enough time to figure out if there even was an us. I couldn’t ask her to come back with me just to work for me. It wasn’t fair to her or to me.

Even if I did ache for her every damn night. How could I ache for something I’d really never had?

But I'd had plenty of dreams, both at night and otherwise. She'd made me hope for so much in just a short time. And I was normally one of the least fanciful men in the world.

She was special. My heart had known it even when my brain refused to get on board.

"But maybe you need to try to ask her to," Esther said quietly. "Maybe she needs to know how much we all want her here to make her decision. Do you really want it to be a what if for the rest of your life?"

"I still have that meeting today."

"No, you don't." Rami grinned. "We rescheduled it to Sunday." She shrugged. "It was his family dinner weekend anyway. Win-win for everyone." She took out her phone and typed quickly before my own phone buzzed. "That's Emma's address in Clintondale," she announced.

This time, they both wrapped me up in a chaotic hug. "Go get our girl."

"This is crazy." But my mind was already whirling. I *wanted* to go get her. I wanted her back. "I can't leave the restaurant—"

"You can and you will. We'll be fine." Rami pushed me down the hallway to the back door where my car was always parked. "We have your number if we need you, but we won't."

"But—"

"Nope. No excuses." Esther joined in the pushing. "Go woo our girl. We're counting on you to get this done. Don't come back without her."

I laughed for the first time in more days than I could count. "I need to finish the reports for payroll."

"You can do that from your laptop. I know it might be dusty in your house—probably like the rest of your house—but you have one." Rami shook her head. "No more excuses."

I didn't want to own up to that one. My house looked just like my damn office at this point.

I paused at the door, leaning against it. My chest was tight from my way too fast breaths. My head was whirling. “You’re both getting raises.”

As they laughed, I ran out to my truck.

Now I just needed to convince Emma to take a chance on me.

On *us*.

TWENTY-FIVE



“MOM, WE’LL BE FINE.”

“I know, but you haven’t been home alone since you...”

“Crashed back into your life?” I laughed. “I did it for the first three weeks with only Sparky coming in to help. And that was only occasionally.”

My mom’s face went ashen. “I wanted to help.”

I rushed to her and held her hands. I’d always regret not letting my mom come and help me when bean had been born. Damn my stubborn streak. “Mom, seriously, I’ll be fine. You guys are only going for an overnight.”

“If I didn’t have these stupid tickets.”

“Oh, now the tickets are stupid?” Clintondale Hauser’s voice boomed from the top of the stairs. “You drove me crazy for thirteen months to get these tickets.”

“Dale, you know I want to see Richard Marx. But this is our baby and our grandbaby.”

“Go, have an amazing night. Richard Marx will get you guys all romantical.”

“Romantical isn’t a word, baby girl.” My dad came down the last step and kissed the top of my head. “But we will miss you and we’ll have our phones on vibrate.”

“Pocket rocket for the win,” I quipped.

A flush flooded up my father’s neck to bloom across his ruddy cheeks. “You say the damndest things.”

“You love it.” I patted his chest. “I’m just going to Netflix and chill all by myself tonight.”

My mom fretted as I pushed her toward the door, holding their overnighter in my hand. This was the first time I’d actually had a moment to myself since I’d gotten back to Clintondale. While I appreciated that they’d been here for me through the worst of bean’s colic, I really and truly missed having some *me* time.

“I’m making some popcorn and I’m going to watch Mr. Darcy fumble his way through falling in love. It’s gonna be great.”

“Oh. I love that movie. Maybe we can watch it next weekend?” My mom turned at the door and wouldn’t budge. “Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

“C’mon, Leah. Your favorite singer awaits.” My dad gently urged her onto the porch. “We’ll text you when the show starts to make sure you’re okay.”

“Just enjoy yourselves. How about I text if there’s something wrong instead?”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure. Bye now.” I closed the door in my mom’s face and didn’t even feel bad about it.

Sometimes you had to do things for someone’s own good.

I breezed back through the foyer into the living room area that I’d commandeered. The mayor’s house was ridiculously big, and half packed up since my parents were getting ready to transition out of running the town.

I still didn’t believe that my dad would actually retire, but they kept telling me they were going to after my brother Theo married Mary Sue.

Freaking Mary Sue. How was this my actual life?

The small town of Clintondale was like the setting for a Hallmark story on crack. In fact, I supposed it was fate that I

was back here. I was living my life like one of those sweet Hallmark stories.

The highlight of my year besides bean was a kiss. A couple of kisses.

Okay, so perhaps they had been a little hotter than the typical Hallmark movie kisses, but still.

I checked on bean, happily sleeping away in her pack and play. Because of course she was, it was early afternoon. My kid loved to snooze the day away. I should be napping with her since she still didn't know how to sleep through the entire night, but I was wired for sound.

I wasn't sure I could sit still long enough for a movie. Instead, I flicked through the music channels on satellite cable. I found a current hits channel and grinned as Harry Styles came out of the state-of-the-art speakers.

Since bean and I had taken over this room, it had gotten a little chaotic. Cleaning to music was always preferable to silence. And my kid snoozed through everything except the dark.

It was a gorgeous late summer day, so I opened the curtains to let the sun stream in. I was tempted to open the windows too, but it was already hot, and I'd worked up a bit of a sweat tidying up earlier.

At the sound of a vehicle pulling in, I rushed to the front window and frowned at the truck coming up the circular drive.

That looked like Mason's truck.

No.

It couldn't be. I blinked to make sure I wasn't seeing things.

He parked and stepped down from the truck. My heart kicked—hard. He looked different and achingly familiar at the same time. His wheat-colored hair was longer and fluttered around his face. The sun had bleached out some of the ginger undertones and he looked like he'd stepped right off the boat, all windblown and sexy.

Just like that last night.

He wore jeans and a T-shirt with the new MJ2 logo on it. Even a hundred and twenty miles away from his restaurant, he still couldn't leave it all behind.

He shielded his eyes and tipped back his head to look at the house. It was pretty impressive. A bit pretentious, but impressive if you'd never seen it before. He slowly walked around the path, pausing at the flagstone steps. My lips twitched as I noticed him shake out his hands.

What was he doing here?

Just a visit, surely.

No, idiot.

I didn't want to believe he'd come here for me. I checked on bean, then quickly, I ran to the front door to fling it open.

Mason was on the porch, his hair wild around a tired face.

A tired face I missed like crazy.

“Hi.”

Mason swallowed hard. “Hi.”

I leaned against the doorjamb, trying to play it cool. “You're a long way from home.”

“You left.”

I straightened. “I know. I had to, Mason. I sent you an email.”

“I know. I got your email.” His expression went from nervous to so very intense as he stepped closer. “You couldn't come to tell me yourself?”

I shook my hair behind my shoulders and lifted my chin. I still had a little pride left even though I'd run home with my tail between my legs. “I'm not sure I'd have been able to.”

The truth of it tripped my heart rate up a few dozen beats. I hadn't really owned up to that part before. Instead, I'd kept myself busy with Adriana and my folks. Anything to fill the spaces that allowed me to think too hard about him.

“Emma—”

“I had to go.”

“I know it.” He closed the gap until his sneakers grazed the tips of my green painted toes. “I understood. I still do. Doesn’t make me miss you any less.”

“You do?”

“Every damn day, Emma.”

“But you didn’t reply. I thought...”

“Your email was pretty damn final.” His thumb tucked into the loop of my cutoff jeans as his fingertips dug into my hip. “Every night, I replayed our kiss behind the tree. On the boat. I knew I was supposed to let you go. For Adriana, for your responsibilities. Hell, for my own.”

He jerked me forward until my thighs pressed to his and my chest grazed his sun warmed T-shirt. My eyes slid shut at the contact.

He tipped his forehead to mine. “Did you? Did you think about me all these months away or did you forget me?”

My eyes flew open. “*No*. No, I couldn’t. I missed you every day.”

“And you talked to my employees but not me?”

I bit my lower lip. “Yeah, about that.” I laid my hand on his chest. “They needed me.”

“*I* needed you.”

I swallowed down the lump in my throat. “If I’d opened that door, I’d never have stayed here. You have to know that.”

His gaze dropped to my mouth. “Instead, I found out you’ve been running things from here.” His gaze lifted to meet mine. “Still helping us.”

“I didn’t do much, Mason. I just nudged them with a few ideas, that’s all.”

His other hand came up to cup my jaw. “I thought you cut all ties. I understood why, but all I could focus on was how

mad I was that you left. I couldn't get around it."

"Mason," I whispered, the pain of his words radiating through my bloodstream. I'd never wanted to go. Not really. "Maybe I should have—"

He shook his head. "No, I'm not explaining this right. I was mad because you meant so much to me so quickly. That I'd finally found everything I wanted and didn't have the chance to tell you."

My breath stalled. "Mason."

"Just let me get this out. If you want to turn me away after I say it, then that's fine. I won't ask for more."

"Turn you...didn't you hear a word I said?" I went onto my toes and gripped his shoulders. "I loved working for you. Loved the family you made at the restaurant. Loved—"

"Just working for me?"

I could see the hope in his eyes and the wariness.

I'd caused a lot of it because I'd run. It was for a good reason, but I could have handled it better. But I'd been running from anything that got hard all my life. As the baby of the family, I was allowed to do that, and I'd definitely taken advantage.

I took a deep breath. "I was...no, *am* falling in love with you."

He closed the gap then and covered my mouth with his. He crushed me to him, and he felt so good and solid and perfect. I'd had just a taste of him that night of the party, but I'd fallen in love with the man starting with the day he'd held my hand through the birth of my little girl.

I dragged him inside, pushing him against the sturdy wooden door as I slammed it closed. His mouth raced down my neck and then back up to slant across mine.

"Tell me this is okay," he said against my lips.

"More than okay. More. Just more," I said and wound my arms around his neck. I didn't even know what I was saying, I

just wanted him to touch me. My fingernails tunneled through his thick hair, pulling him down to me to get closer.

His hands gripped my ass, pulling me tightly to his very happy jeans. “I mean, okay to do this. I don’t...after the baby. I don’t want to assume.”

“Oh.” I laughed and pressed my cheek against his scruffy one. “Yes. This body is very, very willing and very ready, sir.”

“Fuck.”

I drew back and grinned at him. “Sir? Or just that I’m ready?” I rolled my hips to rub against the active participant behind that zipper.

One I desperately wanted to get my hands on, please and thank you.

“Fuck, I feel like I’ve wanted you forever. I tried. Christ, I tried to put that out of my head, but...” He scraped his teeth along my neck to the scoop neck of my tank top. He flexed his fingertips into the muscles of my ass. “I’ve dreamed of this ass,” he lowered his grip to my thigh and brought it up around his hip so he fit against me better. “These legs wrapped around me. Around my neck. Watching those summer sky eyes stare down at me while I ate you alive.”

“Oh. Well, I’m on board for all of that.”

“But I don’t want to do anything that would...be too aggressive.”

“Nope. Aggress away.” I yelped as he hoisted me up and wrapped my legs around him.

“Shit.” He suddenly stopped. “I mean, are you here alone? God, is your dad going to come down here while I’m...”

“You’re what?” I laughed and held onto his shoulders. “Debauching his daughter?”

“Jeez, Emma.”

I tipped my head back with a delighted laugh. “You picked the very best day to come and visit. I actually have the house all to myself. My parents went to a concert in Connecticut.”

“Are you serious?” He gripped my ass and hiked me up a little for better purchase. “You wouldn’t lie to a dying man.”

“Dying? Now who’s being dramatic?”

“It feels like I’m dying. Slowly.” His jaw did that muscle jump thing that made my ankles twist. “Where do I go? How do I get inside you the fastest?”

Things I forgot that pulsed, definitely pulsed. My sex drive had been near nonexistent except that one day on the boat. But I was very happy to see it wasn’t fully dormant.

“This way.” I pointed to the hallway, but I couldn’t stop myself from kissing him again. His mouth was so damn perfect. “Wait.” I dragged in a breath. “Wait. Stop here first.”

He nodded. “Okay.” I tapped his shoulder to let me down, but he growled at me. “I’m not letting you go.”

“Well, then.” My insides went soft and liquid with more than lust. “Just let me grab the baby monitor.”

“Oh.” His face paled. “I can’t believe I forgot.”

“You didn’t. She’s sleeping. It’s okay, I just never know how long it will last.”

“Right. Absolutely. Whatever you need. I’m not putting you down though.”

“Okay, Mr. Muscles, you can just walk me over to that little table.” I crossed my ankles at the small of his back as I craned my neck to make sure she was still sleeping.

Evidently, a little mix of Taylor Swift and Harry Styles was keeping her in dreamland. Worked for me. I leaned down and snatched the monitor. “Okay, now out the doorway there and down the hall.”

“Where are we going?”

“My dad’s study.”

His eyebrows shot up. “You want our first time to be in your dad’s study?”

“I mean, ideally, I’d have a king-sized bed, four bottles of water, and a sea view—or a lake view.”

“Come home with me and you can have that exact thing.”

I kissed him. “For now, you can debauch me in my dad’s study. He’s got the good couch in there. My mom’s sofa would definitely break with what I’m going to do to you.”

TWENTY-SIX



MY DICK LITERALLY JUMPED AT THE THOUGHT.

I strode down the hall to the stately door as Emma kissed the hell out of me the whole way. We bumped into the doorjamb as she fumbled behind her to open the door.

I felt like a damn teenager. There had been a time or seven when I'd taken my high school girlfriends in places we definitely shouldn't be having sex. But in the mayor's study was a new high. Or was that a low?

Whatever.

Distantly, I noticed all the dark wood, the huge desk that had to be an antique, and the rug that probably was worth as much as my car. But the only thing I really cared about was that massive L shaped leather couch along the windows.

I let her slide down my body, all that summer tanned skin driving me absolutely insane. Her hair was a cloud of wild around her shoulders and happiness radiated off her.

And this time, I might've had something to do with that happiness.

As much as I wanted to get inside her, and God, did I ever—I wanted to soak in that Emma glow too.

She lit up the room, wherever she went. The secret smile was new, and I planned to find out all of her secrets today.

Tonight, and for the rest of my damn life. But for now, I'd take this.

Take *her* with as much reverence as I could.

I dropped to my knees in front of her and her sky-blue eyes went wide. I dragged my nose along the soft skin of her inner thigh to the strings of the ancient cutoffs. I reached up and flicked the button open and slowly peeled open her zipper. The plain green cotton panties were the only thing covering her from me.

She sifted her fingers through my hair. “What are you doing down there?”

“If you don’t know, then it’s been too long for both of us.” I tugged her shorts down and helped her step out of them then lightly traced the line of the green cotton, breathing her in. She smelled of summer and warm sheets from the dryer.

And something hotter and earthier.

I lightly pulsed the tip of my tongue along the front of her and she let out a shaky breath. I cupped her ass and peeled her underwear down to find a little triangle of gold. I looked up at her as the first hit of her taste hit my tongue. Soft, wet, and so uniquely Emma.

It had been such a long time since I’d touched anyone like this, never mind with the sun streaming around us in the middle of the day. But it wouldn’t have mattered, everything was new and different here with her anyway. It meant more to discover just what she liked here in the brightest part of the day.

I licked deeper into the slick warmth of her. Her fingers gripped my hair harder as I found her clit and trailed around it before sucking it between my lips.

“Oh, crap.” Her head tipped back as she slowly undulated against my face. “Mason.”

“That’s it.” I sipped for her, slipped inside of her, pulsing my tongue inside the tightening muscles. I followed each twitch of her hips, each biting pain of my scalp as she steered me where she needed me.

I would go wherever she wanted me. Forever.

Moving swiftly, I dumped her on the couch and widened her legs to get more. I slowly dipped a finger inside of her, watching her reactions. She seemed ready for me, but I didn't know how things exactly worked after a kid.

She arched off the couch. "God, like that."

Okay then, I didn't hold back. I slid another finger in and growled at how she tightened for me. I licked her clit and thrust inside of her as she surged up against me, her body asking for more. I quickly looked up to see her face, the wide blue eyes burning as her mouth dropped open with a moan.

"That's it." I was a starving man, and one orgasm wasn't enough. I kept pushing, thrusting against the resistance of her clenching pussy.

Hoping like hell I wasn't hurting her.

My hard cock was insistent against the restriction of my jeans, but I ignored it. It wanted to be inside her luscious body, and boy, did I want to follow his directive.

I bit the inside of her thigh as she twisted on the couch, the heel of her foot digging into my back.

"Mason." My name was a chant in her sexy voice.

I couldn't help the smile against her thigh as she shuddered.

I held her down, my fingers sliding up her belly. I didn't know if her breasts were off limits with the whole breastfeeding thing. But her fingers clutched over mine on the curve of her breast over her shirt. She hissed out a breath, then her whole body locked around me.

And then she laughed. The curls around her temples were wet with sweat, but her face was soft with release and the laugh made my dick even harder.

"Sir..."

My back molars clicked shut. "Emma."

Her eyes were lazy slits. "You have earned that sir and then some." She reached between her legs to cup my face.

“That mouth.” She inched up on the couch, dragging me closer until my mouth crashed into hers. “Is that what I taste like?”

“Fuck.” I dragged her to the edge of the couch and knelt before her.

The kiss was messy and wild, her hair falling forward to surround us. “Inside me, Mason. Please.”

As if I could deny her.

She slid her fingers down to my zipper. “So hard for me.” She dragged her mouth to my ear. “At night, did you think about me? Dream of me?”

I groaned. “Yes.”

“I’d wake up at night sometimes. When I should be sleeping, I couldn’t.” She wrapped her fingers around the base of my cock. “I’d remember how you held me. I’d remember how you kissed me. I’d dream up more. But it was nothing on the reality of you, Mason.”

She drew me out of my jeans and shimmied closer until I fell back to sit on my feet. She pushed the denim out of the way enough then covered me.

“Emma, wait.”

“No waiting.” She stroked the tip of me inside her and then rolled her hips to take me. She hissed out a long breath as I stretched her. As she fisted me, welcoming me into all of that hot, silken perfection with a smile just for me.

Just for *us*.

I gripped her thighs as she slowly rode me. My jeans weren’t even all the way off my ass, but I didn’t care. My freaking feet went to sleep as she rode me and I didn’t care.

I just wanted more.

Wanted her endlessly.

She made this slow roll as she clasped around me and swore. I fisted the back of her shirt and raced over her breasts to her neck and wrapped her tightly against me as I thrust into her.

“Please tell me I’m not hurting you.”

“You’re perfect.” She groaned and threw her head back. “More, Mason. Just *more*.”

Giving her everything I had was now officially my life’s work. Nothing else mattered but this moment and Emma.

I lifted my hips to meet her, my cock surging inside of her heat again and again. Riding toward the sunny bliss of her laughter as she came around me again. As I finally let go and emptied myself into her.

Finally knowing that last bit of her.

She would be mine forever. I vowed it in my mind then. I couldn’t even pretend that she wasn’t mine at this point.

And I was hers.

Then a baby’s cry broke the bliss.

“Dammit, bean.” Emma groaned and draped herself on top of me.

I lost my balance and we both crashed onto the rug.

I groaned as I slipped out of her, too spent to even make sure there wasn’t a mess. Messes like this were just fine.

She landed on my chest with all her hair falling around us and then she propped herself up and smiled down at me. “Hey there.”

“Hi.” I couldn’t stop smiling back at her.

“Remember that water I mentioned?”

“Vaguely.”

“Four bottles?”

“Oh, right.” I cupped her perfect ass as she straddled me.

“I need the first round.” She dropped a kiss on my chin then struggled off the floor. “The kitchen is out the door and down the hall toward the big sitting room. You can’t miss it.”

I craned my neck as she ran out of the room with that perfect ass on display, her hair flowing behind her like flames.

I dropped my arm over my face, my chest still heaving as I tried to find oxygen.

Somehow I managed to sit up and heard her voice come through the monitor.

“Okay, okay, Miss Lungs. Give me a break. Mama just had the best sex of her life, and you ruined my afterglow because you’re a little piglet.”

I grinned as I put my clothes back together.

I’d take the best sex of her life to start.

TWENTY-SEVEN



WHEN I'D TOLD MY PARENTS I WAS GOING TO NETFLIX AND chill, I actually hadn't thought the chill part would be an option. But here we were.

We'd managed to make it up to my room this time.

I wasn't sure I'd be able to go into my Dad's study without seeing Mason going down on me in my head.

Not good.

I mean, it had been very good, but not good for my psyche. I'd just avoid his office. I'd cleaned up in there and scrubbed the couch down with only a little bit of blushing while Mason sat with bean in the living room.

We'd ordered pizza and did, in fact, watch a movie.

Of course we made out on the couch like a couple of teenagers in between action sequences. *Speed* was on the menu both for Keanu and Sandy, and because of that one liner between us. Because yes, we might have started under intense circumstances, but it didn't make us any less right together.

I opened blurry eyes as the familiar cries split the darkness. Ahh, 3 AM my old friend. Guess Mason would get to see just how much fun colic was on the overnight.

I started to get up when I heard him murmur to bean. "Hey, what's all this?"

I could see her little fist flail in the dimness of the nightlight.

“I can get her,” I said as I sat up.

“I’ve got her.” I heard the creak of the old rocking chair in the corner of my bedroom. I’d stolen it from the nursery because it was just easier to have her sleep near me than to go between the two rooms.

Bean was not having it.

I was about to get out of bed and take over, incredibly grateful that he would even try to soothe her. Then bean quieted and I heard her drinking. He must have found the backup bottle I kept in my warmer. Sometimes I couldn’t produce fast enough for her when she was super upset.

“Everything okay?”

“Go back to sleep.”

I rolled onto my side and watched them. I couldn’t quite fall back to sleep. My heart was too busy being full to bursting for this man. My eyes misted as he rocked my baby back to sleep. Her little squeaks and grunts so familiar and so different when they came from this side of the bed.

I must have drifted off because I felt the bed shift and him slide in beside me. He kissed my shoulder and curled around me.

The sun came up far too soon, but it was definitely a better start to the day with Mason behind me.

His fingers slid down my belly. “Morning.”

I rubbed my butt against his morning erection. “Well, hello there.”

He tucked his fingers under the band of my shorts. “Can I?”

I smiled into my pillow as he slipped between my thighs with a low groan. “Is she sleeping?”

“She is.” He circled my clit with the pad of his fingertip. “Will this traumatize her forever?”

I laughed lightly. “Pretty sure parents have been doing the same for eons.” I stilled as I realized what I said. “I don’t

mean...”

“*Shh*. I want that, Emma. I know you guys are a package.” He stroked me again and again until I was soft and pliant in his arms. When he peeled down my sleep shorts, I shifted to line us up.

When he slipped inside of me, I stilled again. “God, you feel so good.” I gripped his thigh as he thrust harder. It was so hard to stay quiet with how he filled me up. Stretched just right.

He rubbed against my clit and pushed me over with a sigh. I grinned into the pillow. I couldn’t stop smiling whenever he made me cum.

Happiness drifted around us as he lightly trailed his fingers through the mess we’d made. Suddenly, my brain came back online and I gripped his hand. “Oh, boy.”

“What?”

I swallowed thickly. “Um, we weren’t exactly careful.”

He kissed my shoulder as the silence stretched on. “Would it be so bad?”

I twisted in his arms. “Mason...” Shock tripped through my chest and my heart raced as I tried to find words to address what he’d just said.

“Emma, who’s truck is outside?”

My door creaked open, and I squeaked. My heart went from beating fast for one reason and shot into pure shock. “Mom!”

We both pulled the sheet up.

I covered my face as right behind my mom in the doorway was my dad.

Could I pull a sheet over myself enough to blink out of existence?

Probably not.

“Who the hell are you and why are you in my house?” My dad’s booming voice filled the room.

Then bean screamed because there was no sleeping through my dad’s charged-up octaves.

My mom marched over to the crib and scooped her out of the crib and headed out the door.

“Mom, come back here with Adriana.” I got twisted up in the sheets as I slipped my shorts back up. Good grief, could someone die from embarrassment? “I thought you guys were going to be home later.”

My dad stood in the doorway, his huge arms folded across his barrel chest. “Obviously. And who are you?”

Mason scraped his hair back. “Umm. I’m Mason Brooks, sir.”

“My daughter’s former boss!” My dad’s furious voice reverberated through the room.

“Dad—”

Mason tucked the sheet around him. “This is not how I thought this was going to go. Look, Mr. Hauser. I love your daughter and I came here to tell her that.”

“You love me?”

He looked at me. “I was just about to tell you that.” He cupped my face. “I love you, Emmaline Hauser. I came here to get you and bring you home.”

I rolled onto my knees. “What?”

“Come home with me. Make a family with me. If it’s just bean, that’s fine by me. But I want us to be a family. I want forever.”

My eyes went hot and the tears flowed. “I love you too.” I wrapped my arms around him. “I think I have since the boat when you held me while I was in labor.”

“That was about it for me too.” He laughed as he clutched me tighter. “What a way to start our forever, huh? At least we’ve got one helluva story for our grandkids.”

I looked over his shoulder at my dad whose face was still a little thunderous, but I saw his red-rimmed eyes too. He was a big softie as well. Then he closed the door and I took an extra moment with Mason.

I swallowed hard and pushed him back. “What I was about to say when we got interrupted was, you know we might already have a baby on the way?”

“I caught on quick.”

“Okay, Ace. But we have some things to figure out.”

“And I’d be good with that. One thing isn’t going to change. I want you to come back to the Cove and be with me. I’ve been talking to the girls at the restaurant and we think we’ve figured out a way for you to still work part time.”

“And love you full time?”

“You’re goddamn right.”

I laughed and hugged him again, this time even harder. “I love you so much.”

“Thank God.”

Turn the page for a sneak peek of our next book!

MADDIE

COMING SOON: TAMING THE BOSS

I'd never played matchmaker before, but I was tempted to start now.

The owners of the two flower shops in town clearly had something sparking between them, and without a push, they'd never make it happen. They were too busy creating sparks of another variety.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched as Bess Wainwright, proprietress of the new flower shop in town, A Flower A Day, squabbled with Alan Brooks, the owner of Brooks' Greenery, about some nonsense that I couldn't quite follow.

Something about hybrid roses.

But he had gone quiet and speculative in direct contrast with the louder she became. Which was *loud*.

Considering we actually had a couple of customers in the store, browsing the many arrangements we had on display for the upcoming Fourth of July holiday, you would think that maybe they would want to take their spat into the back room.

But no.

Alan actually continued to help customers even as Bess railed at him. He just held up a finger to tell her to wait and paused to speak to whomever needed his help next. I was here too, but obviously, the part-time help didn't have his expertise with flowers.

However, when it came to rocking a holiday wreath with streamers and little star picks and a giant festive bow, I was your girl.

Until the newcomer in town strolled into the shop. Somehow even the bell didn't work as usual when he opened the door.

As if his dark energy stifled the sound.

He didn't look my way at first. His gaze settled on the counter and his voice lashed out at Alan. "I need an arrangement."

No politeness at all. Not a please or thank you. Just a demand he expected to be immediately fulfilled.

Alan didn't jump to help him, since he was already assisting another customer. So, I waded into the fray.

Later, I'd always wonder why I had. Yes, it was my job, but I was big on following my gut, and this new guy gave off plenty of foreboding vibes.

Even in the height of summer, he wore a dark three-piece suit that screamed money, as did the expensive gold watch dominating his wrist.

I cleared my throat and his gaze snapped to mine. Arctic blue eyes pinned me in place. "Can I help you?" My voice didn't shake. I actually sounded confident, at least to my own ears.

"Who are you?"

"Madison Masterson." I didn't use my nickname though I usually did with everyone. He hadn't yet earned the right to know it. "Can I help you?" I repeated.

"I can handle this, Maddie—" Mr. Brooks interjected.

"No, *Maddie* can help me." The newcomer's voice warmed slightly on the nickname I hadn't given him. He stepped toward me, his shoes echoing on the tile floor, and I held my ground, not wanting to give him an inch.

He seemed like the kind of man you couldn't take your eyes off for a second.

"What do you need help with?" I asked sharply as I moved to the counter to grab a pad and pencil.

"I need an arrangement for my real estate agent. I want her to receive it tomorrow. AM, preferably."

I pressed the tip of the pencil into the pad. "We can't process an order that fast on a weekend."

"Cost is no object." His tone was sharp and brooked no arguments. "Make it happen or I'll find someone who can."

Bess turned from the counter. "My shop, A Flower A Day, can—"

Alan cleared his throat, effectively silencing her. "We can do it too. Do you know what flowers you want, sir?"

He jerked a shoulder without offering his name. His gaze remained lasered to mine. "Maddie can pick whatever she likes. I'm sure that will be just fine."

Whatever *I* liked? I wasn't a florist. I'd only worked here for a couple months for a few hours a week. I didn't know what flowers went together best or anything of the sort.

But this stranger's tone didn't indicate he was open to discussion.

Inside, my internal organs were trembling. Outside, I remained composed and nodded, picking up my pad. "Rush weekend service will be 99.95."

At the counter, Bess gasped. Alan probably did too. I didn't even know why I'd said that. We were given rush jobs so rarely that our typical fee was much less. But if cost was no object...

The stranger waved it off as if he didn't care. "Fine."

I expected Alan to interrupt and say that wasn't the fee. He did not.

Instead, he and Bess moved to the back room to continue their heated discussion.

At least I assumed. I had other concerns at the moment.

I moved to our lily of the valley display, one of our more expensive flowers and only around for a limited time in the late spring and early summer. We were already at the tail end of their lifespan. “These are delicate and lovely, but deadly poison.”

He narrowed his ice chip eyes. “Since I doubt she’ll take a bite, I’ll take those. And what else?”

I wandered around, selecting other flowers here and there by whim—lavender roses and some periwinkle then white carnations to fill in along with some blush dried Italian Ruscus. It probably wasn’t a bouquet worthy of that rush charge, but I was doing my best.

Not to mention tall, dark, and spookily silent followed me around the store as I built the bouquet, saying nothing, making no noise at all. Just looming and making sure I never forgot he was so close behind me.

I wanted to ask his name. It was rare I didn’t know people in the Cove. Then I quelled the impulse, figuring I’d find out when he gave me his credit card.

But he paid in cash and had the arrangement sent to his real estate agent by noon tomorrow, so I had no clue who he was.

“You’re new in town?” I finally asked after filling out the bouquet’s card to his specifications. “Where did you buy a house?”

“By the lake.”

I nearly said *duh*, but I managed to control myself. “Can you get more specific?”

Rather than speak, he moved from the counter to the wide window at the front of the shop and lifted his chin. I followed his lead and moved up beside him, letting out a gasp as I tracked his gaze. “Not the Windsor Victorian.”

The gorgeous historic home was high on a hill overlooking Crescent Lake. I’d heard there was a bidding war after the

most recent time the property had come up for sale.

I didn't even know who'd owned it last. Mystery shrouded the property, which was half of its allure.

He smiled, a gesture that held absolutely no warmth. "Now it's the Keller Victorian."

Then he was gone without even saying thank you or telling me his first name.

TAMING The BOSS

A Crescent Cove Standalone Romance

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USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
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*Now...turn the page for a special sneak peek of
Desperately Seeking Kitty.*

Katherine



DESPERATELY SEEKING KITTY

AFTER MIDNIGHT, ANYTHING WAS POSSIBLE.

Or so the tarot cards and reheated Chinese told me.

My food wasn't talking to me—I'm not quite that batty yet—but I was having...a moment. I had a pleasantly full belly and Loreena McKennitt was playing while snow swirled beyond my windows on the third floor of my building. Down below, the few cars moved about sluggishly, their jewel tones mixed with a heck of a lot of neutrals.

Kinda like my life.

But right now, I felt cozy. Warm. Safe.

Rare for me as of late.

I'd pulled The Sun and The Star. Positive cards that encouraged me to do what I was about to do.

Even if I half believed fortune telling of any sort was a bunch of hooey.

I shifted on the padded window seat, pressing my suddenly warm cheek to the cold window. Beside me, Princess Goldenrod snored lightly with her wet pink nose pressed against my bare thigh. I tried to tug my robe back into place without disturbing her, then gave up and went back to my phone.

Want ads for all kinds of pet-related items scrolled down my screen. Kitten Around was a local charity that mostly focused on saving the most desperately in-need kittens, usually those that were critical or special needs in some way.

Exactly why I couldn't afford to help them in any way but financial right now. I'd lost my beloved cat earlier this year—Princess Goldenrod's bonded mate—and as much as I empathized with those kittens who needed homes, I couldn't take the risk of losing another so soon.

Couldn't take the risk period.

Not to mention owning or fostering another cat would require more interaction with the outside world. More vet visits, more grocery trips—even if I almost always ordered delivery except in extreme cases—just more of everything.

But my Princess was lonely. So I'd brainstormed another way for her to get her required interaction with her species without her running free as an indoor/outdoor cat. That was too dangerous for a number of reasons—communicable diseases, inclement weather, fights, cars. Just way too many threats out there.

Surely there was another way. And lo and behold, I'd come up with one.

I would rent a cat.

Okay, yes, the idea sounded kind of nuts. I'd certainly never heard of such a thing before. I supposed I could've gone the cat café route—assuming I'd been okay with the whole public interaction thing. That was not an option right now. And I didn't know if you were allowed to bring your own pet to interact with the ones there. Probably not.

Besides, sometimes you had to try something new.

My *new* was helping someone who perhaps was in a financial bind while they handled all the cat's vet visits and other needs. One thing I had was money. In return, I would rent their cat for a pre-approved number of hours a week, depending on what my girl seemed to like best.

It wouldn't be a quick process. She was finicky. Her human mama was even *more* finicky. It had to be exactly the right fit.

So far, I'd been deluged with offers since I'd first placed my ad in Kitten Around's classifieds section two days ago. If

deluged meant zero.

Which meant it was time to change things up.

Maybe I needed to make it seem...I don't know, more appealing? How did one entice someone to be willing to rent out their cat? Just for perfectly innocent cuddling and inter-cat relations of a playful nature.

I wasn't selling sex, although I had reason to know that a hint—or more than a hint—of naughtiness definitely got attention. I could always try an experiment. If it didn't work or my ad attracted some kind of weirdo, I'd just cancel it and go back to living my life as a mysterious oddity who locked herself in her apartment and liked cats more than people and would rather type than talk to anyone.

It was now closer to one a.m. I still had zero bites on my very factual ad.

Princess Goldenrod, a gold—duh—DSH cat, would like to pay for the services of a preferably male cat for afternoon playdates. Several sessions a week with all toys provided (though they will remain at my home after your boy goes home). She is spayed and has all shots. Requesting same. Pay negotiable.

PRGLDNROD

So I used my honed skills at crafting provocative text to write myself a doozy. Only slightly encouraged by two—fine, three—cans of Brothers Three Orchard's hard apple cider.

Seeking pussy for a few playdates a week. I started out wanting a male for my gold girl, but I decided to open the field. So, a male or female can work depending on fit. I have toys and beds, though they will stay on premises. Must be up to date on shots. Top dollar for the right candidate. Discretion is advised.

PRGLDNROD

I reread my ad one last time then finished the last of my cider. My cat had wandered away, so I curled up on the window seat for a short nap. It wasn't the most comfortable position and my ample parts dangled off the cushions, but I just needed a few minutes to rest. I was a night owl, after all, and I had a ton of work to get done tonight. Damn cider had hit me harder than I'd expected.

Two hours later, I shot up into a seated position with my dark curls half covering my face, my eyes bleary, and the snow outside reaching epic levels. Not unusual for my small town in central New York, but I must've somehow missed a weather alert.

I lifted my phone, swiped it awake, and squinted at the screen with one eye, sure I must be seeing things. I'd left my Kitten Around profile open and my mail icon was jumping madly. The red number above it read 213.

What the hell?

I opened my inbox and started reading the messages with growing horror. They got more and more salacious, describing sex acts and positions that even I wasn't familiar with.

And I knew my sex acts. I actually prided myself on my knowledge of a wide array of the ways people got off, so that I could help my editing clients.

These people apparently could teach me a few things. At least intellectually. I wasn't looking for those kind of playdates, thank you very much.

I shuddered. And neither was Princess Goldenrod.

I went through every message. Some went right in the trash bin. A few of them, I noted their contact information in my notes app so I could possibly contact them with questions later.

That left me with three candidates. Three out of the now 226 messages.

I took a deep breath.

Perhaps I'd gone too provocative. I needed a beta reader when I wrote these things, apparently.

This was why I just edited romance novels and didn't write them. I'd probably set the internet on fire if I tried.

Shivering, I tightened my robe as message #227 came in. I wasn't sure I had it in me to read any more about pony play except with cats. Or humans dressed as cats or something along those lines. Hey, you do you, whatever works. I just hadn't expected quite that level of enthusiasm in response to my ad.

Maybe I should have. I hadn't exactly posted it at the best time of day for such things. But who spent the overnight hours trolling Kitten Around's classifieds section?

Color me schooled.

I opened #227 and read it with my heart racing.

ADMIN

Hi, you don't know me, and maybe I'm not understanding what you're looking for, but considering where you posted this, you might want to reword it? I can't imagine the kind of replies you're getting. Actually, I can, but don't tell me because I'm not a pervert and not interested. You probably won't even see this.

I frowned and responded before I thought better of it. Although I probably wouldn't have thought better of it, anyway. I had a vague hard cider buzz and it was three a.m. and my toes were freezing. How those three things worked together, I wasn't certain.

When someone says they aren't a pervert, they most certainly are. It's like someone in a cabin in the woods saying they aren't a serial killer then holding out a handful of candy to a hapless stranger.

I don't know what made me say that. I wasn't that drunk, if I even was at all. But there was a little devil on my shoulder who felt bold behind the screen.

I often did while I did my work, too, despite the fact they weren't my words I was editing. I just rearranged sections that needed help. I didn't *create*.

Kitty Armor, developmental editor, was the brave one, not Katherine Armitage, mousy recluse with a pair of red heels she'd probably never actually wear anywhere other than her own apartment while she edited.

So who was being brave here? Kitty, Katherine, or someone new altogether?

While I pondered that, another message came in. And it wasn't from my cabin-candy giver.

Whom I'd apparently scared away. Even my typed words were intimidating somehow. My dad would shake his head sadly and say he'd told me that men like to make the first move.

I hadn't made any moves. I was looking for a cat, not a man, for fuck's sake.

Then he messaged again. Assuming *he* really was a he.

ADMIN

I just wanted to help. But if you don't need help, fine by me. Good luck on your pussy search. Though maybe next time post this on a more appropriate site.

A pussy is a cat. A CAT. This site is for Kitten Around, a kitten rescue. I posted it exactly where I wanted to. What are YOU doing here, genius?

ADMIN

I'm an admin. An alert went off while I was sleeping about extremely high traffic on the server. I logged in to see someone posting a request for pussy, so I figured I'd send a message first before I removed it. Our servers don't have the bandwidth to support your solicitations.

Solicitations? You think I was trying to get sex?

ADMIN

You tell me.

I am telling you. Do you have access to my first post?

ADMIN

The one you took down?

Yes.

He responded twenty-nine minutes later. Yes, I kept track. In that time, Princess showed up and stared at me for several minutes until I received her telepathic communication that apparently breakfast today wasn't at her normal seven-thirty but at four thirty-six.

After I fed my fuzzy overlord, I returned to find my cabin-candy giver had responded with the message board version of *hmph*.

ADMIN

Your post was poorly worded unless you deliberately were being provocative.

Give the man a ribbon! Assuming he is a man. Also assuming he really works at Kitten Around.

ADMIN

Do you see the Admin tag beside my name?

I did see that, yes. Dammit. Harder to accuse one of things when the proof otherwise was right there, but I wasn't one to go down without a fight.

Maybe you're a hacker.

ADMIN

Sure. And if I was, hacking into Kitten Around's site would be my first target. A site that usually has approximately 3 visitors on an average Saturday night in the midnight to six a.m. time period. Tonight? Over five hundred.

Wow, go me. Maybe I should start writing books.

He didn't reply so I sent another message.

Fine, you're an admin. Maybe you're female.

ADMIN

And if I am? I didn't indicate any interest in the pussy you're seeking, so my sex is irrelevant.

Oh, come on. Women don't get excited by that word. That's a male trigger. You probably have a pussy search-term alert on the server so it flags you first. Sorry to say you were #227 in my inbox.

ADMIN

And maybe you're a man. You're the one seeking pussy. All I want is for you to reword your post for clarity without deliberately inflammatory terminology.

Pussy is slang, not terminology.

He responded quickly this time.

ADMIN

Pussy for a cat is slang? Good to know, since it's the first definition in Webster's. The dictionary in case you're unaware.

Much to my shock, I sat back with a smile. I didn't play chess, but in my brain, someone was screaming *checkmate*.

And that someone was directly connected to my mostly dormant libido.

A man who quoted the dictionary to me? Even if he wasn't a man, I wasn't sure I cared. This person intrigued me.

Then he sent a picture. Probably to kill me dead, the bastard.

ADMIN

For you. Just so you know my sex since that's apparently a concern of yours.

I opened it, expecting a dick pic. Because of course. The possibility disappointed me. I hated when someone turned out to be predictable.

But when I clicked to download it, the picture that emerged was not of an erect penis. No, it was of a golden-skinned man with washboard abs and tattoos of palm fronds on either side of his groin just above the waistband of his plaid flannel pajama bottoms.

Oh, and a cat. He wasn't wearing the cat as an accessory. The cat's fluffy black bulk was draped over cabin-candy guy's discreetly hidden groin, staring at the camera with the cool green disdain that only a cat could pull off.

My mouth was now officially dry. Those abs were things of beauty.

How to respond? I'd just go by instinct.

I can reverse image search that to see if it's widely available, you know.

ADMIN

Be my guest. You going to send one back?

Send what back?

ADMIN

A picture.

Oh, are we internet dating now? Should I tell you my measurements, my astrological sign, and what enneagram I am, or do you want to go first?

ADMIN

Now she's angling for my measurements. Beginning to think someone is a pervert and it's not me.

Again, why would I troll on a kitten rescue site? Isn't that what Tinder is for?

ADMIN

Oh, I knew you seemed familiar. Is your screen name Vulva69 on there?

As much as I liked a snarky man, I didn't respond immediately. Just to ease my mind, I did that reverse image search. No such thing existed.

By then he'd sent another picture, this one of the gold collar with reflective paw prints the black kitty wore in the photo, looped around his fingers. Both collars said Lucky on their little fishy tags.

ADMIN

Enough for you?

Sure. Yeah. I guess. Whatever.

ADMIN

You googled, didn't you?

So you have a pussy.

ADMIN

If you mean cat, yes. As you can see, his name is Lucky and he rules the roost. Are you really wanting playdates with an actual cat for your DSH?

So he *had* gone back to check out my previous post on the server. And he appeared to be comfortable with the term DSH, so he at least knew that much.

I supposed I would tentatively trust hot-abs guy—at least for now. Until he slipped up and I caught him in a lie.

Do you spray tan?

ADMIN

What? No. Of course not.

Do you live in Kensington Square?

ADMIN

I'm local. Are you?

Depends. Where do you live?

ADMIN

Like an address?

No, like spatial coordinates. Yes, an address.

ADMIN

1831 EastView Road on the wooded side of Crescent Lake, but I don't live in a cabin. You?

I frowned as Princess Goldenrod hopped onto my window seat and started kneading on the bottom of my robe, her sharp nails digging into my leg. “Don't worry. I'm not giving our address to a strange man with a spray tan and abs for days. I'm feeling him out.”

Then again, how had I expected to have playdates with a rental cat and my cat if I didn't give out my address? It wasn't as if we could meet in the park in the middle of winter, even if I had been okay with hanging out anywhere but my apartment. It was only November, but we lived in the snowbelt—proven by the fact that it was indeed snowing.

That left us going to hot-abs guy's not-a-cabin. But that didn't feel any safer. Going there held its own dangers, not the least of which was I hated leaving home. At least here I was on my own turf and I could disable him with a two-finger jab to the eyes.

I'm not prepared to disclose that.

ADMIN

Are you prepared to go to bed? It's five-thirty in the morning.

I squinted at my screen. Now that he mentioned it, I was still tired. But I hadn't done the work on my docket. I hadn't set up a playdate for Princess. All I'd done tonight was get halfway to drunk and kind of bantered with a man who'd thought I was soliciting female companionship of a personal nature on a kitten charity site.

Yeah. I'm tired. Good night.

I didn't wait for him to say anything else. Didn't make plans to chat later or meet or exchange more photos. Well, *he'd* be exchanging more. I hadn't sent anything yet.

Maybe I never would.

"Let's go to bed," I said to Princess, scooping her up before she could argue. She tended to do that with a few well-placed meows.

Wonder where she'd picked up that personality trait.

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ABOUT TARYN QUINN

USA Today bestselling author, **TARYN QUINN**, is the sexy and funny alter ego of bestselling authors Taryn Elliott & Cari Quinn. We've been writing together for years, but we have decided to pull the trigger on a combo name just for fun.

And so...Taryn Quinn was born!

Do you like ultra sexy small town romance full of shenanigans? Quirky office romances full of steam? Okay, look...we pretty much just love writing steamy stories. If you're all about that, we're your girls!

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