

FAKING IT WITH THE GUY NEXT DOOR



A Romantic Comedy

USA TODAY Bestselling Author
KATE O'KEEFFE

FAKING IT WITH THE GUY NEXT DOOR

A Romantic Comedy

Second Chance Café

Book 3

KATE O'KEEFFE

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Wild Lime
Books

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About This Book

He's hot. He's charming. He's new in town. And he's trying to destroy me.

As if Hunter's Creek wasn't already serving up enough drama, in walks Oliver Langdon, the shining star of the coffee conglomerate, Steamy Coffee. He's giving my Aunt Sheila's Second Chance Café a run for its apple pies, but guess who's now steering the ship? That'd be me, Marlowe Cole, returned to my hometown and ready for battle.

Sure, Oliver's got that whole tall, dark, and seriously-stop-being-so-handsome vibe going on. But let's not get carried away here. Chiseled jawlines aren't my kryptonite. Although I'll admit to a seriously hot flirtation between us, and perhaps I may have had a teensy desire for more? But that was before I knew who he was, and now that I do, there's no way Mr. Corporate Coffee is brewing romance in my life.

Or at least that was the plan. The problem is, sometimes you can let things like someone trying to destroy your aunt's business cloud your judgment. And then you get to know the real person behind the corporate clout and things... change. Sparks fly. Feelings are shared. Perhaps there's even a life-changing kiss.

Which puts me in a frothy mess when half the town rallies behind me, trying to push Steamy Coffee out.

Talk about awkward.

The two of us are now caught in a showdown spicier than Oliver's overpriced triple shot lattes and here I am, putting on an Oscar-worthy performance, pretending that I'm totally immune to his charms.

I'm faking that I'm on Team Get Lost. But between us? I'm secretly

waving the flag for Stay With Me Forever.

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Chapter 1

Marlowe



~ 3 months ago ~

“Let me get this straight. You want me to willingly climb into that oversized beach ball, roll down the hill as I attempt a slalom like I'm a pinball, and then bounce up against that wall thing and come back to Earth with a series of vomit-inducing bounces—and *pay* for the privilege?” I raise my eyebrows at my kid sister and her boyfriend, standing in their swimsuits, their hair wet, towels wrapped around their waists.

Just because they've done it doesn't mean I'm going to.

Surely they'll see reason.

“Come on, Marlowe. It's so much fun, and besides, you brought your swimsuit,” Ryn, my total risk taking, youngest sibling stereotype of a sister, replies.

I eye a Zorb as it goes rolling by, the poor person trapped inside screaming their lungs out. If I was in any doubt about this whole fiasco, the frenzied screaming more than makes my point.

“I beg to differ on the fun part, Ryn.” I cross my arms over my chest and feel every inch the older sister. “And anyway, I'm sure your idea of fun and my idea are pretty much opposite.”

“Zorbing is awesome,” Ryn’s boyfriend, Gabe, announces, as though making such a declaration will spur me on to get into one of those...*things*.

“How about we go and have a nice cup of coffee. Seattle is famous for its coffee, you know, and I’m sure you two could do with warming up. You must be cold.” Without waiting for a response, I turn to leave the park.

Ryn gets a hold of my sleeve. “Do you always need to have a giant carrot stuck up your you know what?”

“I don’t have a giant carrot stuck anywhere, thank you very much,” I reply haughtily.

She shoots me a look that tells me she doesn’t believe me.

“Just because I don’t want to risk my life in a big plastic ball doesn’t mean I’m uptight you know.”

Ryn scoffs and Gabe shoots her a look.

“Well, I’m gonna do it. We both are. Right, Gabe?” Ryn shoots me one of her defiant looks.

“Yeah, but you don’t have to if you don’t want to, Marlowe. It’s cool.” Gabe shrugs.

“If you’re happy being poultry,” Ryn adds and immediately begins to cluck like a hen.

“That’s not what I meant,” Gabe hisses at her.

Not listening, Ryn adds in the arm motions and bobs her head back and forth in her chicken imitation—just in case I missed her point.

“Would you quit that?” I complain.

“Only when you say you’re gonna do it,” she replies between clucks.

I take a furtive glance at one of the Zorbs. The woman who was prisoner inside has now climbed out, dripping wet, high fiving her friends who are all whooping and laughing along with her.

She looks happy—and alive, most importantly.

“See? They enjoyed it and they’ve gotta be at least your age,” Ryn says in my ear.

“Thanks a lot.”

“So? What do you say?” Gabe asks.

I look between my sister and her boyfriend. Despite the fact that getting thrown around like a ragdoll is hardly my idea of fun, I did agree to come here. In fact, other than the Museum of Glass, this was the only activity my weekend visitors wanted to do in Seattle.

There’s also a part of me that fears I’ve become too comfortable, too set

in my ways, like an elderly lady who resists change. I'm only 28. Sure, I'm not a kid anymore, but maybe I should be a little more adventurous? More open to new experiences? Suffice it to say, I've never gone Zorbing before—the corporate world doesn't really call for it—and maybe today I could take a step out of my comfort zone?

“She's wavering,” Ryn announces as she studies me.

“I think she looks like she might throw up,” Gabe replies.

“Nah. That's her thinking look.”

“It is?”

“Yup. Totally off putting, right?”

“Totally.”

They're talking about me as though I'm not right here in front of them.

I push out a breath, and before I change my mind I say, “Okay, I'll do it.”

I don't want to be old before my time.

Ryn pumps the air. “Yes! You are not going to regret this, sis.”

“Zorbing is awesome,” Gabe states for the second time.

I pull my lips into a line. “So you said.”

Fifteen minutes later, I'm stripped down to my swimsuit and climbing into the Zorb with some serious reservations, and most definitely questioning my decision to take more risks in life. In fact, right now I would say my life is pretty good as is. I've got a great job, a cute apartment, even if it is a little on the small side. I've got a wonderful boss, who incidentally I've been dating for the past ten months, which I know isn't smart. I've had all the arguments with myself. But I know that Mike Warner is different. Our relationship is different. We are meant to be together, and the fact that we met at work—and he happens to be my boss—will ultimately mean nothing in the grand scheme of our lives once we are sitting around the Christmas tree with our grandchildren someday.

“Okay, here we go! Have an awesome ride!” the surfer looking guy, who can't be any older than 18, says to me once I'm inside.

Before I have the chance to tell him I'm doing this under duress and a totally misguided attempt to be more adventurous, he releases the Zorb and I begin to sail down the course, water sloshing around me, the ball beginning to bounce, and me screaming my lungs out. It takes a few bounces, and swallowing some of the probably quite disgusting water, before I surprise myself and begin to actually enjoy it. Sure, it's not my first choice for a Saturday afternoon activity, and I can't imagine I'll buy a season ticket

anytime soon, but I'm glad I'm doing it.

As both me and the ball bounce up against the wall, indicating the end of my virgin Zorbing experience, I'm almost sad it's over. I climb out with a grin on my face.

Ryn and Gabe are there to greet me, their grins as wide as mine. My sister gives me a hug and Gabe high fives me.

“You loved it, didn't you? I can tell,” Ryn says with a grin.

“It was okay, I guess,” I reply, but I can't keep the pretense up. Maybe it's the adrenaline pumping through my body or the fact that I'm now standing on firm ground, but I can't help but agree with her.

She nudges my arm. “Come on. You loved it.”

“Yeah, I did,” I admit, to more squeals and another hug from my sister.

“Wanna do it again? We could do it tandem,” she suggests.

“Hey, I thought I was doing it tandem with you,” Gabe complains.

Ryn wraps her arm around Gabe's waist. “We've got all afternoon. We can go as many times as we want.”

I laugh at her enthusiasm, enjoying this new-found feeling of closeness with my kid sister. I've always been close to my family, but I share my life a lot more with our middle sister, Harper. She knew about Mike from the get-go, and of course tried to talk me out of dating my boss. Harper has a good head on her shoulders and always gives the best advice, but when she met Mike, she was totally supportive of our relationship, even if I knew she had her concerns.

Ryn and I, on the other hand, have really only started to get to know one another as adults over the past year. I'm five years older than her, and I left home for college when she was only 13. Up until recently, I always saw her as just a kid. Now, spending time together and getting to know Ryn the 23-year-old woman, I've learned how kind and clever she is—and how much better she is at having fun than me.

Hence the Zorb.

“What do you say, sis? Shall we do this?” Ryn asks me, her face aglow.

I let out a laugh. “Sure. It'll be fun.”

“See? I told you Zorbing is—” Gabe begins.

“Awesome?” I finish for him.

“You got it,” he replies on a laugh.

We begin the climb back up to the start of the course when I notice a couple out of the corner of my eye. They've got their arms wrapped around

one another as they kiss, looking every inch the loved-up couple. He's way taller than her, which is because he's a very tall man and she's probably average height. There's something familiar about him and I realize in a flash it's because he reminds me of my boyfriend.

I smile as I think of Mike. He's tall, 6 foot 6 1/2 inches to be precise, which not only makes him stand out in a crowd but meant that he played college basketball with the aim to go pro before an injury spelled the end of that particular dream. I'm not complaining, since it all worked out quite nicely for me, because if he had become a pro baller I would never have met him.

He had an early dinner with us last night but had to catch the red eye to Chicago for a conference. I get that he needs to travel, and that it's part of his job, but I always miss him when he goes away—and am the first to tell him how much I miss him—probably way too often. But when you know you know, as the saying goes, and I definitely know with Mike Warner.

The couple's kiss comes to an end and I pull my eyes away. It's one thing to be reminded of my own boyfriend while strangers share an intimate moment, it's quite another to be caught gawking at them like some kind of weirdo.

But something has me snapping my attention back to them. The tall man is now smiling down at the woman. It's a familiar smile, set in a familiar face.

My stomach drops and my mouth instantly turns dry.

It's Mike.

My Mike.

The man I'm in love with. Only he just kissed that other woman and now he's holding her in his arms and gazing at her with love in his eyes and... and... Suddenly I'm light headed, my world spinning around me like I'm back in the Zorb. Only this is the opposite of fun.

"You okay, Marlowe?" Gabe asks, his voice sounding distant, muffled by my heart beating in my ears.

Da-dunk, da-dunk, da-dunk.

I can't turn away. I can't stop staring. My eyes are superglued to Mike and the other woman, clinched in their embrace.

A wave of nausea rolls over me.

Is Mike...cheating on me?

He can't be. He wouldn't. He's mine. We're together. We're in love. We've told each other, said those very words. Many times. He gave me the

necklace I'm wearing right now. My hand flies to my neck, my fingers finding the pendant. It's still in place around my neck, but the man who gave it to me just last week is now...with someone else.

"Are you chickening out?" Ryn asks.

"No, I—" I begin, but cannot find the words.

She follows my line of sight and takes in the scene. "Oh, my gosh. Is that Mike?"

"It sure looks like him. I thought he was in Chicago," Gabe replies. He turns to stare. "Huh. Is that his sister?"

Ryn scoffs. "I sure don't gaze at *my* sisters like that." Now they're turning toward us and looking our way and..."—" She grabs me by the arm and begins to yank me away, up the course and away from Mike and the other woman. Whoever she is.

"Ryn, stop!" I insist, snatching my arm away. "I need to talk to him about this."

She takes me by the shoulders and levels me with her stare. "Marlowe, nothing good can come from this. He's clearly two-timing you."

Mike's two-timing me? I glance back over at him and the woman, as though I need further proof. As though the image of them together isn't etched into my eyes permanently.

I swallow, a lump the size of a Zorb in my throat.

"And now they're heading our way," Gabe states.

"They are?" My voice sounds like it's coming from someone else's lips. "Have they seen us?" I take a furtive glance in their direction to see them walking, his arm wrapped around her shoulders, smiling and laughing.

They haven't seen me.

"Marlowe. Look at me," Ryn says in a commanding voice and I do as she says. "Do you want to confront that cheating, good-for-nothing jerk right now, or leave? Whatever you decide. We'll go with you."

"We got you," Gabe echoes.

"I—"

What do I do? I'm not prepared for this. I mean, when I got up this morning and sent Mike a message, telling him I missed him already and couldn't wait to see him on Sunday, the last thing I expected was to see him in another woman's arms, looking blissfully happy, as though our relationship doesn't even *exist*.

And anyway, he's supposed to be in Chicago, attending a conference. Not

kissing some other woman's face off in a Zorbing park in Seattle.

The decision is made for me.

As though in slow motion, I watch them approach, Mike's face shifting from happy smiles to one of shock.

Gabe and Ryn stand closer to me, protecting me, acting as a buffer.

Ryn crosses her arms and glares at Mike. "Nice day for a stroll, *Michael*," she says in a dry tone.

His now-panicked eyes dart from one wet post-Zorbing sister to the other, onto Gabe, and then back to me. I can almost see the cogs in his brain whirr as he works out how to handle this new and unexpected situation.

He starts by lifting his lips into a smile. "Hey there, guys. Looks like you've all been Zorbing. Was it fun?"

Is he serious right now?

His companion places her hand on his forearm and Mike's entire body stiffens. "Aren't you going to introduce me to your friends, honey?"

Honey?

Any tiny shred of doubt that Mike and this woman could be brother and sister washes right away.

"I'm sorry, Cara. This is Marlowe, who works for me, and her sister, Ryn and—" he looks blankly at Ryn's boyfriend.

"Gabe," he says for him.

"That's right. How could I forget?" Mike replies. "This is Gabe."

"Yeah, especially considering you used my name several times when we all had dinner together at Marlowe's place last night," Gabe adds smoothly, an edge to his voice.

I want to kiss him but I'm too stunned to do anything.

Mike barks out a laugh, a weird sound that wouldn't be out of place in a pack of howler monkeys.

Cara tightens her grip on Mike's arm, shooting him a questioning look. "Honey?"

Ryn nudges me and gestures at Cara. I'm so discombobulated, it takes me a while to work out what she wants me to see specifically, rather than just the horror movie unfolding before my eyes. Until something glints in the sun on her left hand.

A ring.

Not just any old ring. An engagement ring on her left hand, sitting proudly above a wedding band.

She's married? Mike's having a relationship with me and...and a married woman?

Mike appears to be frozen.

Cara unhooks herself from him and stretches out her hand. "I'm Cara Warren. For some reason my husband has forgotten his manners."

Ryn's the first to respond, taking her hand and shaking it with vigor. "You're Cara Warren, you say? Married to...?"

"Well, Mike, of course," she replies with a light laugh, as though Ryn's question was totally out of left field.

"Do you live here in Seattle or are you just visiting?" she continues.

"I live here."

She gestures between them. "So, you two get together a lot?"

"We sure do," she replies on a laugh. "We live in the same house. Well, when poor Mike here doesn't have to stay in the city overnight. I told him he needs to tell his boss that he needs his personal time, too, but he's such a hard worker." She gazes lovingly up at Mike.

Mike the lying, cheating *jerk*.

He on the other hand looks like he swallowed a plate full of overcooked Brussels sprouts.

Ryn pulls her brows together. "I don't get it. You're divorced but you live in the same house?"

Cara lets out a pretty, tinkling laugh as she places her hand on Mike's chest. "Why would you think we're divorced? We had a separation," she says, pursing her lips,

but that's all in the past now. Isn't that right, honey?"

"We've been married five years next month."

I blink at Cara. They were separated and now they're back together?

No! No way. She has to be lying. Mike's not married. He's divorced. Everyone knows that. I'm his girlfriend. He said he loves me. I said I love him.

He gave me this necklace.

I lift my gaze to Mike's, but he's not looking at me—which comes as no surprise whatsoever. Why would you look at the woman you've been...oh, no. With a sickening jolt I realize what I am to him. Cara's existence makes me something I never thought I'd be.

It makes me the *other woman*.

"Is this true?" I ask Mike, finally finding my voice, the Zorb-sized ball in

my throat making it hard to breathe as tears threaten my eyes. But I refuse to cry. I refuse to let my emotions get the better of me. I need to be strong. I need to hold my head high. Even if I'm now unwittingly the other woman, I've got nothing to be ashamed of.

His face is drawn, his mouth pinched. "Marlowe, I...yes, it's true. Cara and I have reconciled."

"Three months ago," Cara corrects with another tinkling laugh. "Man!" She shakes her head lovingly at him, as though he's a loveable scamp.

It's all the answer I need.

My fingers still clutching the pendant, in one fluid motion I tug at the necklace until it snaps. I thrust it at him. He takes it in his hand before I turn blindly, blinking back my tears, and walk away, concentrating on putting one foot in front of the other as my world falls apart around me.

Chapter 2

Oliver



~ 3 months ago ~

The leather creaks as I lean back in my seat, half listening to David O'Neill report on the latest company financials. I gaze out the window of the 42nd floor at the deep blue waters of Elliot Bay and across to Bainbridge Island, the overhead clouds moody and gray. Fingers of light emerge from the clouds, dancing on the water below.

Moody. That's the word I'd use to describe today.

I try to refocus on David. It's the same story I hear the first Monday of each month, and I've been told since the company began some twenty-something years ago as a small, independent coffeehouse in a suburb. It's always a story of growth, new markets, and profit profit profit.

No one's complaining. Well, other than our competitors, that is.

The woman at the head of the table, her Chanel suit deep red with black and white trim, her dark hair perfectly styled, immaculate in the same makeup she's worn since I've known her—bold red lipstick, thick black lashes—taps her gold pen against the solid wood table in impatience. She clearly has something to say, and being her minions, we're all going to listen. That's what you do when your boss speaks, particularly when it's a boss like

Melody Langdon.

Whatever you do, don't be misled by her pretty, musical sounding name. Melody Langdon is all rottweiler, even if she looks like she's a lady who lunches.

"—which of course is great news for the region's sales figures, which are strong, up twenty-three percent from last month." With a click, David O'Neill moves to his next slide and I pull my gaze from the sunlight fingers in the bay and back to the room.

I need to focus.

"Now, if I can direct your attention to the stats on the new branding, you'll see that it's been a huge success in Oregon, California, and Nevada, but it's had a negative impact in Washington state, which has come as a surprise. I believe you're going to pick up the narrative on that for us, Oliver?" David sits back in his seat.

"Sure. Of course. I've got my stats on that right here." I pull up the relevant presentation and plug my laptop in so it appears on the big screen for everyone in the room to see.

"As you can see, parts of the state have responded well to the rebranding, places like Seattle, Olympia, Tacoma, and Spokane, but we're really struggling in the smaller towns. For some reason, they don't want to see half naked people when they go for their morning cup of Joe." I smile at the assembled bigwigs, and I'm met with furrowed brows and blank stares.

Tough crowd.

"Anyway, our research shows that places like Cotown and other small towns prefer more, shall we say, *clothed* advertising." I flick the slides over to one containing two images: one of a good-looking man and an attractive woman smiling as they hold their coffee cups, and one of a man's naked torso, pressed up against a woman in nothing but her bra and panties, the top halves of their faces cropped out, as their hands clutch a single mug embossed with the words *Things are getting hot at Steamy Coffee*.

This, people, is our new branding.

How everyone at this table doesn't cringe every time they see it baffles me. It's like hitting our customers across the head with sex appeal, yelling *Look at us! We're sexy! We drink coffee!*

Subtle is not a word in our vocabulary.

But you know what? Dislike it as I do, it works, and it's been working since way before I joined the company, fresh out of college.

It didn't start out that way. As the company folklore will tell you, Melody Langdon opened her first ever coffeeshop and served a decent cup of coffee with a tasty muffin when she was a single mom of 3. It was homey and comfortable and the kind of place you could while away the hours eating delicious food, sipping your coffee, and getting lost in a good book. But all good things come to an end, and for Melody that was when she met Frank Darlington, her second husband and the person who pushed her to expand her one solitary coffeeshop into the beginnings of a chain, branding it as Steamy Coffee. The chain thrived, but Frank and Melody's relationship did not.

Over the years, some marketing bright spark decided to take the double meaning of "steamy" and introduce the sexy couple, canoodling over their coffee. The company has been a runaway success, transforming the chain to the powerhouse it is today.

"To sum up, they're responding positively in the metropolitan areas, and not in the rural," I say.

"Why?" This is the one syllable response from our boss.

"Perhaps they don't like sexy people in the Washington heartland?" David suggests.

"You may be right. Cotown and the surrounding area is a place full of lumberjacks, after all," Sylvester Bordwood, the VP of Operations comments to titters from the room.

"No sexy lumberjacks in Washington state?" Tiffany Carlisle, the Vice President of Marketing, and the only other woman in the room, asks. "I find that hard to believe."

Melody Langdon's face doesn't crack.

"Perhaps we should do a campaign with lumberjacks holding coffee cups and see how that goes?" Tiffany suggests.

"As long as there are curvy gals as well, I'm on board," Sylvester responds.

David holds his hand up in the air to stop the conversation and I glance at Melody. I know my boss better than most and she's not one for joking around, particularly in the boardroom. Or any room, really.

"I know it was a joke, but maybe the lumberjack thing could work in the smaller towns in Washington. We could test it?" David suggests.

Melody Langdon pulls her lips to one side. "We spent a huge amount of money on branding and it's worked perfectly fine elsewhere. I say we choose one location and use it as a test base."

“That's an excellent idea, Melody,” David replies.

David O'Neill has always been a total suck up, ever since I took this job straight out of college. Well, not that I was in this job at the time. I started out managing a coffeeshop, getting to know the ins and outs of the day-to-day operations before I moved to the corporate head office, where I went from a lowly clerk, moving up through the ranks to the company nose bleed heights.

But what I loved doing was being on the ground, running the cafés. Truth be told, I miss it, and spend way too much time staring out the window at Elliot Bay these days.

“I can see it now,” Tiffany begins, an excited glint in her eye. “A half-dressed lumberjack, maybe with his shirt open and his six-pack on display, with his lumber-whatever the female equivalent is. Lumberjane?” She offers a shrug. “I have no clue. Anyway, they're together, enjoying their first morning coffee, looking happy and super-hot. Naturally. Those small-town types will be able to relate and I bet they'll lap it right up.”

Will they? Or will they be insulted that we're taking an element of their small-town culture and exploiting it for our own means?

I quirk an eyebrow. “So, basically you're suggesting we use our same advertising but with a guy in a plaid flannel shirt?”

Tiffany leans back in her seat, a self-satisfied smirk on her face. “Exactly. We could probably just Photoshop it.”

“I bet we could,” I mutter under my breath.

I receive a sharp look from Melody. “Robert created an incredibly successful brand for this corporation, and I see no reason to deviate from it just so we don't upset the apple cart in small town Washington state.”

Ah, Robert Langdon. The man whose shadow stretches the full length of this boardroom table and beyond. The man who've I've been trying to live up to my entire professional life. The man who could do no wrong, at least until his untimely death in a car crash two years ago.

His mother has never recovered and saying anything remotely negative about him always results in her ire.

“You're right. He did,” I say, less because I want to appease Melody and more because Robert Langdon was amazing at his job—and he did help put Steamy Coffee on the map.

Conversation continues about targeting small towns in the state, until David says, “Some of these small towns have festivals. There's one town in particular that I visited last year. It's called Hunter's Creek. It's picture

perfect, nestled in this huge forest, with colonial buildings and quaint little stores. You know the kind of place. Totally Hallmark channel.”

“It sounds cute, and familiar. Why do I know that name?” Tiffany comments.

“They have this festival I went to last year where they get a bunch of kids to sing songs from *The Sound of Music*. It’s as cheesy as all get out but people love it. They come from far and wide.”

“To listen to kids sing cheesy musical songs from last century?” Sylvester asks with a chortle.

“Yup. It has animals for the kids to feed and carnival rides and even a pie contest. All that great, wholesome American heartland stuff people love,” David continues.

“And you think the wholesome American heartland is begging to look at half-naked men in unbuttoned flannel shirts while they drink their coffee?” I ask with more than a splash of sarcasm.

“Absolutely I do,” David continues, not catching my tone in the least. “Hunter’s Creek has two coffeehouses right now, only one of which seems to have a decent trade. It’s called something like Second Chances. I forget. It’s on Main Street. Great pies, but less-than-great coffee.”

“Oh, I remember how I know that town’s name,” Tiffany says. “Hunter’s Creek is where they filmed the movie that’s coming out this summer. The one with Leonardo Finch and Charlene Kemp. You know the one. It’s a rom com,” Tiffany says.

“*Love at First Swipe*,” Sylvester announces and everyone turns to look at him. “My daughters are Leonardo Finch fans,” he offers by way of explanation. “It comes out later this summer.”

“When’s the town festival?” Melody asks.

“Late summer, too. I’ll check,” David says as he begins to tap on his phone. “Huh. It looks like they’re scheduled for the same weekend. The Summer Festival on that Friday and the world premiere of *Love at First Swipe* on Sunday. Big weekend for a small town like Hunter’s Creek.”

“I cannot imagine a better time to open a new Steamy Coffee, complete with lumberjack branding,” Tiffany says with a grin, leaning back in her chair. “Hunter’s Creek: our test site for the region.”

Melody turns her razor-sharp focus on me. “You know Leonardo Finch, don’t you, Oliver?”

“He was my roommate in college,” I reply.

“He was?” Tiffany exclaims, her eyes wide.

“How did I not know this?” Sylvester complains. “My daughters will freak out when I tell them.”

“Oh, we could definitely use that!” Tiffany declares in mounting excitement. “You could have him do a promo at the site before the premiere, get a bunch of media there and ride on his coattails. He’s so hot right now.”

“I lost touch with him a few years back,” I reply, dismissing the notion of riding on my former roommate’s fame.

“No,” Melody replies, her eyes narrowed at me. “It’s a good idea. Use whatever we have in our bag of tricks.”

“It feels wrong to call him out of the blue after 10 years,” I respond.

Melody shoots a look that could wither the hardiest of souls. “Use whatever we have in our bag,” she repeats.

“I’ll...err...give him a call,” I reply sheepishly.

At Steamy Coffee you do what the boss says.

“Tell me about this Second Chances place,” she instructs David.

“It’s a small coffeehouse with the good trade. The food’s great, and they’ve got this bookshelf bursting with books and comfy seats where you can sit and read over a coffee and a slice of pie.”

“You make it sound quite whimsical,” Melody comments, her tone telling us she doesn’t think a lot of this independent coffeeshop.

David clears his throat. “The coffee’s drip. They’re an easy target.”

“Easy?” Melody questions. “Having been that small coffeehouse with the good trade myself, I know the locals will be loyal to them, at least to start with. We’ll have our work cut out for us, which is why Oliver’s Hollywood connection could be useful.”

“It’s not a current connection,” I interject, but no one’s listening. As far as they’re concerned, me calling in a favor from a now-famous former-roommate I haven’t seen in ten years is a done deal.

“We’ve conquered the main cities up and down the West Coast. I’m pretty sure one small town won’t derail us,” David states with confidence.

Tiffany chortles. “We’ve said it before. We’re like the advancing Roman army, conquering every town and city in our path.”

“Except in Gaul,” I offer with my tongue firmly in my cheek.

“Where’s Gaul? Out east?” Tiffany asks.

“It’s in *Asterix*,” I explain.

She creases her brow in response. “Where’s that? New Mexico?”

“You know, the comic? *Asterix*?” I say, looking around at blank stares. “It’s a classic. Set during the reign of ancient Rome, there’s one small village in the country of Gaul—which is modern day France—that the Romans can’t conquer, no matter what they do.”

“Why not?” David asks.

“Because they have a secret potion that makes anyone who drinks it super strong. The Romans simply can’t beat them.”

I remember the comics from when I was a kid. Originally French, someone had left a translated copy behind in my mom’s coffeeshop. They never came back for it, and I had my first introduction to Asterix and Obelix and all the weird and wonderful goings on in their small Gaulish village.

“You’re suggesting the people in this town drank a secret potion that means big chain coffeehouses can’t win?” David asks on a scoff.

“How obscure,” Melody comments.

“Actually, it’s incredibly popular.” I tap on my screen and pull up a quick Google search. “It’s sold 385 million copies and been translated into 111 languages, making it the most widely translated comic book series ever.”

“Oliver does enjoy a comic,” Melody says in her most acerbic tone, telling me this is not an appropriate boardroom conversation.

Message received.

The thing is, these meetings can be so dry that sometimes you just have to inject something else. Otherwise, you spend the whole time discussing money and how to beat independent coffeeshops out of business and count the abs on the half-naked guy holding his cup of Joe. Asterix and his pals feel like appropriately light relief.

Melody collects her water glass from the table and takes a sip before she looks at the waiting faces. “I feel certain that Steamy Coffee can conquer a small town like Hunter’s Creek.” She turns her laser-like gaze on me. “Call Leonardo Finch.”

I let out a breath. There’s no getting out of this now. “Sure thing.”

“This is going to be amazing,” Tiffany says as David simpers his agreement.

“We’ll need someone to spearhead it. I’ll leave that in your court, Sylvester,” Melody says as she collects her papers, indicating the meeting is now over.

Sylvester looks unnerved. “I...well...of course it will be hard to find someone willing to move to a small town in Washington.”

Melody raises an eyebrow at him.

“But I'm sure I could drum someone up. Someone of high caliber who's up to the challenge, of course,” he says.

The man is flailing.

Tiffany, David, and Sylvester make their way from the room, and I'm left with my boss.

“I'll do it,” I surprise myself by saying.

What? Why? I have zero interest in moving to a small town in Washington state, let alone trying to make a success of a place deemed impenetrable by the Steamy Coffee-slash-Roman Army.

Melody looks at me as though I've suggested we close all our branches for good and head to Cabo for cocktails. “You?”

“Me,” I confirm, my conviction to take this on growing by the second.

Hunter's Creek, Washington state. How bad can it be?

“I'm not sure that's such a great idea,” Melody replies dismissively.

I tighten my jaw. “I do, and I'm totally up for the task.”

She slides her eyes to mine. “I'm not sure you are.”

I don't let her words sting. I'm used to them. Perhaps it's because I like the idea of being in the American equivalent of a French town that's resisted the power of the great coffeehouse chain? Or perhaps it's because I'm determined to throw some light on that long, Robert Langdon-shaped shadow?

“I've opened a bunch of sites. Successful sites. It makes sense that I operate a new venture, even if this Hunter's Creek place seems difficult. Let me prove myself with this.”

She watches me for a beat, her lips tight, her piercing blue eyes boring a hole into my skull. Finally, she speaks, “All right. Prove yourself with this site and you can be part of the international team next year.”

I allow myself a small smile. “I won't let you down, *Mom*.”

Chapter 3

Marlowe



~ Present Day ~

Do you know what to do when your life implodes? As in totally and completely blows up in your face without prior warning and your new life bears zero resemblance to it?

You head home with your tail between your legs, your head bowed, back to where you belong to lick your wounds.

That's what I did when my life blew up anyway. Back to good old Hunter's Creek, Washington, where the trees are tall, the men are burly and flannel-clad, and gossip fuels the very heart of the town.

Sure, I could have stayed in Seattle. I could have toughed it out. My life may have irrevocably changed, but I still had a great apartment, a good group of friends, a life.

But here's the thing, and I warn you, it's a doozy. When you spot your boyfriend, who is also your boss, with another woman, confront him about said other woman, and discover that *you* are in fact *the other woman* because he is still married, well, you're not exactly jumping at the chance to stick

around.

So, I ended not only my ill-advised relationship with my boyfriend-slash-boss-slash-two-timing-slash-total-lying-dirtbag, but also my employment in his company. Because what sort of a masochist would want to stay in either of those situations?

A self-deluded, idiotic masochist, that's what.

I blow out a breath as I turn off the main road and into a pretty, wooded area just out of town. I park the car I still owe way too much money on—because no big city job equals no cash, of course, just to add to my malaise—in the empty parking lot and do my best to push those deeply unpleasant memories from my mind. It's something I've been trying to do since I moved back home two and a half months ago.

Let's just say it's a work in progress.

I collect my towel from the passenger seat, and in my flip flops, I pad my way down the dirt path toward the pond.

It's a beautiful day and this is one of the spots I missed when I lived in the city. The rustling leaves overhead whisper in the warm breeze as an orchestra of birds fills the air and I breathe in the scent of pine that always reminds me of home, no matter where I am.

This is good for my soul—and for banishing horrible memories of Mike Warner.

I meander down the path through the trees until I reach the familiar clearing. The pond is deep blue and as smooth as glass, reflecting the clouds dotting the sky overhead.

I take a furtive look around. No cars in the parking lot means I've got the whole place to myself. *Bliss*. Just the way I like it.

I slip my dress over my head and kick my flip flops off. I take a deep breath and close my eyes, the late-afternoon sun warming my skin.

Hunter's Creek may lack the excitement of a city, with all its diversions and activities, but what it lacks in excitement it more than makes up for in tranquility, and right now, I wouldn't want to be anywhere else.

I lay my towel down on the pebbled surface, adjust my bikini, and stroll down to the water's edge. The flash of a fish's tail and splash of water catches my eye.

"Is that you, Freddy?" I ask as the surface of the pond ripples in a growing circle.

Of course the fish doesn't reply. In fact, he probably doesn't even know

his name is Freddy.

I'd never admit it to anyone because I'm a fully grown woman, but over the past few weeks I've named a few of the creatures that live here at the pond. Of course, there's Freddy Fish, but there's also a couple of frogs I've named Fiona and Fenella, and then there's the duck family, Dion and Della Duck and their babies, Daphne, Dawson, Delia, Drake, and Diego. Henrietta Heron isn't making an appearance today, but wait long enough and I'll spot her, searching for her dinner along the shore.

Really, I should be a children's book author.

I read somewhere recently that cold water is good for you. I figure I need as much goodness as I can get my hands on right now, so despite the water temperature, I take a few tentative steps into the pond, up to my knees, the coolness making me catch my breath.

I've been coming here after working at my aunt's coffeeshop whenever the weather is decent. I may have read that plunging yourself into cold water is good for you, but I definitely fall into the fair-weather plunger camp. I eye the swim platform in the middle of the pond that I swim out to and back most days.

It's now or never, Marlowe.

As I begin to wade out, there are more splashes and I look across the pond to see what's causing the commotion. Is Freddy Fish holding a dance party, a frenzied algae-chugging affair?

I freeze.

It's not Freddy Fish.

It's not even amphibious.

It's a person, swimming across the pond toward the floating platform from the opposite side. I watch their strong, easy strokes, the water splashing up behind them with each kick of their feet. With those shoulders it has to be a man, although it's hard to tell from here.

I wonder who it is?

The person reaches the platform and climbs the ladder. There's no doubt what sex the swimmer is now.

Yup. It's a man. A well-built, chiseled man, at that.

And a *stranger*. I know that for a fact because if a man who looked like that lived in Hunter's Creek, everyone would know about him, particularly the Hunter's Creek Ladies' Committee, as my sister, Ryn, refers to the busybody women of the town.

Oh, yeah. They'd be all over this guy.

Standing as far away from him as I am, I can't help but throw my gaze over him. I might have had my heart cut into tiny pieces by Mr. I'm-a-Big-Fat-Cheater, but I'm still a woman, and this man is *fine*.

From his broad, defined shoulders and arms to his glistening six-pack abs, his physique exudes masculine strength and athleticism. His skin is sun-kissed, his hair dark, and although I can't make out his features from this distance, from the confident way he moves, I bet he's handsome.

Not that him being handsome, ripped, and confident should have any effect on me. Far from it. He's intruding on my purposefully solitary sanctuary.

But he *is* mighty good to look at.

I watch as he runs his fingers through his damp hair, pushing it back from his face before he turns toward me.

That's my cue to leave.

With a tentative step back, my foot lands on a sharp rock. I let out a gasp and stumble backward, landing firmly on my butt with a splash of cold water.

"Ow!" I exclaim and immediately clamp my hand over my mouth as my eyes dart to Mr. Hot Body over on the platform.

Did he notice?

"That was gwideadadoob!" he calls out.

That was gwideadadoob? What is he talking about?

I rise to my feet, wiping the pebbles from the damp skin of my butt. "Excuse me?" I ask, somewhat indignant. Is this stranger passing judgment on my accidental fall?

I mean, how rude!

"I said, that was quite a dance move!" he calls out again, this time with his hands cupping his mouth, announcing clearly.

Right. Got it. Falling on my butt. He saw and he's making a joke.

Wonderful.

"I'll be here all week!" I reply with a self-effacing smile that he probably can't see.

He lets out a laugh. "You're a talented dancer *and* you're funny!"

"I try!" I shrug, beginning to almost enjoy my interaction with this guy, mainly because he is literally too far away from me for anything other than shouting.

"Wait right there. I'll swim over to you!"

Wait, *what?*

“Oh, no need! I’m just leaving—”

“But you only just got here.”

Who is this guy, Sherlock Holmes?

I squint my eyes. He’s got a touch of Robert Downey Jr. to him, I guess. But I’m not sticking around to actually *meet* the guy.

“Really, I gotta go. Have a nice swim. Bye now!” I lift my hand in a wave to signal that despite the fact we both know I arrived a mere two minutes ago before landing painfully on my butt, I am in fact leaving.

My words are lost in the splash as the guy dives into the pond and begins to swim toward me.

If I were in an isolated area in the city, I would not be waiting around to be murdered by some random stranger. But this is Hunter’s Creek, and although I don’t recognize the guy currently gliding through the water like a freaking Olympic swimmer, he’s probably a friend’s brother or husband or dad from my sister’s school, or even someone I went to high school with. Possibly all of those things.

What can I say? Hunter’s Creek is a small town.

I grab my crumpled dress, throw it over my head and wiggle into it. He might have witnessed my embarrassment as I landed inelegantly on my butt a moment ago but there’s no need to meet him in my bikini.

It doesn’t take him long to reach the shore. By the time I’ve pushed my hair back from my face and turned to him, he’s wading through the water toward me. He’s all wet, glistening muscles, his swim shorts plastered to his strong, sculpted legs.

Seriously, throw a sheathed dagger on his hip and he’d be James freaking Bond.

My belly does a little leap in appreciation.

Not that I’m looking for a man.

But, as I’ve previously stated, I *am* a woman, and I’m sure I read it in a magazine that gazing at such manly perfection is good for the soul. Or something. Whatever. Don’t judge me. I’m looking and it’s a great view.

“You changed your mind about a swim? The water’s beautiful today,” he says in a deep, melodious voice that completely matches his physical hotness.

“It sure is,” I reply brightly. “My...err...ankles appreciated it. You know, for the short time they were in.”

The corners of his lips quirk into a smile. “Your ankles?” His eyes sweep

down my body and then back up to my face and I swear it's like his vision has some kind of magical power, sending shivers across my skin wherever his eyes land.

"You're not coming in for a dip?"

I scan his face. He's handsome all right. I don't recognize him, and this guy sure has the kind of face you don't forget. He's got that dark five o'clock shadow thing down pat, framing his brown eyes and aquiline nose, his thick dark hair sending rivulets of water down his face. Like he did on the platform, he pushes his hair back and I try my best not to gawk at his muscular arms.

He's a total doppelgänger for Ian Somerhalder from the vampire show we used to watch, only with the way he's looking at me right now, this version could definitely give old "Smolderholder" a run for his money. And yes, that really was his nickname. Given to him by his fans, not himself. Obviously.

It's not every day you go to your local pond for a swim and meet Hercules.

"I think it might be a little cold for me today," I reply, forcing my eyes not to drift south.

His smile grows and it lights his whole face up. "You're totally missing out."

I give a wave of my hand. "I'll come back tomorrow."

"Do you live here in Hunter's Creek?"

"I do," I reply after a beat.

His lips quirk. "You're not sure?"

"No, I'm sure. It's just that I moved here recently so I had to think about it for a while." I offer him a smile, feeling like some kind of ditzy blonde. And I'm not even blonde.

In my defense, he's towering over me, with his wet, glistening muscles, looking ridiculously hot—Smolderholder, remember?—and staring right at me with those baby blues of his.

I'm amazed I can string a sentence together at all.

"Do you like it here?" he asks.

"I love it here. I'm Hunter's Creek born and bred, you see. This is home. I moved back from Seattle where I lived for a while. A few years, you know, after college. Not that I went to college in Seattle, but it was where I got my first big job. And my promotions. But it," I search for the right words, "ended...recently. Which is why I'm back here now. Which is great because

I've got a job I love and I get to go swimming here at the pond and my family's all here and, well, I love it."

Why am I telling this guy the story of my life?

His smile doesn't drop. "That's a lot of information."

I clear my throat. "I guess."

"Thanks for sharing."

I decide to ride it out. "I thought it was important that you know, in case we meet here again sometime."

I'm rewarded with the crinkle of his eyes as his lips pull up into a fresh smile. It tugs at my belly, reminding me that it's been a long time since I've enjoyed talking with a man that gets my blood moving, which this guy is.

"But you're back living here now that things *ended* in Seattle?"

I can't help a smile from claiming my face. It happens whenever I think about what I'm doing for a job these days. I've gone from working in marketing for a tech firm in Seattle with a strong career path and nice expense account, to running a coffeehouse in a small town. I should be bereft. I should be mourning the loss of my stellar career.

I'm not. I've found that I love it here. I love my job. It's as though I needed that life implosion to lead me to where I was always meant to be: at home in Hunter's Creek, running the Second Chance Café.

I see it as the shiny silver lining to the horror story of my life.

"Yup," I reply happily. "It's great here. So much more chill than a big city."

He takes in our surrounds. "It sure is. What do you do? Are you at the mill? I heard most people here work at the mill."

"They do. I run my aunt's coffeehouse down on Main Street. You might know it. The Second Chance Café?"

"That's your aunt's place?"

"Oh, so you've been there?"

"I dropped in there this morning. Take out."

How did I miss this guy? It was probably when I was in the kitchen or balancing the books in the back.

Dang books.

"You should eat next time. Best coffee in town, and the best pies. Award-winning, in fact. My aunt is real proud of that."

"I didn't eat, but the coffee was fine."

Fine?

“Perhaps I met your aunt?”

“Oh, no. Aunt Sheila isn’t working there these days. She’s away for a while and I’m running the place for her.”

I don’t mention my aunt being in Seattle, supporting Uncle Johnny as he undergoes cancer treatment. No need to overshare to that extent. No one ever mentions the c-word while they’re flirting with a hot new guy.

“You enjoy running a coffeeshop?”

“I love it. Hey, you should definitely drop by for a slice of apple pie. Or blueberry. Or pecan. Or strawberry and rhubarb. Any pie, really.”

Am I seriously going to list *all* the flavors of pie?

I give a self-deprecating shrug. “Or not. Totally up to you.”

His eyes haven’t left my face and I feel my cheeks heat under his gaze. “I’ll be sure to do that. I didn’t grow up here or get my first big job in Seattle, but I am visiting and this place sure is beautiful.”

There’s something in the way he says *this place* that makes me wonder whether he means more than just the pond. That he means *me*.

It makes my belly do all kinds of weird things.

You see, I haven’t felt anything for anyone since I broke up with Mike months ago. But I’m not going to dwell on that. Perhaps it’s time for me to move on? Move on with a guy who’s not my boss and not secretly married to another woman?

That would be a great place to start.

I throw my gaze over Mr. Hercules. He’s new in town, he’s gorgeous, he’s looking at me the way he’s looking at me, and—I do a quick check of his left hand—he doesn’t appear to be married.

Perhaps I need to step up and ask this guy out? Men do it all the time. Just last week Cody, one of the lumberjacks from the mill, asked me if I wanted to catch a movie with him. I turned him down. I’d been his babysitter in middle school and although I’m all for older women dating younger men, I couldn’t picture myself going on a date with a guy who once told me about how he wanted to build a house out of Lego big enough to live in with his pet guineapigs.

And besides, my sisters, Ryn and Harper, are always going on about how I need to put the Mike disaster behind me and get back on the wagon. Ryn has reminded me on more than one occasion that at my age my eggs are at risk of shriveling into microscopic raisins. So helpful.

“Why don’t you come by the café tomorrow?” I ask before I chicken out.

Sure, it's not exactly asking him on a date, but it's showing him I'd like to see him again. Baby steps.

"I'd love to, but I'm leaving first thing," he replies, and my heart sinks. "I'll be back soon, so I'll come by then."

"You must really like it here. Visiting twice in a short period of time."

"Something like that," he replies elusively. "Well, I'd best swim back to my car."

"Where did you park?"

"In the trees over there on the side of the road." He points across the pond.

"Why didn't you park in the lot?"

"There's a parking lot?"

I laugh. "We do have cars here, you know. It's up that path." I gesture behind me.

"Good to know. I won't have to go all Discovery Channel in the wilderness next time I feel like taking a dip."

We share a smile, and my belly does that weird flip thing again.

"Well, it was great to meet you—" He tilts his head. "I don't even know your name."

"It's Marlowe. Marlowe Cole."

"Hey, Marlowe, Marlowe Cole. I'm just plain Oliver."

There is absolutely nothing plain about this man.

"Oliver. Nice name."

His smile crinkles his eyes oh-so attractively. "Had it all my life."

"Names kinda work that way, you know."

"I've heard that. I'll be sure to stop by the Second Chance when I move to town next week," he says with a smile as he turns away, heading for the pond once more.

He's moving here? This just gets better and better.

"It's a date," I call out and then scrunch my eyes shut in embarrassment. "Or not a date. Just a pop in to say hi. Or you know, whatever."

Why do I allow myself to speak?

He turns and directs his smile at me, this babbling woman at the side of the pond. He wades through the water, sunlight bouncing off the defined muscles in his back and strong legs before he dives under and begins his strong, rhythmic swimming stroke once more.

I'm not afraid to admit it. I watch him. With every stroke, my eyes are

trained on this gorgeous, god-like man as he glides through the water.

Who can blame me? Oliver is quite something to look at. And he's moving to Hunter's Creek.

Chapter 4

Marlowe



I can hear them before I see them: the so-called Hunter’s Creek Ladies’ Committee, a group of self-appointed busybodies with gossip pumping through their veins, who love nothing more than a juicy story. Better yet, they love to be intricately involved in a juicy story, pulling strings in a matchmaking dance.

Mrs. Ashbridge, Mrs. Jacobson, and Mrs. Sommerfeld are three friends, born and bred in Hunter’s Creek, and my 9:00 AM regulars every Monday through Friday here at the Second Chance Café.

They chatter amongst themselves, sharing town gossip and probably figuring out whose lives to meddle with next, giggling like a group of high school girls.

“—I swear it, Suzie. Tanya saw them canoodling in the library. Didn’t you, Tanya?” Mrs. Sommerfeld says.

“I can neither confirm nor deny,” Mrs. Jacobson replies as she nods her head, telling anyone who cares to look at her that she is in fact absolutely confirming the aforementioned canoodling. Between whom I cannot tell you, but knowing these three, I’m certain I’m about to find out.

“Morning, ladies,” I say to them with a bright smile. “What can I get you today?”

“Marlowe, aren’t you looking delightful in that pretty blouse?” Mrs. Jacobson says. “You’ve always had a terrific sense of style. Hasn’t she, ladies?” The other women open their mouths to reply but they barely have time to respond before Mrs. Jacobson continues. “I think it’s because you had that fancy job in Seattle for all those years. I know Penelope O’Mara has a nice selection of frocks and blouses and whatnot at her store down the street, but a big city like Seattle sure has a lot of choices for a young thing like you. Doesn’t the pale blue look pretty with your auburn hair? Where did you get this one?”

“Oh, I can’t remember,” I reply, glancing down at my cotton blouse over which I’m wearing my Second Chance Café apron. “Ann Taylor, I think? Or Nordstrom? I shopped all over.”

Against my will my mind turns to when I’d last worn this shirt. I’d paired it with my navy-blue jacket and pencil skirt that day at work. I remember how Mike had taken me to the copy room to steal a kiss because he’d told me I looked too good to resist. I remember how I’d felt so strong and sexy and desired.

My chest tightens. This blouse might need to get rotated to the back of my wardrobe.

I pull my lips into a smile, pushing the memory from my mind. No point dwelling on the past. What’s done is done. I’ve moved on, never again to make the mistake of falling for the wrong man. Particularly if we work together.

A bad move. A very bad move.

“Don’t you want to know who Tanya saw canoodling in the library yesterday?” Mrs. Sommerfeld asks. “It’s juicy.”

“You know I don’t go for gossip much. What can I get you ladies today?” I repeat. “Your usuals?”

It falls on deaf ears.

“Nancy Molloy and Dwayne Batten,” she declares with satisfaction.

“As in the grocer and nice Mr. Molloy’s widow?” I ask in surprise, despite myself. They’ve both got to be well into their 80s.

“The very same. Can you believe it?”

“Oh, I can. I called it weeks ago,” Mrs. Jacobson declares.

“Only because you’d seen them giggling together in the historical romance section the week before,” Mrs. Ashbridge replies. “It’s the covers, you know. All those corsets and heaving bosoms. It’s enough to make anyone

giggle.”

Mrs. Jacobson simply smiles at her friends. “You all know I have an intuition for this kind of thing.”

“Not as strong as Sheila’s,” Mrs. Sommerfeld replies, referring to my aunt and owner of this coffeehouse. “Sheila was the mastermind behind Marlowe’s sister and Gabriel Hartmann’s romance, you know. She always knew they were meant to be together, and she made it happen at the Summer Festival with her karaoke magic.”

“Getting Ryn and Gabe to sing *Islands in the Stream* at the town festival was my idea, my karaoke magic, I think you’ll find,” Mrs. Jacobson rebuffs.

Mrs. Sommerfeld shakes her head. “No, it was Sheila’s.”

“Mine.”

“Sheila’s.”

“Mine,” Mrs. Jacobson grinds out, her jaw set.

Someone needs to break this up before it develops into a purse slinging situation right here in the Second Chance.

“Is it the usual today, ladies?” I ask for the third time. Really, it’s a good thing the film crew left town last year or the line would be stretching out the door and winding down Main Street by now.

“Three cups of coffee,” Mrs. Jacobson instructs.

“The usual.” I place three mugs on the counter and begin to pour in the coffee.

“Plus, I’ll take one of those delicious looking slices of your aunt’s apple pie,” Mrs. Jacobson says.

“Good choice.” I busy myself with cutting the first slice of the pie I myself baked early this morning and place it on a plate.

“What about the keto, Suzie? Aren’t you still watching your carbs?” She looks at me and explains, “You need to do that on the keto: watch your carbs. We still are. Aren’t we, Dana?”

“If by ‘watching carbs’ you mean eating a donut before anyone looks, then yes, Dana is,” Mrs. Jacobson quips, a conspiratorial smile creeping across her face.

“You said you weren’t going to tell,” Mrs. Sommerfeld complains.

Mrs. Jacobson shrugs.

“I might only have had one, but you had two!”

Mrs. Ashbridge’s eyes widen into UFOs as they dart between her friends. “You did?”

They both give remorseful nods.

Mrs. Sommerfeld sighs. "I wish donuts and apple pie weren't carbs."

"But they are," Mrs. Ashbridge says in a clipped tone, her face looking like she just sucked on a bitter lemon. I bet she's feeling superior right now, having stuck with The Keto as they like to call it.

Mrs. Jacobson sighs. "No pie for me today."

"Good girl," Mrs. Ashbridge says with an approving nod.

"Now, Marlowe, before I forget, I need to get you signed up on the Town Brightening Committee," Mrs. Jacobson begins. "We need all the able hands we can get to spruce this town up before Hollywood turns up for the big movie premiere in a couple weeks. Ryn and Harper and their lovely boyfriends, Gabe and Christopher, have signed up already. You're the last Cole sister on my list."

"I'll gladly help. What is it you need me to do?"

"I'm not sure right now, but I'll let you know."

A scream-like sound of a bandsaw pollutes the air and I glance through the open door and across the street at what was a knitting and crochet shop run by Naomi Burton up until a month ago. Mrs. Burton was a kindly elderly lady who loved to share her passion for knitting and crochet with the people of Hunter's Creek. She only closed the shop because her arthritis got to be too much. Now it's being transformed into a new place, and the town is abuzz with what it could be.

No one knows.

"Any further info on what the new store will be? I'm still hoping it's a pet store. That way I won't have to go to Cotown every time I need new birdseed for Alfred and Betty," Mrs. Sommerfeld says.

"It won't be a pet store. Hunter's Creek was put on the map, thanks to the movie people. No, it'll be something far more glamorous than kitty litter and foul-smelling dog food supplies," Mrs. Jacobson states with surety. "Like a nail place or a new hair salon. A fancy one."

"Maybe a boutique with designer clothes," Mrs. Sommerfeld suggests.

"Or a restaurant with a celebrity chef!" Mrs. Ashbridge says.

"We'll just have to wait to find out. I noticed a new sign above the door this morning, covered in black plastic," I tell them.

"I bet you it's a pet store. Or a restaurant," Mrs. Sommerfeld says.

"Care to put your money where your mouth is, Dana?"

"Money well spent, as far as I can see, Tanya," she quips.

Mrs. Jacobson rolls her eyes as she pays for the coffee and the three of them make their way to their usual table by the window.

Ryn appears at my elbow, tying her apron in place. "What's the haps?"

"You're late, that's what."

"Only 7 minutes," she protests. "Who's the pie for?"

"No one."

"I'll take that off your hands. Literally." She swoops the plate from the counter and before I can protest, picks up a fork and sticks a bite into her mouth.

"Ryn!"

"What?" she asks, her mouth full of pie. "I didn't have any breakfast."

The women notice Ryn and give her a cheery wave. She waves back at them before swallowing her mouthful and saying under her breath, "The Ladies' Committee giving you a hard time?"

"They were talking about how they matchmade you and Gabe at the Summer Festival."

"They kinda did, you know, in a way. Sowing a seed, I suppose." A smile creeps across her face and I know she's remembering last year's Summer Festival with a whole lot more positivity than I am. I went to it with Mike, aka Lying Scumbag Jerkface.

Not something I want to remember.

"The song worked on you two, huh?" I ask.

"Well, that and the fact I had just figured out he'd always been in love with me, ever since high school. What can I say?" She shrugs. "The guy's got great taste in women."

That's my kid sister: deeply lacking in self-confidence.

Seriously, if I could take half Ryn's self-belief, I'm sure life would feel a lot rosier than it does for me these days.

She places her plate of half-eaten pie on the counter and takes me by the arm. "Come with me."

"What? Where?"

She doesn't answer, and instead drags me over to the table where the three members of the Ladies' Committee are still deep in conversation.

"Hi there, ladies," Ryn says with a sweet smile.

"There she is," Mrs. Ashbridge replies, beaming. "Our lovely Ryn."

"How's that gorgeous boyfriend of yours?" Mrs. Sommerfeld asks.

"Perfect," Ryn replies. "How would you like a new project? Someone

else to work your magic on?”

What is my sister up to?

“Always,” Mrs. Jacobson replies.

“Who did you have in mind?” Mrs. Sommerfeld asks.

Ryn stands back and gestures at me as though she’s a host on a TV gameshow.

She has got to be kidding me.

All eyes turn to me.

My sister is so dead.

“You are so going to get it,” I grind out under my breath.

“Who, me?” Ryn’s fake halo is gleaming.

“Marlowe Cole. What a terrific idea!” Mrs. Sommerfeld claps her hands together. “Now, who can we set her up with?”

“Oh, I know!” Mrs. Ashbridge says. Her face drops. “No, wait. Not him. He’s got gout. And a bad leg.”

“Are you meaning Kyle Bradshaw? Because I saw him trying on a pair of size 13 high heels last week in Cotown,” Mrs. Jacobson says.

“Did you really? Ooooh!” Mrs. Sommerfeld exclaims. “Is he gay?”

“Just because he likes to wear high heels doesn’t make him gay, you know,” Mrs. Jacobson says in a superior tone. “I’ve been to San Francisco.”

Geez. A cross-dressing man with large feet, a bad leg, and gout—who may or may not be gay?

Let me at ’im.

“Look, as kind as you all are, I don’t want to be matchmade with anyone, not after...you know.” I take a step back from the women and glare at Ryn who seems to be finding this whole situation—this situation of her making—highly entertaining.

“Oh, honey, we know,” Mrs. Ashbridge purrs.

“We feel so bad for you. He seemed like such a nice man. It’s such a shame things didn’t work out between you two.” Mrs. Jacobson is not being the least bit subtle as she fishes for gossip.

Although Ryn and Gabe know why I ended things with Mike—they were with me when I caught him red-handed with his wife at the Zorb park, after all—the only other person I’ve confessed the full story to is my other sister, Harper. If the Ladies’ Committee got a hold of the actual circumstances of our breakup, it would wipe all gossip about the octogenarian library canoodling and everyone everywhere in this town would know what a royal

screw up I am.

Better for them to think I've got my life together and have just had a bit of bad luck in the romance department.

Ryn scoffs and I glare at her, just in case she decides to offer even a glimmer of the actual story.

"There's no point dwelling on the past," she says. "Mike who, am I right? My sis is over him and moving on. Which is precisely where you ladies come in with your expert matchmaking abilities."

Did I mention my kid sister is *so dead*?

"I'm happy just being on my own, running this place." And fantasizing about hot men in ponds, of course, but I'm not exactly going to mention Oliver to the Ladies' Committee. Don't give them any fodder. "And anyway, I thought you might be talking about the big news that the premiere of the movie is going to be held right here in Hunter's Creek."

I'll admit it. I'm trying to deflect attention away from me. And a movie premiere in Hunter's Creek is not only genuine gossip but it's not something that's ever happened in this town ever. It's big news!

But my deflection falls on deaf ears.

Mrs. Jacobson gives a wave of her hand. "Yesterday's news, Marlowe. Three months ago, to be precise. But finding you a man? Now that's what I call newsworthy."

Chapter 5

Oliver



I watch the woman in the pale blue blouse and slim-fitting skirt, with a pair of high heels on her feet, as she locks up the coffeehouse across the street and walks to her car. I recognize her as the girl I met at the pond on my visit here last month. Marlowe Cole, the swimmer who refused to swim.

I picture her smiling up at me that day, squinting in the sun, her hair collected in a messy bun atop her head, the pale skin of her bare shoulders lightly freckled. She's beautiful, I'll grant her that. Beautiful and interesting. Like the actress Jessica Chastain.

But I'm not here for the girl.

It's just after four in the afternoon and I scrape my hand across my stubble-lined jaw as she climbs into her car and drives away.

Beautiful and interesting or not, closing at 4:00 is total amateur hour. Not that I'm complaining. Steamy Coffee's business hours will be one of many points of difference between a small, independently owned place and our slick, streamlined operation. Sure, the marketing department may have gone with the guy in the open flannel shirt, his abs so defined they assault your eyes, but this town is begging to be pulled into the current century. It's crying out for a professionally run urban coffeehouse with consistent, quality food and beverages that go beyond drip coffee.

I'm sure the Second Chance Café is delightfully homey and quaint, and doubtlessly includes a bunch of elderly regulars who like to sit and read books from its overstuffed bookshelf as they while away their retirement over a cup of substandard coffee. With us in town, the Second Chance Café won't be offering anyone a Second Chance, let alone serving those people coffee. I know. That's just the way it goes. Well, usually, anyway.

But the place can't make much of a profit, and although I never delight in seeing local places go out of business, Ms. Cole looks to me like she's made for much bigger and brighter things. She'll land on those high heel-clad feet of hers once we attract her customers.

Gorgeous women like her always do.

My conscience, the part of me not trained by my mother, stings. I push it away. This is business. Straightforward. Dog eat dog. That's what Melody Langdon would say, anyway.

The whine of Dave's bandsaw pulls me back into the store, and I turn to assess the status of the installation.

The spacious layout will include tables and comfortably soft seating, the black and gray color scheme, with hints of green and blue, welcoming patrons into this space as they peruse the backlit menu displays behind the counter. Next to the menu, you'll find images of happy, sexy young couples enjoying their daily brew. Our marketing department describes this look as both welcoming and aspirational, and having overseen many such installations throughout the country, Steamy Coffee Hunter's Creek will provide the same feel our customers expect.

We always try to include some local flavor in our sites and our research team informed us that Hunter's Creek is known for three things: lumber, artisan glass, and more recently, a Hollywood invasion. Dave, a local builder, is currently putting the final touches to what we like to call the local showcase. We've got a local glass blower's work, some polished timber boxes, and a film reel and fake camera.

I'm certain the locals will appreciate the nod to their unique Hunter's Creek flavor. And if not, as long as they buy our coffee and snacks, I'll be good.

As Dave places the final piece of the display into position, I make my way past the stacked tables and chairs, past the huge slab of local wood we used to make the counter, to my office. When we took over the lease on this place, we had to remove all the detritus from the previous owner's

stockroom. Boxes of wool and oversized plastic needles my sister, Olena, had to explain were for knitting. Why you'd want to knit anything in 21st century America is beyond me. But this is small town Washington, where the need to move with the rest of the world for the last thirty-plus years has not been felt.

What a girl like Marlowe Cole is doing here, power dressing like she's on Wall Street, is a total mystery.

And here I am thinking about her again. I need to kick it before it becomes a habit. I can't afford to allow anything to distract me here. I may not be my mom's favorite son, but I'm no second best, either. I'll crack this market and show her and the rest of the management team that Oliver Langdon delivers results.

"It's looking good, Ollie. Like every other Steamy Coffee I've been to, of course."

I turn to see Olena smiling at me, her 2-year-old son balanced on her hip. In her wide leg slacks and blue and white striped top she looks like an advertisement for motherhood: young, pretty, and happy.

I collect her in a hug. I breathe in her familiar floral scent. "Hey there, Zander. How's my favorite nephew?" I tickle him under his chin and am rewarded with a giggle.

"Uncie Orrie," he says with a grin.

"When did you get here?"

"We just arrived. This town is so gorgeous! No wonder Freida Roil wanted to film her latest movie here. All the old, historic buildings and charming boutiques, and the town square is just adorable. It's like the town on *Gilmore Girls*, only set in a huge forest and full of hot guys walking around in flannel shirts."

"Aren't you happily married?" I ask on a laugh.

"Yes, but I'm not blind."

"Being a guy, I've never watched a single episode of *Gilmore Girls*, nor have I noticed how hot the men are, so I'll have to trust you on that one, sis. But yeah, it's a cute place—perfect for the opening of a new Steamy Coffee."

She smiles at me and Zander says something totally undecipherable, to which my sister responds, "You're right, honey. This is Uncle Olly's new coffeeshop."

"Did he really just ask that?"

She shrugs, her grin wide. "Sure."

"Speaking of men in flannel, have you seen the images behind the

counter?”

“Take me to them,” she instructs.

We wander back into the coffeeshop where Dave is now tidying up his tools, and I introduce him to Olena.

“Oh, we met already, didn't we Dave?” Olena says. “Zander was quite taken with his electric drill.”

“Most kids are. My own kids want to get into my tools, which is why I gotta lock 'em away.”

“Power tools and children under five don't mix, huh?” I ask with a smile.

“Power tools and any child don't mix,” Dave tells me, his tone stern.

Olena and I share a look.

Note to self: Dave isn't a joker.

“I'll, ah, keep that in mind,” I say. I regard the finished display. “It looks great. Thanks for your hard work. Come back on opening day and we'll be sure to give you free coffee for you and your family.” I correct myself. “Not for your kids, of course. I'm sure caffeine and kids don't mix, am I right?”

“You got that right,” Dave replies as he clips his toolbox together. “Got a vacuum? I'll get rid of all this sawdust for you.”

“I got it. Thanks again for your hard work.”

“No problem.”

Dave says his goodbyes and slips out the back door.

“I assume he's signed an NDA?” Olena asks.

“Oh, yeah. We don't want anyone in this town knowing who we are until the big reveal.”

“Smart. So where are these men in flannel shirts?”

“Hold on.” I slip behind the counter and flick the light switch. Immediately, the menu overhead lights up, illuminating the impossibly perfect 6-pack abs of the model, his red plaid flannel shirt hanging off his ridiculously broad shoulders.

“Is that you?” she asks with a smirk.

“Sure is. And that's my beautiful girlfriend beside me.” I pull my lips into a line as I realize what I've just said. Sure, it was a flippant joke made to my sister, but it cuts a little close.

“Have you seen her?” Olena's voice is soft.

I shake my head. “She made her choice and it wasn't me.”

“What if—?”

I don't let her finish her question. “I know where you're going with this,

and I don't want to hear it. Carla and I are over and done. There's no going back. Not after what happened.”

“She came to see me last Sunday. I think she regrets leaving you. Actually, I know she does.”

“Olena—”

“Would you at least talk to her, Ollie? She seems so sad without you.”

I flick the light switch off and with the brown paper on the windows blocking most of the natural light, we're plunged into semi-darkness.

“Should I take that as a no?”

“What do you think?”

She reaches out and places her hand on my arm. “That's what I was hoping you would say. You deserve a whole lot better than her and what she did to you.”

“Why did you bring it up then?”

“Because she asked me to and we were college roommates and I kind of feel responsible for the fact that you fell in love with her in the first place.”

I let out a bitter laugh. “Do I wish I'd never met her? Of course, but you can't blame yourself for that.”

“Duh. If it wasn't for me, you never would have met her and Robert... well, Rob would still be here. So, yeah. I do blame myself.”

“You're right. I blame you, too.”

She blinks at me for a moment before she realizes I'm kidding. She bats me on the arm. “Don't do that to me.”

I shrug. “You're an easy target, sis.”

“Hey, is it true what mom said? You've got Leonardo Finch coming here for a photo op on the day of the movie premiere?”

I had swallowed my pride and reached out to Leo. He wasn't exactly easy to pin down, but when I mentioned I'd be in Hunter's Creek for his premiere, he raved about how great the little town is and how much he liked the iced coffee from the Second Chance Café. Of course I'd told him that iced coffees from Steamy Coffee were free for life, and I even got him to agree to a photo op at the shop before he walks the red carpet.

“It's not what you know but who you know, you know.”

She lets out a laugh. “Good for you. Hey, do you want to get out of here? I've been told there's a pond nearby and one of us needs to burn up some energy.” She tickles Zander's belly and he squirms and giggles.

At the mention of the pond, my mind turns once again to Marlowe in her

sundress, her face flushed as we chatted. It was about this time of day when I met her. I wonder if she'll be there now?

I clear my throat. "You go ahead. I've got a lot of work to do."

"That's a shame."

"You might not realize this, but we are opening up in just four days' time. We can't all be on indefinite maternity leave from the company."

"Hey! It's only been a couple years."

"I'm messing with you. Go. Have fun. I'll come with you next time."

"Tomorrow. Promise me."

I smile at her. "Sure. Tomorrow."

She lifts Zander up toward the ceiling and he grins down at her. "Do you wanna go swimming?"

Zander's face lights up and he lets out a squeal of delight.

Olena places a kiss on my cheek as the two of them say goodbye and walk out the back door, and I'm left alone, not thinking about the happy couple flanking the menu above my head.

And definitely not thinking about Marlowe Cole.

Chapter 6

Marlowe



Despite knowing I shouldn't be doing it, I pull up Instagram and search for Mike's name. It doesn't take long to find him. I look at his feed way too often. I know it's not good for me, to see him continuing his life without me, doing the same things we did together. But even though it's been a few months, what he did to me still hurts.

A quick scroll tells me absolutely nothing. There are no pictures of his wife, no statement about me and our relationship's demise—not that I would expect that from a man who was having a clandestine affair with a co-worker. Mike's world looks unchanged.

Mine's been turned on its head.

"Marlowe, dear!"

I look up from my phone to see Mrs. Jacobson as she totters through the door, a blur of sensible tweed. "You'll never guess who I met just now," she says before I even manage to utter my hello.

I smile knowing, just *knowing*, who she's just met.

"A fine young man, new to town, who I am certain is looking to fall in love with someone just like you," she announces with satisfaction, her face flushed.

And there it is.

I've got a choice right now. I could play dumb, going along with her game. Or I could come clean and tell her I've already met this "fine young man" of hers because, in a town the size of Hunter's Creek, it's not exactly a stretch to imagine that the guy I met at the pond and Mrs. Jacobson's man are one in the same.

I go for dumb. Don't judge me.

I hide my phone under the counter. "A fine young man? That's newsworthy. Tell me all about him, starting with how he looks."

She doesn't need to be asked twice, and I'll admit, it will be nice to hear her describe Oliver, my mystery man from the pond.

"Well, he's tall, probably a couple of inches over 6 foot, but not super tall like that ex of yours." She makes a face, telling me she is unequivocally on my side in my breakup with Mike. "He could have played basketball, he was so tall."

Confused, I ask, "Who? Mike or this new guy?"

"Mike, of course. The handsome young man I met today is normal tall. Like Gabe, only he doesn't really look like our Gabe. Not that Gabe's not a handsome man, of course, because he is. But this man looks like he could be from Italy or Greece or even in a magazine advertisement for cologne. He's that good looking."

I'm quite certain Mr. Mystery Pond Man Oliver would love to be described in such terms. "He does sound exotic and interesting," I encourage.

"Definitely exotic and interesting. He's got intense, expressive eyes that hold a mysterious allure, and he is awfully, awfully charming."

I bite back a smile. Expressive eyes that hold a mysterious allure? Mrs. Jacobson sure is waxing lyrical.

"He sounds so good, I'm surprised you didn't snatch him up for yourself, Mrs. Jacobson."

She waves her hand in the air and lets out a girlish giggle. It's a sound I have never heard from her lips in the entire time I've known her, and considering she's been the town librarian since I can remember, that's a long time. "I'll be honest, if I were your age, wild horses couldn't hold me back."

I widen my eyes at an image of Mrs. Jacobson being held back by a team of horses as she tries to get to Oliver and his mysterious allure. "That good, huh?"

Mrs. Jacobson gives a slow nod of her head, her lips curving into a Cheshire cat grin. "I think the two of you will be perfect together."

Mrs. Jacobson, newfound leader of the Hunter's Creek Ladies' Committee—now that Aunt Sheila is out of town—wants to matchmake me with the new guy in town? *Shocker.*

Not that I'm complaining, exactly. She's right that he's awfully good looking, and there was definite chemistry between us when we met at the pond. Definite flirty chemistry.

And I can't forget that I've seen him looking way too hot in just swim trunks. Even if I wanted to. The image of him is burned into my retinas.

"Do you think Oliver will have anything to say about you matchmaking us?" I ask.

Mrs. Jacobson's smile drops, her eyes as wide as dinner plates. "You know him?"

Dang it! I just said his name.

"I'll admit we met at the pond last week." I shrug. "Small town. Not too many secrets."

"Why didn't you say?"

"I wasn't sure he was the same person you'd met," I fib, because of course he is. How many gorgeously hot new men in Hunter's Creek are there?

Just one, people. Just one.

She's undeterred by my lack of transparency. "Did he tell you what he's doing here in town? Because he was a little cagey with me, even though I asked him politely."

"No."

"Did he tell you he's single?"

"No," I reply breezily, ignoring the flush creeping up my neck.

"Oh, don't play coy with me, young lady. I saw the way you lit up when I talked about him. It's fate, I tell you. Fate!"

I roll my eyes, biting back a smile. "I think you've been reading too many romance novels, Mrs. Jacobson."

"We'll see about that." She taps her nose and throws me a wink. "Everyone needs to eat, pray, love to get over a breakup. Like in the movie."

"I can get on board with the eating and the praying, but the love?" I shake my head. "Not for me. Not any time soon."

Her smile grows in wattage. "We'll see, Marlowe, dear. We'll see." She reaches into her purse and pulls out some flyers. "I almost forgot. I saw these at the market and noticed you don't have any here."

She hands me the flyers and I glance down to read them.

Grand Opening on July 24th: Where Aromas Unravel Secrets. Where Steam and Dreams Converge.

Ambiguous.

“What are these for?” I ask.

“The place opening up across the street, of course! It’s tomorrow and we’re all going. Promise me you’ll be there?”

“At the opening of a place that promises to unravel aroma secrets? Are you kidding? I wouldn’t miss it,” I deadpan. Because *ugh*. This marketing is cheesier than a Frenchman’s refrigerator.

“Everyone’s going to be there. I wonder why you didn’t get any flyers?”

“Maybe Ryn cleared them away?”

I don’t recall having seen the flyers in here at all. Perhaps the new proprietor missed us?

“I wonder what sort of business it is? Aromatherapy? That could explain the aroma, but steam and dreams converging?”

“Maybe it’s a day spa that serves chocolate cake?” I suggest and Mrs. Jacobson laughs.

“Steam and dreams! I get it.”

My sister, Harper, breezes in on her boyfriend, Christopher’s, arm—all laughter, love, and bouncing curls.

“Hello there, you two,” Mrs. Jacobson says. “Aren’t you both looking so very happy. Isn’t it wonderful to be in love?” She shoots me a meaningful look, telegraphing that we’ve moved from steam baths and chocolate cake back to her matchmaking plans.

I roll my eyes. The Ladies’ Committee might have had a hand in matchmaking Ryn and Gabe last summer, but they didn’t have anything to do with Harper and Christopher’s romance, as far as I know.

“Hi, Mrs. Jacobson,” Harper says with her pretty smile.

“How are you, Mrs. Jacobson?” Christopher asks in his very polite way.

“Oh, it’s not me you should be asking.” Mrs. Jacobson gives me another meaningful look and both Harper and Christopher regard me questioningly.

“What’s going on, sis?” Harper asks.

I open my mouth to reply when a typically overzealous Mrs. Jacobson jumps in ahead of me. “I was just telling Marlowe here all about this fine young man I’ve met who I think will be just perfect for her.” She claps her hands together as though it’s already a done deal.

“You did, huh?” Harper’s eyes are wide as they land on mine.

I shrug in response. Harper knows as well as I do that Mrs. Jacobson and her tribe love nothing more than to meddle in the lives of the townsfolk—particularly the single ones among us. Considering there aren’t many single people living in town, they tend to focus all their efforts on an unfortunate few. I’ve clearly joined their ranks.

Lucky, lucky me.

“Now, I didn't come here to gossip,” Mrs. Jacobson says and not a single person in the coffeehouse believes her. “But I did want to mention Oliver to you, dear. It’s my turn to get the coffee and treats, so I’ll take three cups of coffee. I’ll also have one to go when I’m done, please, Marlowe dear. I’m training a new librarian today and I think we could all do with some caffeine.”

“Is the new librarian the man you’re matchmaking my sister with?” Harper asks.

“Heavens no!” Mrs. Jacobson barks out a laugh. “I’ll have to tell her that. She’ll find it very amusing, I’m sure.”

I prepare her order and as she pays, she leans in and says, “Let me know if you need any help with Oliver. The town festival is coming up, the day before the big movie premiere, as I’m sure you know. Ample opportunity for matchmaking.”

“I’ll be sure to let you know if I need any help.”

Mrs. Jacobson sashays to her table. I notice Mrs. Ashbridge and Mrs. Sommerfeld arrive and make a beeline for her, throwing me friendly waves and calling out “hello!” as they sit.

“Tell me everything,” Harper instructs.

“How about I order us some coffees and I’ll see you at the table, honey?” a clearly uncomfortable Christopher suggests.

“You don't want to hear the gossip about the new guy in town and how he's going to sweep Marlowe right off her feet, honey?” Harper asks on a laugh.

“I’ll leave that up to you.” Christopher grins at her as he places his coffee order.

Once he leaves to find a table, Harper raises her eyebrows at me in expectation. “Do you want the Hunter’s Creek Ladies’ Committee matchmaking you with some random stranger?”

“Oliver’s not a stranger. I met him when I went swimming at the pond.

He's...nice enough." The flush I'd successfully held back only moments ago returns to my cheeks as I try—and fail—to dispel an image of him in his swim trunks, his skin glistening, his eyes held intently on mine.

"Is that why you're blushing? Because he's *nice enough*?"

Instinctively, I lift my hand to my cheek. It's like it has its own internal radiator and it's set to high.

"He's cute, okay? Handsome, actually, and flirty." I get lost in the memory before I shake myself out of it. "But it doesn't matter because I'm not looking for someone." I turn away and prepare Harper and Christopher's coffee.

"Let me guess: you're done with men?"

"Something like that."

"Figures. But the thing is, Marlowe, love comes along when you least expect it. Look at me and Topher."

I swing around. "Love?" I scoff. "I said I thought he was cute, not that I'm going to fall in love with the guy."

Harper leans her elbows on the counter. "Honey, not all men are like Mike, you know."

I twist my mouth. "I guess."

"I get it. He hurt you. He made you think you were falling in love. He fooled you."

"Harper, he fooled us all. No one suspected he was—" I can't bring myself to say the words, and anyway, if there's one thing I've learned it's that walls have ears in this town. If I don't want anyone to know that Mike was married, then I just need to keep my mouth shut about it.

Harper chews on her lip. "He did seem really into you."

I let out a heavy sigh. "It was an Oscar-winning performance. By a total snake. In an Armani suit."

She holds her hands up in the air. "Now I've got the image stuck in my head of a snake wearing a suit, holding one of those gold statues in its hand."

"Snakes don't have hands."

"They don't wear suits, either," she replies gently.

When I don't crack a smile, she reaches out and rubs my forearm. "You'll know when you're ready."

Sorrow stabs my chest. "My judgement is not exactly reliable these days. Look at how I messed things up."

"You didn't know he was—" she glances around to ensure no one is

listening, “—*married*,” she whispers.

“No, but he was also my boss. It was inevitable that it would blow up in my face.”

“So, let me help you. I’ll be your wingman. Who is this Oliver guy, anyway?”

As if conjured by some cosmic force, the air shifts around us and I feel a presence. I flick my gaze from my sister to Oliver, who is now filling the doorway.

He’s here? Mr. Hot Pond Guy, aka Oliver, aka Mrs. Jacobson’s “fine young man” is here in my aunt’s coffeehouse?

Our eyes meet from across the room and a slow smile curves his lips.

My heart stutters. Actually stutters. Which is ridiculous. Sure, he’s cute, and his body is definitely made for swim trunks, but it’s not like we have some strong connection between us. We haven’t dated. We haven’t kissed. Heck, we haven’t done a single thing together, other than stand awkwardly at the pond’s edge and talked. Okay, flirted, at least for me. But that’s as far as it’s gone.

But still, here he is, doing weird things to my heart as he makes his way across the room toward me, his every movement tracked by the nosy patrons, most of all the Ladies’ Committee.

I swallow hard, wiping my hands on my apron as he makes his way toward me. Up close he’s even more striking than I remember. I clench my hands under the counter, my knees weak.

I’m being silly. He’s just a man. Nothing more.

“Is that *him*?” Harper asks with a conspiratorial whisper, and I give her a short, sharp nod in assent.

He reaches the counter. Wearing a casual jacket over a plain button-up shirt, next to Harper, he’s tall, broad, and oh-so masculine.

“Well, hello there, Marlowe.” His voice is warm honey, dripping with sweet, sweet charm.

“Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world,” I say, trying to sound in control.

He completes the sentence with, “she walks into mine. Although in this case, it would have to be *he* walks into mine.”

“It would,” I breathe out.

“Great movie.”

He likes *Casablanca* and he looks like that? You’re not playing fair,

Universe.

“It’s my favorite,” I tell him.

“What a coincidence. It’s my favorite, too. Rick and Isla. The great love story that didn’t quite work out, although it should have.”

Be still, my beating heart.

“Those pesky Nazis.”

He huffs out a laugh. The sound does things to my belly.

I put my coffeehouse manager hat on to stop from falling for this guy right here, right now. “How can I help you, Oliver?”

“I thought I’d come check out your coffeeshop. I hear your pies are award-winning.”

I arch a brow. “Where did you hear that?”

“This gorgeous woman I met at the pond, I believe.”

He thinks I’m gorgeous?

“The Second Chance pies are the best in the county,” Harper says. She extends her hand. “Hi, I’m Harper Cole. You’re new in town.”

“Oliver. And yes, I am,” he replies smoothly.

I notice again that he doesn’t give his last name. Is that weird? It seems weird. But then again, maybe it’s one of those long, unpronounceable ones and he gets tired of having to correct people when they get it wrong.

He glances between Harper and me. “You’re related?”

“Sisters,” we both reply before smiling.

“You sure look alike.”

“Have you moved here or are you just visiting or what?” Harper asks.

“I’ve moved here. At least for now,” he replies.

Cryptic.

“Does that mean you’re here for a project and then leaving or is it more like you’ve just moved here and you’re trying to decide whether to stay?” Harper asks.

His smile broadens and I can’t help but notice how the skin around his eyes crinkles, making him even more handsome. “That’s a lot of questions for just meeting someone. Is everyone like that in this town because I was grilled by a woman out on the street earlier today.”

“That’ll be Mrs. Jacobson,” I say, gesturing at the Ladies’ Committee table, who promptly smile and wave at him, shooting me meaningful looks. “She’s...inquisitive.”

“That’s a word for it,” Oliver replies and we share a smile that does

terrible things to my pulse.

“She’s harmless enough. She just likes to know what’s going on in the town,” Harper explains.

“I guess in a small place like this someone new moving to town is a point of interest.”

“A ‘point of interest’. Yup,” Harper says and I shoot her look. The last thing I want Oliver to know is that Mrs. Jacobson and her cronies are already matchmaking him and me. Talk about awkward. I barely know the guy.

“Well, Oliver, it’s great to meet you. I guess I’ll see you ‘round town,” Harper says.

“Great to meet you, too,” Oliver replies, and Harper throws me a wink before she joins Christopher at his table.

“What’ll you have?” I ask.

“I’ll have a vanilla cappuccino, thanks.”

“Here it’s just coffee, either hot or iced.”

He gestures at the old coffee machine that hasn’t worked since I can remember. It just sits on the counter, collecting dust. “Doesn’t your machine do cappuccinos?”

“It’s more of a decoration than anything actually practical.”

His eyes gleam. “Just like me.”

I duck my head to hide a smile, grabbing a cup.

“I figured your machine was just broken the last time I came in, which is why I had a cup of drip coffee.”

“No. It doesn’t work. Coffee with cream?”

“Sounds good to me. I’ll take a slice of your world-famous pie, too.”

“Apple, cherry, or rhubarb and strawberry?”

“I’ll go for the rhubarb and strawberry, thanks. You’ve gotta live dangerously sometimes, right? How much do I owe you?” He pulls his wallet from the pocket inside his jacket.

“It’s on the house.”

His gaze slides to mine, warming me to my toes. He waits a beat before he replies, “Please. Allow me to pay. I want to.”

“Seriously. Take it as a ‘welcome to Hunter’s Creek’ for the new ‘point of interest’ everyone’s talking about.”

His lips lift into his heart-melting smile once more. “You sweet talker, you.”

I let out a girly giggle as my face flames hotter than a stovetop kettle.

Oliver grins as though he's enjoying my embarrassment, which he probably is. Seriously, I don't think I've blushed this much in front of a guy in my life. Not even Mike when he first started flirting with me in the office and it felt so very risqué.

I turn away to pour his coffee and place a slice of rhubarb and strawberry pie on a plate with some whipped cream. As I hand them to him, his fingers brush mine, igniting a spark of electricity that floods my veins.

Man! What is it about this guy? He's got my heart pinging and my hormones popping all over the place. I'm 28, not 13. I've brushed fingers with men before and not been at risk of a cardiac event.

I need to show Oliver that I'm not some simpering sycophant and am in fact a fully grown woman in control of myself, so I ask him, "You didn't tell me what you're doing in town?"

Still holding his pie, he leans a little closer to me and says, "If I told you, I'd have to shoot you, and I wouldn't want to shoot someone who makes pies that look as good as this."

"You haven't even tasted it."

"I'm sure if it tastes as good as it looks, it'll be absolutely delicious."

"Oh, it is. Believe me."

Are we still talking about the pie?

"I'm, ah, opening a new business. Across the street."

"Where Thelma Anderson's knitting shop used to be?"

"Judging by the amount of wool and knitting needles we needed to clear out, my answer is yes."

"That's so great. We'll be neighbors. What sort of store are you opening? It's been shrouded in mystery and everyone wants to know."

He taps the side of his nose. "Top secret, remember?"

"Got it."

"You should come to the grand opening."

"A grand opening is a bit fancy, isn't it?"

"Every store should have a grand opening, don't you think? Even the humblest."

"When's this grand opening of yours?"

"Tomorrow at 4:00 PM."

The flyers.

"I'll be there."

He holds up his coffee and plate. "Thanks for these. I won't forget it."

“You're welcome,” I murmur.

“It's been nice seeing you again, Marlowe.”

“You too, Oliver.”

He shoots me one more of his knee-weakening smiles before he turns and saunters off to a table by the window.

The Ladies' Committee erupts into a flurry of giggles and nudges, clearly thrilled at this turn of events.

But for once, I can't bring myself to roll my eyes at their antics. I'm too busy stealing glances at Oliver, wondering what may come with this mysterious man who doesn't want to give too much away. The man who might just make my move back to Hunter's Creek all the sweeter.

Chapter 7

Oliver



I can't help but smile as I glance around the slick, sophisticated interior, ready for the grand opening. It may look like every other Steamy Coffee across the country, with its color scheme and chrome accents, but I'm certain the locals will appreciate the nods to their unique Hunter's Creek character.

I check with the staff, ensuring they're ready to go as soon as those doors swing open at 4:00 PM sharp. Although we will employ locals soon enough, at Melody's suggestion, we brought in experienced staff from another branch to launch the place. Better if the opening of a new Steamy Coffee runs totally smooth—and it helps to keep things under wraps for the grand reveal, too.

I take a deep breath. The scent of freshly brewed coffee wafts through the air, mingling with the irresistible aroma of warm pastries, pumped through the store from the small kitchen out back to tempt our customers.

As exciting as it is to open a new branch, I'm finding it hard to shake the guilt. It's begun to gnaw at the corners of my mind, and it repeats the same name over and over.

Marlowe Cole.

The beautiful, intriguing woman who runs the coffeehouse across the street. She's been warm and welcoming toward me, and definitely flirty if that conversation we had a few days ago at her shop is anything to go by.

Now, I'm about to become her biggest competitor, and she has no idea. Guilt worms its way across my chest.

But the Hunter's Creek store isn't my first rodeo. I've done this a bunch of times before. I've rolled out a number of new sites across the country and there's always some collateral damage in the mix. I never feel good about it, but it's a fact of life. If you're going to succeed in business, your competition is probably going to have to deal with some tougher times.

I know that makes me the bad guy.

If this were a movie, I would be dressed all in black, an evil glint in my eye, and quite possibly a torture dungeon in my basement.

Okay, maybe the torture dungeon is taking things a little far, but you get the picture.

Oliver Langdon equals the villain in this story.

I'm the big corporate machine, wanting to make a profit from the locals' coffee habit, here to gobble up the small, independently-run, charming coffeehouse.

But it's my job. It's what I do.

And what's more, I volunteered to take this one on—and there's a lot riding on it. The little Gaulish village that the Romans couldn't conquer, only I'm going to conquer it. I need to make this a success. No question.

Beautiful and flirty coffeehouse owner or not.

I turn to see my sister, this time without Zander.

"Everyone's going to love it, Ollie," she says.

"Not everyone," I reply with a frown.

"Do you mean that quaint coffeehouse across the street? It's so cute! I took Zander there yesterday morning. They have the best pies."

"I know."

Olena's eyebrows lift. "Went to check out the competition, did you?"

I shrug. "Of course. Mom taught us well."

"It's a nice place and the woman who served me was so welcoming."

I think of Marlowe and that guilt-laced worm wriggles some more.

"I'm not feeling that great about setting up shop right across the street from them," I admit.

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about the Second Chance Café. They'll be fine. And besides, a little competition never hurt anyone, right?"

"Right," I agree half-heartedly, trying my best to convince myself that I'm not about to ruin Marlowe's life. Or at the very least, her business.

“Are you all set for the grand opening?”

“If not, we're in trouble because the door is open in less than 10 minutes.”
I run my fingers through my hair. As I said, there's a lot riding on this.

The anticipation throughout Hunter's Creek has been palpable. It seems the whole town is buzzing with excitement for Steamy Coffee's grand opening, and I can't help but feel a rush of pride at the thought of becoming the local hotspot.

Eight minutes later, I stand at the front door and look out at my sister and the assembled staff. “This is a big moment, guys. The first time we've opened a branch here in Hunter's Creek. I know the townsfolk are going to love us, so let's make them feel super welcome and give them a great evening.”

Everyone applauds and cheers, the atmosphere inside the coffeehouse full of anticipation and excitement.

This feeling never gets old, the rush I get when people flood through the doors for the very first time.

I instruct Tina and Naomi, two baristas from a nearby town's branch, to remove the paper from the windows as Olena flicks on the full lighting. And then I take a deep breath before I unlock the double doors and pull them open.

I'm met with a sea of people, eager to see what we've created. We'd dispersed our cryptic pre-opening marketing throughout the town the week before, creating a buzz, and now it's paying off.

“Hello, everyone!” I say in a booming voice to be heard over the chatter. “Welcome! I'm Oliver Langdon, the proprietor of this, our newest branch of Steamy Coffee. Come on inside and enjoy some great coffee and treats on us!”

People burst into animated chatter and I stand back to allow them to flood through the doors, where they're greeted by our staff in their Steamy Coffee uniforms, offering them free coffee and muffins. The sound of frothing milk and the aroma of freshly ground beans soon fills the air. The baristas craft cappuccinos, lattes, and mochas with expert precision, adding swirls of whipped cream and drizzles of syrup that add to the coffee's visual appeal—and taste.

Olena sidles up to me. “Tell me if I'm wrong, but I would say this opening is a resounding success.”

I look out at the customers milling around, sipping their coffees and sampling the mini muffins and cupcakes. The place is full and the atmosphere

is electric. “So far, so good.”

Without conscious thought I find my eyes scanning the crowd for one person in particular. But, of course she won't be here. Why would the woman who runs my main competition in town come to our grand opening?

The moment she sees this is a coffeehouse—a coffeehouse run by the new guy in town she's been flirting with—she'll not exactly have warm thoughts about me.

Best I forget about Marlowe Cole.

I wander around and introduce myself to the townsfolk, several of whom I've already met in my short time here. Some had already put two and two together, figuring out that I was the one responsible for this new place, although no one suspected it would be a coffeeshop.

“I feel like he's watching my every move,” a middle-aged woman says to her friends as she samples one of the mini muffins. I recognize the woman with short gray hair and bright blue glasses as the extremely nosy person I met in the town square. Mrs. Jacobson, I think she said her name was, although she asked me to call her Tanya.

“Who?” another woman in her group asks.

“Him. Up there. The one with all the muscles.” She gestures at the photo of the guy wearing an open red plaid flannel shirt with his impressive six-pack on display.

Tanya Jacobson moves from side to side as she looks up at his image. “You're right. He does. It's kind of creepy. He's got so many muscles.”

“It doesn't look natural. I bet he's on steroids,” one of the other women says.

“My sister-in-law is on steroids,” Mrs. Jacobson comments. “For her arthritis.”

“Different type, dear.”

I smile to myself. Fully aware that I'm eavesdropping, I begin to move away when I hear one of them ask, “I wonder if Marlowe's coming tonight?”

My heart sinks a little at the mention of her name. Well, it sinks and at the same time does a weird fluttery thing, like it doesn't want to see her but hopes she's here at the same time.

Weird.

“She said she was coming, although that was before we all knew what sort of place this is,” her friend replies, as though we're some sort of sketchy establishment, laundering money for the criminal underworld.

“Competition,” she hisses and her friends give knowing head nods.

Tanya Jacobson notices me loitering nearby and pulls me over to the group. Quite literally. She grabs me by my jacket sleeve and leads me firmly to her group. “Oliver, aren't you the dark horse? You never mentioned that you're here in town to open this place. And here you were flirting with Marlowe, the woman who runs your major competition.”

I open my mouth to protest when one of the women says, “We heard about the flirting.”

“Oh, yes. We *all* heard about the flirting,” the other agrees and all three of them regard me suspiciously, like I was flirting with Marlowe in an attempt to learn her café-related secrets or something, and not simply because she's a stunning woman.

I decide on what I hope is a disarming shrug. “What can I say? My competition is beautiful.”

There's a murmur of agreement among the group.

“Beautiful *and* single,” Tanya Jacobson says.

I'm being matchmade with my “major competition” now? People sure do move quickly in this town. Quickly and *intrusively*, that is.

I lift my lips into a smile. “I'll keep that in mind. Thank you, ladies. I didn't catch all of your names.”

“I'm Suzie Ashbridge,” the woman with the thick red glasses and curly gray hair says.

“And I'm Dana Sommerfeld,” the other woman in the group adds.

“And of course, you know me.” Tanya grins. “Did I hear you right that you're a Langdon? As in part of Melody Langdon's family?”

I hate this question. It makes me look as though I only got this job because I'm related to the boss, when in reality I work hard for the company and I deliver results.

“Melody Langdon is my mother.”

“Handsome *and* rich, huh?” One of the other women runs her gaze over me and I get the distinct feeling she's sizing me up as she assimilates this new information.

“Oliver, you must be so proud having a mother like Melody Langdon. I saw her on the cover of a magazine,” Tanya tells me.

“She's been on the cover of a few over the years.”

Mrs. Jacobson's smile is broad. “How wonderful for you.”

I shift my weight. My mother's public profile is one of a single-mom-

made-good, successful go-getter who stopped at nothing to become the wealthy and influential woman she is today. *And she did it all while rearing three adorable children!* The only problem with that picture is she was a lot more focused on her success than actually rearing her kids.

Not that I'm about to mention something like that.

Save it for your therapist. That's what Olena always says to me.

It's time for a change of subject.

I clap my hands together. "Now, ladies, have you put in your order for one of our special coffees with our friendly baristas, Tina and Naomi? They're on the house, and I can guarantee you'll love them."

"We'll be sure to do that, Oliver Langdon," Tanya Jacobson replies, clearly enjoying using my last name.

"Now that you're open, maybe there'll be a war between the two coffeeshops, right here in Hunter's Creek! Wouldn't that be something?" Suzie Ashbridge declares, her eyes wide with excitement.

They clearly are not ready to move on.

"Or maybe Marlowe and Oliver here will fall in love and merge their businesses," Dana Sommerfeld suggests.

That's not going to happen, I can tell them that right now.

I roll my eyes, but deep down, I can't help but wonder what it would be like to work alongside Marlowe Cole every day. I bet it would be a whole lot of things. Fun. Captivating. Distracting. Definitely distracting.

I force myself to shake off the ridiculous notion. Tonight is all about Steamy Coffee, not my increasingly confusing feelings for the competition.

"Don't you worry, Dana. The wheels are already in motion on that front," Tanya Jacobson says to her friends before she shoots me a little smile.

They are? What does that even mean?

I open my mouth to say something—even though I'm not sure what I'm going to say to this blatant attempt at matchmaking—when someone places their hand on my arm and introduces himself.

"You must be Oliver Langdon," says the man who bears more than a passing resemblance to the actor Jack Nicholson.

"I am, sir. I'm pleased to meet you," I reply as I take his hand in mine. "Go get those complimentary coffees, ladies," I say to the interrogators, who scurry off toward the counter.

"Calvin Cantor is the name. Used to own the mill until I sold it last year. Lived here in Hunter's Creek all my life, other than when I went to college

and onto business school. Great little town.”

Of course. I had learned about Mr. Cantor and the mill his grandfather established way back when. It's a part of the town's history, and the mill remains the single largest employer here, hence all the lumberjack types in their plaid flannel. “Well, it's great to meet a former Hunter’s Creek captain of industry.”

“I understand you’re the son of Melody Langdon, the owner of the entire Steamy Coffee chain.”

Word sure does get out.

“I am, Mr. Cantor, and she has entrusted me with the opening of this branch here in your fine town.”

“That's interesting. I would’ve thought she would put her top man at a bigger site in a large metropolitan area.”

He's assumed I'm my mother's favorite employee, when in reality I know that privilege rests with my brother, even after his untimely death.

“I asked for this site, actually.”

He looks me up and down. “Did you now?” He’s clearly sizing me up as some kind of weirdo who prefers to open a branch in a small town rather than a major site in some big city. “Not sure I approve of the marketing,” he says as he eyes the lit photos flanking the menu.

“We wanted to add some local flavor to our standard imaging, an ode to the history of the town,” I reply smoothly.

A guy wearing an open flannel shirt is an ode to the town history? Inside I'm cringing.

He takes a sip from his coffee mug. “This coffee is top notch. If we don't watch out, you're gonna put every café in town out of business.”

“We'll have to see how things play out, I guess.” I can't help glancing out the window and across the street.

“Mary's isn't great,” he says, naming the small place around the corner that seems to have no customers. “Although the food is great at the Second Chance across the street, thanks mainly to the cooking skills of its owner, Sheila Browning, but the coffee leaves much to be desired.”

“I thought it was Marlowe Cole’s place?” I reply, although I seem to recall Marlowe mentioning her aunt when we first met.

“She's running the place for her aunt. Came back from Seattle to do it, I'm told, although I don't know the precise ins and outs of it. What I do know is that Sheila’s husband is in a bad way. Cancer.” He adds in a lower voice,

“The bad one.”

I'm jeopardizing the livelihood of a woman who has entrusted her business to her niece while she helps her husband deal with cancer?

That guilt-laced worm doubles in size.

My mother always taught me to never get personally involved when I open a new site. She's right. If you keep the competition at arm's length, you avoid any messiness. Any guilt. You can rationalize that the people want what we're offering, a superior version of the local coffeehouse. Sure, that local coffeehouse might be family-run and it might have been here forever, but times change and people's tastes move on. And Steamy Coffee can become their new favorite place.

If I hadn't met Marlowe at the pond that time, if I hadn't felt an instant attraction to her, and if I hadn't acted on that attraction and gone to see her at the Second Chance, I wouldn't be personally involved. I could do my job. I could make this site a success. I could show my mother what I'm worth.

But here I am, finding myself concerned about how she'll feel about this new behemoth coffee chain opening up across the street. And more acutely, how she'll feel about me not warning her about it.

I excuse myself and make my way through the press of people to the counter where I check on the baristas. “Is everything under control here?” I ask.

“It's really going off in here, boss,” Naomi says as she pours more coffee beans into the machine. “We're a hit!”

“Duh. Everything's free. That's why it's so popular,” Tina explains.

“Isn't there a correlation between how popular opening night is and how many regulars a new site gains over the following weeks?” Naomi asks.

“There sure is, and it's our job to make them want to come back and become actual paying customers as of tomorrow morning,” I reply.

“We've got you, boss,” Naomi says with a grin.

“You know you can call me Oliver, right?”

“Sure thing, boss.” She gives me a wink.

I let out a laugh as I turn around and come face to face with Marlowe Cole.

I'm certain a hush falls over the crowd, as though they expect some kind of guns at dawn situation between us.

“Marlowe, hi,” I say, my voice sounding weird.

Her features are tight. “So, this is your new business, huh? A

coffeeshop.”

I plaster on a smile. “Sure is. Would you like a—”

She cuts me off. “But not just any coffeeshop. It's a Steamy Coffee, one of the biggest and most successful domestic coffeeshop chains.” Her eyes flash, flaming with anger.

I can't blame her.

I lower my voice. “Look, I get it. You're upset,” I begin.

“Upset? Try shocked or blindsided or...or lost for words.” She gestures around her. “Why didn't you tell me a couple of days ago when you came into the Second Chance? You didn't have the decency. You could have at least *warned* me.”

To my surprise, what I thought was shocked anger morphs into something worse. Much worse. Water pools in her eyes and she blinks it away, lifting her chin in defiance.

“Marlowe, I-I—” I stammer, taken aback by her sorrow.

Anger I can handle. Sorrow is a whole other ball park.

“Big chain coffeeshops push small, locally-owned places out of business all the time. I bet you knew that.”

Of course I knew that.

I square my shoulders. I've done nothing wrong. We have two marketing strategies when we launch a new site. We either keep it on the down low to create intrigue, or we shout about it. In Hunter's Creek we went for intrigue. Successfully, by the looks of things.

“Would you like a complimentary coffee?” I offer weakly. “Naomi or Tina can help you out.”

Her eyes glide to the baristas who smile at her, oblivious to the content of our conversation and the fact that Marlowe runs a competing coffeehouse—a coffeehouse that as of this moment is under serious threat.

Looking back at me, she shakes her head before she pushes her hair back from her face. “I'm good on coffee, thanks.” She throws me a final look before she makes her way through the people.

All eyes turn to me.

My face burns with embarrassment and I can feel the weight of the town's judgment pressing down on me, like a lead paperweight on a pile of papers. I've upset one of their favorite daughters, setting up a business in direct competition to hers.

Part of me wants to go after her and apologize. But I know it wouldn't do

any good. I shouldn't have gotten personally involved. This is business. Nothing more. So I don't. Instead, I clear my throat and paste on a smile. "I hope you're enjoying your complimentary beverages and snacks. We'll be open every day from 6:00 AM, not closing until 10:00 each night."

Told you I was the villain in this story.

Chapter 8

Marlowe



I stare out the window in the bright morning light, my anger and dismay from last night's shock at discovering what Oliver's new business is still smarting.

Of all the down and dirty, loathsome, despicable things to do! Oliver knew I ran the coffeehouse on Main Street. I told him. He's been here. And still he didn't think to share the small, inconsequential fact that he was opening a business in direct competition to mine?

It's like Mike all over again. I'm being double crossed. I'm being played for a fool.

I huff out a breath.

A voice in my head says, *Oliver's not secretly married and I'm not in a relationship with him and he's not my boss.*

Why do I have to think so rationally?

It's exactly like Mike, and I hate him, I tell myself.

There.

"What's with you this morning?" Ryn asks as she returns to the counter after delivering an order to a table.

"I cannot believe I ever thought that monster was cute," I say through gritted teeth as I watch customers—*my* customers—walk through the doors of the new Steamy Coffee across the street.

“Wait. You think the new guy in town is cute?” Ryn asks.

“Only because he's new and male,” I quip.

“So, when Eugene McAllister moved here last Christmas you thought he was cute, too?” she asks, referring to a small, round, balding 50-something man who took over running the local grocery store when his older brother retired.

I shoot my little sister a look. “Don't you have class in Cotown this morning?”

“You're so easy to wind up. And my facial class doesn't start until noon, which means I'm here all morning to question you on your feelings for the new owner of Steamy Coffee.”

“Lucky me,” I deadpan.

“Have you gone to see the place?” asks our Aunt Lisa, who usually resides in the kitchen, keeping away from the goings on out here in the coffeehouse.

“I went over last night to the ‘grand opening’.” I use air quotes. “Not that it was grand, exactly. It was more criminal than grand, on account of the fact they're stealing our customers. There should be laws about setting up new businesses in direct competition right across the street.” I turn to Aunt Lisa. “Are there?”

“You'll have to ask someone in the know, honey. Maybe Christopher? He's a lawyer,” she replies.

“Christopher knows everything,” Ryn agrees.

“I missed the opening last night so I haven't gotten to see it yet, but a couple of my friends told me it's super swanky,” Aunt Lisa says.

“I didn't notice. I was too busy being shocked,” I admit.

“Why don't you go over and check it out properly?” she suggests.

I suck in a breath, appalled at the very thought. “No way! I've been there once and that's enough in one lifetime.”

“If it's so awful, why did you go there last night?” Ryn questions.

“Because I needed to see it for myself. To be fair to me, I had no idea it was a coffeehouse.”

“The sign didn't give it away?” my sister asks with her usual note of sass.

“It was covered up, like the windows. No one knew.” I look back at the busy café, noticing more of our regulars walk through their doors. “This is the worst thing to happen in Hunter's Creek, ever.”

Ryn crosses her arms. “Actually, I think the worst thing to happen was

when Hollywood came to town, bringing with it a smarmy, self-interested jerk by the name of Joe Turner.”

“But if it wasn't for Joe, you might not have realized how good things could be with Gabe,” Aunt Lisa points out, and Ryn smiles that goofy smile she gets every time her boyfriend's name is mentioned.

“Can we focus here?” I ask them pointedly. “What the heck are we going to do? Most of our customers have gone to Steamy Coffee this morning.” I glance around. “I can count the number of people in here on one hand and usually we're super busy at this time of day.”

“I heard the guy who runs the place is the son of the owner,” Aunt Lisa declares.

“Oliver?” I question.

“Yup. Melody Langdon's son.”

So, he's good looking, rich, *and* had this job handed to him on a silver platter.

This gets better and better.

“It's a typical dating show scenario,” Ryn declares.

I pull my brows together. “How, exactly?”

“The couple's happily dating and everything is great and then a new bombshell arrives and the guy's head gets turned because she's super-hot, but it only lasts for a while before he remembers how great his girlfriend really is.”

I blink at my sister.

Aunt Lisa, on the other hand, nods her head. “I get it. The townsfolk are dazzled by the new shiny thing, but given time, they'll remember how good it is here.”

I chew on my lip. “I hope you're right.”

“We might have to do more than *hope*,” Ryn says as she gestures out the window.

I look across the street and see the three members of the Hunter's Creek Ladies' Committee waltzing through the door of Steamy Coffee. “What the...? But they always come here.”

“Gabe and I missed the grand opening last night, so it's only right that I go today.” Ryn unties her apron and thrusts it into my hands. “I'm gonna go check it out. You coming with?”

I shake my head with vehemence. “No way. I can't be seen in...in...that place.”

Ryn scoffs. “Marlowe, it's just a coffeehouse, not some den of iniquity.” She gets a hold of my ties and pulls my apron off me. “I've got a hat out back and a pair of sunglasses, if you want to wear those.”

“That's the worst idea ever,” I tell her, but a few minutes later we dash across the street together, Ryn looking like she does every day in her T-shirt, jeans, and tennis shoes, and me in my sleeveless blouse, skirt, and heels, with a bucket hat and a pair of wraparound sunglasses. I look like a confused Vin Diesel wannabe. But the last thing I want is for Oliver to recognize me.

We sidle up beside the entrance.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” I stage whisper.

“You can't chicken out on me now. We're going in.” Ryn takes my hand in hers, and before I have the chance to protest further, she pulls me through the doorway and into Steamy Coffee.

I'm immediately hit with the scent of freshly ground beans and warm pastries as I cast a surreptitious look around. The place looks like every other Steamy Coffee I've visited. Tastefully decorated, with hardwood floors that most certainly weren't there when it was a knitting store, and the silver of the picture frames and shelving gleaming in the soft, expert lighting. The overall effect may be generic, but it's polished and stylish. The antithesis of the homeyness of the Second Chance Café.

“Get a load of this place,” Ryn breathes out at my side.

My eyes skim the extensive coffee list above the counter. They've got every kind of coffee imaginable, from cappuccinos to iced coffee and everything in between.

She nudges me in the side. “Check out the hot guy.”

My mind, of course, turns instantly to Oliver. “What? Where is he? Has he seen me?” I ask breathlessly, my eyes darting around in a panic.

“Not your coffeeshop-owning rival. I meant the guy up there.” She points at an image of a smiling man who seems to have forgotten to button up his shirt, which is red and plaid and clearly flannel, his impressive physique on display for all to see.

Subtle? Not so much.

Beside him is an equally gorgeous woman, for some reason wearing a red bikini, her long dark hair falling down her back as she smiles lovingly at her man. They're both cradling coffee mugs in their hands, looking happy, sexy, and in love.

Ryn whistles. “You know what they say: sex sells. Although I didn't

know it sold coffee, exactly.”

“Clearly it works,” I reply on a sigh as I lower my sunglasses to take in the sheer volume of customers. Every seat in the place is taken, and there’s a line at the counter. Although I don’t recognize a few of them, most are locals and most are Second Chance patrons.

“Well, this is where all our customers are today, sis. Mystery solved.” She tugs on my arm. “Look at the Ladies’ Committee. Traitors”

I look over at the group of women, sitting at one of the tables, chatting over their fancy coffees. Mrs. Sommerfeld looks up at us and her eyes widen, surprised that we’re here.

I remove my Vin Diesel sun glasses and give her a supercilious wave.

You are so busted, ladies.

“Come on. Let’s go have a little chat,” Ryn announces as she strides over to their table.

“Ryn, no!” I call out.

“Marlowe Cole.”

I jump when I hear my name. I know who it is. Of course I would get caught by the one person I don’t want to see right now. Or ever again.

Oliver is standing behind the counter, grinning at me like he’s just won the lottery. “What a pleasant surprise. Nice bucket hat.”

“It’s part of my look.” I try to sound nonchalant, but my voice cracks. So much for playing it cool.

A smile teases at the edges of his mouth. “Well, it’s a different look from your usual, I’ll give you that.”

Of course I know the bucket hat doesn’t exactly work with the office chic look I rock for work. But should I be mildly offended that he’s noticed what I usually wear? Offended or...quietly thrilled?

Offended. Definitely offended.

“To what do I owe this pleasure?” he asks.

“I just thought I’d drop by and see what all the fuss is about. I, err, didn’t get the chance to have a good look last night at your big opening.”

“Because the place was so full of eager customers?”

It’s a barbed comment. He wants a rise out of me.

He’s not going to get it.

“Not at all. I could see everything last night, from your generic seating to those totally inappropriate images behind the counter. Not exactly family-friendly.”

He grimaces and I know I've hit the jackpot. I double down.

“You don't know the town is a little on the conservative side and I'm not sure those oversized images will be accepted here. Just a friendly word of warning.”

He chews on his lip. “You might be right. Shall we ask some of the customers what they think?”

I eye the members of the Ladies' Committee. They are bound to have an opinion on the way the couple is dressed—or not dressed, as the case may be. “What about that table over there? We could ask them.”

“Be my guest.” He gestures for me to walk ahead of him, which I do with my shoulders straightened.

This is so going to play in my favor. The Ladies' Committee will deem the image totally inappropriate and I would have won a point in this new battle with Oliver.

“Hi there, ladies,” I say with a smile.

They regard me with worried expressions.

“Marlowe. How great to see you,” Mrs. Jacobson murmurs, her eyes darting around her friends.

“You look settled in here,” Ryn says wryly.

Mrs. Jacobson ignores the jab and instead says, “And Oliver, too. The two coffeeshop owners on Main Street, here together.”

I know where she's going with this and being matchmade with Oliver right now will not be in the least bit helpful. Not now that he's my enemy.

“I'm not staying for long. I've just got a quick question for you ladies,” I say.

But Oliver wants to make a big deal about them being here. “Good morning, ladies. It's wonderful to see you all here again today. On behalf of Steamy Coffee, thank you for your patronage,” his voice dripping with overdone pleasantries.

The women titter. They actually *titter*. I widen my eyes at them. They're old enough to be his mother. No, his grandmother. Not that I know how old Oliver is, but he looks like he's in his early 30s, possibly mid?

“We missed you this morning at the Second Chance,” I say to them.

“We're doing some market research for you,” Mrs. Ashbridge claims and the other two nod along enthusiastically.

“That's right. Market research. We were going to report back to you when we come in for our regular coffee tomorrow morning,” Mrs. Sommerfeld

says.

“That's great,” I reply even though I know it's a load of crap. “I look forward to seeing you all tomorrow. In the meantime, I wondered what you thought of those photos up behind the counter.”

“The photos?” Mrs. Jacobson asks. “I'm not sure I've noticed any photos.”

Her friends agree with her. Apparently, they haven't lifted their eyes up beyond the counter to notice the oversized photos flanking the menu board, let alone the ones in the window. In fact, I would go so far as to think they were impossible to miss.

“Really?” I ask, not believing them for a second. I point at the lit-up photos behind the counter. “You haven't noticed those?”

“Oh, *those* photos. We thought you meant some other photos,” Mrs. Jacobson replies, her face flushing. “Is it getting hot in here or has the coffee made me warm?” She fans her face with her hand.

I cross my arms. “You've seen them now. What do you think of them?”

“I thought the man's eyes looked like they were following me everywhere,” Mrs. Ashbridge admits.

“I barely noticed his eyes, if you know what I mean,” Mrs. Sommerfeld says with a waggle of her brows.

“Do you think they're perhaps a little risqué?” I ask.

“You can't lead them,” Oliver protests. “What Marlowe is asking you is what you think of the photos.”

No, what Marlowe is asking is why such obviously sexy images should be used to entice people to spend their hard-earned cash on over-the-top complicated coffees when there's a perfectly lovely coffeehouse across the street with nice pictures of nice things that don't involve mostly naked models. So bite me, Oliver Langdon.

“Will they be covering up for winter? It can get cold here, you know,” Mrs. Jacobson says, and I could kiss her for it.

“I think they're a little bit distracting. I've come in for a cup of coffee, not to have some naked man look at me the way he is,” Mrs. Ashbridge says, another person on my new list of favorite people.

I scrunch up my nose. “It's off putting, right?”

“Come on. That's definitely leading,” Oliver protests.

I shrug. “You heard 'em. They're distracting and not appropriate for a coffeeshop.”

Oliver looks between the women and me. “Enjoy your coffee. If you

come back tomorrow, tell Naomi or Tina that I said you could have a second specialty coffee on the house, in case I'm not here."

I raise my eyebrows at him. Really? That's how he's going to play this?

The women beam at him, offering their thanks and clearly forgetting they'd already informed me they'll be back at the Second Chance tomorrow.

How easily the townsfolk of Hunter's Creek are swayed.

I'm taking this as my cue to leave. I've seen what I need to see here, and I'm feeling as deflated as a failed cheese souffle.

I say goodbye to the women and throw a disingenuous smile at Oliver.

"Let's go, Ryn," I grind out before I make a hasty retreat.

"Be right with you," she replies.

To my surprise, Oliver follows me to the door.

"Have you seen everything you need to see?" he asks.

"I've seen more than enough for one day," I sniff.

"You never told me why you had to leave so suddenly last night."

"I had a...a thing."

Smoooooth. He will never suspect I just made that up.

"A thing?"

"A thing," I confirm as I lift my chin.

"I see." That teasing smile of his balloons into the real deal. "It's great that you've come to witness our superior coffee first hand," he teases, his eyes twinkling mischievously. Eyes that I'd thought we're so very attractive only yesterday morning. Today they look positively traitorous. "Or are you here to steal some trade secrets?"

"You've got nothing I want," I scoff. "As I said, I wanted to see what the fuss was all about and I can see it's just that. Fuss."

"You're welcome to stay and enjoy a cup of coffee on the house. Whatever you want."

As if I would drink *his* coffee!

"Thanks, but no thanks."

"As long as you're sure I can't tempt you?"

I make the mistake of looking up into his eyes and my belly does a flip, despite the fact that he's gone from flirty stranger to my enemy.

It's obvious my body hasn't gotten the memo yet.

So, I do the only thing I can do. I lift my head and shake out my hair, leveling him with my gaze. "Oh, you can be sure of one thing, Oliver Langdon."

He pauses briefly before he replies, “What's that?”

“There is absolutely nothing you can offer me that I want.”

He arches an eyebrow at me. “Nothing?” he questions and it sounds utterly flirty.

“Nothing,” I confirm, ignoring the way his eyes on me make my body hum. “Good day to you.” I turn on my heel and stomp out of the coffeehouse only to smack straight into someone coming through the doorway.

Oof!

“Pardon me. I didn't see—Marlowe?”

I steady myself to see who I walked into, only to be met with a very familiar face. “Dad?” I flick my eyes to his companion. “Mom?”

“Hi there, pumpkin. What a nice surprise,” Dad says.

“What are you doing here, sweetheart?” Mom asks as she pulls me in for a quick hug.

I give her a meaningful look. “I could ask the same question.”

I don't look at Oliver.

“We wanted to know what all the fuss was about. Everyone's talking about this place today. Don't worry. We still love the Second Chance. But I do quite like the idea of getting one of those big vanilla flavored coffees with the fancy cream.” She licks her lips. Actually licks her lips.

“I'm going to get myself one of the peppermint chocolate ones,” Dad says.

This is what it's come to. Betrayed by my own parents.

“Might I suggest a vanilla cappuccino with extra cream for you, Mrs. Cole, and the peppermint mocha for you, Mr. Cole?” Oliver says.

“That sounds delicious,” Mom purrs, and I shoot her a look.

“I'm Oliver Langdon, the proprietor. Welcome.”

My parents say their hellos and I turn to Oliver. “Thanks for walking me to the door. See you some other time.”

I'm being about as subtle as his sex-sells photographs but I don't care.

“Perhaps we'll bump into each other at the pond sometime,” he says.

In your dreams.

“Bye now,” I say pointedly.

Thankfully he gets the hint and returns to the counter.

“All my customers are here,” I say in a small voice.

“Not all of them. I'm sure,” Dad says.

“Most of them.”

“Honey, it's the exciting new place in town. That's all. Your customers are just here to check it out and then they'll be back to you in no time. You'll see.”

“Your mom's right. You can't beat a Second Chance apple pie.”

I smile weakly. “I hope you're right.”

“We are right. What's Sheila said about this new development?”

Aunt Sheila. My heart sinks. I'm going to have to tell her about this.

“I haven't mentioned it yet. I'm still coming to terms with it myself.”

“I suggest you give her a call and have a chat about it. She's been running that coffeehouse for many, many years. She'll have some ideas,” Mom says.

My spirits lift. “I hope you're right.”

Chapter 9

Marlowe



I give my traitorous parents a quick hug before I slink back to the Second Chance. I relieve Aunt Lisa of her temporary counter responsibilities so she can get back to the kitchen—not that she served many customers in the time I was gone, of course.

I fire off a quick message to Aunt Sheila, telling her I need to talk to her about something. I don't want to scare her, but at the same time she needs to know her business is under threat. I know it's only day one and Steamy Coffee is the new, exciting toy in town, but a quick Google search shows me that the chances of small, independently-run coffeehouses going out of business when a big chain moves in are pretty high.

I don't rate our chances.

I look up as someone breezes through the door. Hopefully it's a customer. It's Ryn, a smile on her face and—and what the...? Is that a Steamy Coffee cup in her hand?

Indignant, I throw my hands on my hips and glare at her. “I cannot believe you not only bought one of their coffees but you brought it back here!”

“Chill, sis. For starters, this iced coffee was free. Your boyfriend gave it to me.”

“Who? Oliver? He’s not my boyfriend.”

“So why are you blushing?”

I clench my jaw, aware that heat is indeed rising in my cheeks.

Dang it, Oliver! Why do you have to be so attractive? There should be a rule: if you're going to move in on someone’s turf, threatening to end their business, you should at least have the good grace to be ugly.

Ugly Oliver would be so much easier to deal with. No reactions to his smiles or flirtations or teases. I could go on hating him without complication.

“Ryn, do you seriously think it's a good look for an employee to walk into our coffeehouse holding a cup from the competition?”

She sucks on her straw, making a loud gurgling sound as she reaches the bottom of her iced coffee. “That was good. All their coffees are good. We seriously need to up our game.”

“We're not going to try to compete with them by making loads of fancy coffees. Besides, everyone loves our coffee.”

“Marlowe, we serve drip coffee with cream, milk, and sugar. It's only marginally better than Mary’s, the only other competition in town, and that's because they're not on Main Street and their food sucks.”

I'm not going to argue with her assessment of Mary's. It's a tiny coffeehouse in the least picturesque part of town that tends to cater to people who want to grab an easy coffee and sandwich on the go.

“This is the 21st century, not 1952.” Ryn holds up her now-empty cup. “This is what people expect. I'm not saying we have to go the whole nine yards, but maybe two or three?”

I glance at the coffee pot. It's been sitting on the heating element since the last customer ordered a cup.

Anxiety fills my chest like a hot air balloon. “We do iced coffee,” I protest.

“Not like this, we don't.”

“You’re right.” I let out a resigned sigh. “We need to step up our game.”

“You know it.”

“Before we do anything, I need to talk to Aunt Sheila.” I pluck my phone from the counter and check for messages. No word. I chew on my lip.

“Could we get this baby going?” Ryn asks, her hand on the old coffee machine I've never seen used.

“I think it's a relic. Kind of there for looks more than anything else.”

“Do you have any idea how to use it?” Ryn walks around to the front of

the machine and starts turning knobs and pressing buttons.

“No idea.”

She presses a button and the machine makes a weird whirring sound.

We look at one another in surprise.

“Well, that's a good sign, right?” she asks.

The machine clunks before steam shoots out from the wand and then fizzes out with a bang that has us both bouncing away from it.

Our one solitary customer looks up from his book in surprise.

“Everything's okay, Mr. Duarte. We're just giving this old coffee machine a try,” I explain.

“You'll be hard pressed to get that thing to work. Last time I had a coffee from it your aunt was a blushing bride.”

I do some mental math. That makes the machine at least 35 years old, probably more.

“This machine is *old*,” Ryn says. “Might be better to invest in a new one to beat Stupid Coffee?”

“Stupid Coffee?”

“It's my new name for them. Catchy, no?”

I shake my head at her. “Coffee machines must cost thousands. I'm not sure Aunt Sheila has that kind of money lying around. Especially not now with Uncle Johnny.”

“Since when has a lack of funds ever stopped us from achieving what we want? Coles make things happen. Look at me, following my dream of becoming a beauty esthetician. When I started, I had next to no money and had to save everything I made here to pay for the fees. Now I'm only a month away from graduating and I've already signed a lease on the old Greenwood place.”

“Wasn't your dream to become a glass blower?”

She waves my comment away with a flick of her wrist. “Semantics. My point is, I decided to become an esthetician and that's what I'm doing. You can decide to take on Mr. Hottie McCoffee across the street and do it, too. Even more so because you're the hard working, high achieving oldest sibling and I'm just the baby of the family.” She shoots me her winning grin.

Ryn used to have a thing about being treated as the baby, saying no one ever took her seriously. I suspect seeing her older sister return home after her life imploded has made her feel better about herself.

It's had the opposite effect on me.

“We’ll shelve the new coffee machine idea until I’ve spoken to Aunt Sheila. What other ideas have you got?” I ask.

“Maybe a new sign outside? The old one is kind of warped and faded. I could get Gabe to help me paint something?” She must notice the dubious look on my face. “I’ll design it and run it past you first, of course.”

“A new sign would be good, but we need to think bigger.”

“You’re the marketing expert in the family.”

I tap my chin. “I could start posting some stuff on social media, try to get a buzz going. We could make some reels, and some TikToks? Something cute and engaging. Aunt Sheila’s social media presence involves a Facebook page with something like 35 followers, all of whom are family or members of the Ladies’ Committee.”

Ryn grins. “As long as we get to dance, I’m all in.”

I let out a laugh despite our current dire predicament. “Maybe not dancing, but we’ll think of something.”

“Aw, come on, sis! It’ll be fun. I can teach you some moves.” She begins to throw out some dance moves.

I shoot my sister a look. “I’ll consider it.”

“I’m taking that as a firm yes, just so you know.”

I shake my head. “Any other ideas?”

“Dinner!” Ryn exclaims, her eyes lighting up.

I pull my brows together. “We don’t do dinner. We close at 4:00.”

“Exactly. Steamy Coffee is open till 10:00 at night. They don’t offer dinner, just plastic snacks.”

“Plastic snacks?” A small smile blooms on my face.

“Oliver gave me a muffin. It was chewy and overly sweet. It sure didn’t taste like our muffins.”

“So, we’re ahead of him on food already. I like it. We could keep that going with offering a dinner menu to attract more customers in the evening.”

“Nice.”

I begin to think of the practicalities of opening for dinner. “Longer hours will mean we’ll need more staff, which means more wages. I’m not sure it’ll be worth it.”

“Think about it. If you want to go out to dinner in Hunter’s Creek right now, it’s one of the bars, someone else’s house, or you have to drive all the way over to Cotown. We’ll have the market sewn right up.”

“And all the Hollywood people are coming back to town soon for the

premiere.”

“And the Summer Festival is the same weekend as the premiere, too.”

“Right! It's the perfect timing to launch a dinner menu.” I feel a surge of excitement.

We fall into silence.

“Ooh! Live music on weekends!” Ryn’s practically bouncing in her seat. “Local bands or acoustic performers would draw in a crowd.”

“Do you know any local bands or acoustic performers?” I scoff. “Let's be realistic here.”

“Ivy.”

“Your roommate?”

My phone rings and I pick it up to see it's our aunt, Sheila.

“Aunt Sheila. How are you?”

“Oh, I'm doing just fine,” she replies. “I'm getting used to being in Seattle but I do miss home.”

“We miss you, too. How's Uncle Johnny?”

“He's doing okay, sweetheart. You know your Uncle Johnny: never one to complain. He's in the hospital right now having the stem cell work we came here for. Poor man has lost all his hair, but the doctors assure us it'll grow back, and let's face it, he didn't have a whole lot before, anyway.”

I think of my strong aunt and her husband, Johnny. He always smiles, always has a joke to tell, and they've been happily married for decades. Total romance role models.

“Now, what's this I hear about a rather handsome young man opening a coffee chain store across the road?”

“You've heard about that?”

“Honey, I might be away from home but I can still keep abreast of all the goings on. Tanya Jacobson called.”

The new leader of the Ladies’ Committee. I should have known.

“That’s what we need to talk about. I'll put you on speaker. I've got Ryn here, too.”

I press a button on the phone and Aunt Sheila’s voice booms around the empty café. “How are you, Ryn? How's it going with that boyfriend of yours? Still in love, I hope.”

Ryn’s face breaks into a sappy smile. “He's good.”

“By ‘good’ I assume you mean yes, you are deliriously happy and still in love and going to get married soon and provide me with some beautiful great-

nieces and nephews?"

I watch as Ryn squirms.

"One step at a time, Aunt Sheila."

"We need to talk to you about Steamy Coffee and how we're going to handle it," I say and my sister shoots me a grateful smile. No one likes to be grilled about when they're getting married and having kids.

"It's certainly an unexpected development," Aunt Sheila says. "No one knew they were opening up a branch in town, not even my friends."

"The gossip queens, Hunter's Creek Ladies' Committee," Ryn says to me under her breath.

Our aunt used to be the leader of the Ladies' Committee, pulling the strings and setting matchmaking schemes in motion. All of that has had to be put on hold as she focuses on her husband, but it's clear she's not completely out of the loop. She does so love to gossip and matchmake.

"Can I ask you about the old coffee machine on the counter? Does it work?" I ask.

"That is a vintage coffee machine from Rome. It's a family heirloom, passed down to me by your great grandmother when I took over the coffeeshop."

I regard the coffee machine with its timeless sophistication and elegance. Despite its age, the stainless steel and intricate brass accents shine brightly under the overhead lights, and I can just imagine it whirring to life back in the day, expertly wielded by my great grandma.

"How come you let it fall into disrepair?" Ryn asks in her usual unsubtle fashion.

"Honey, what you don't understand is nobody wanted that kind of coffee when I took over the café. They wanted drip coffee, like the stuff we serve now. No fuss, no nonsense. Just straight up coffee."

"Why did you keep it?" Ryn asks.

"Because it looks pretty."

"Well, we've been wondering whether we need to get a new machine to compete with all the different types of fancy coffees the place across the street is offering. If I put you on video right now you would see how empty the coffeehouse is. There is literally no one here, other than Mr. Duarte," I say.

"They're all over at Steamy Coffee, drinking the fancy coffees," Ryn adds unnecessarily.

Aunt Sheila considers spending money on a new coffee machine and I promise to do the research into the cost. Ryn and I assure her that we think it'll be worthwhile.

“We're also going to repaint the sign out front and I'm going to do a bunch of social media postings. We thought we could open up for dinner, too, if we can get the staff. Steamy Coffee doesn't do dinner, in fact all they do is crappy snacks.”

“No one can match our pies. Best in the county,” Aunt Sheila announces proudly.

I smile down the phone. “They sure are, and that's something we definitely have over the competition.”

“You know what? I'm giving you the green light for everything. Opening for dinner, painting the sign, the whole nine yards.”

Ryn flicks her gaze to me. “Does that include a new coffee machine?”

“I need to do the research on that,” I say, but I'm interrupted by Aunt Sheila.

“I'll have a chat with a couple of my contacts. I'll get you a coffee machine, don't you worry.”

Optimism rises inside me like a burst of laughter, brightening my outlook for the first time since I walked through the doors of Steamy Coffee last night.

“The Second Chance has weathered many storms and we'll make it through this one, too,” Aunt Sheila says.

“I hope you're right,” I reply as I watch a stream of customers walking into Steamy Coffee.

“Just make sure you remember the secret ingredient is always love,” Aunt Sheila continues.

Ryn and I share a look.

“I'm not sure love is going to cut it when we're up against the behemoth Steamy Coffee chain, Aunt Sheila,” Ryn replies.

“Run by the son of the owner, no less,” I add.

“It will. Don't you worry,” she replies with such certainty that I feel my shoulders drop a fraction for the first time since this whole thing began. “Give it your all, and don't forget to smile. Life is an adventure and this is but a bump in the road.”

“Aunt Sheila is clearly feeling poetic today,” Ryn murmurs under her breath.

She promises to get back to us within the next day or so on the machine, and we wish both her and our uncle the best before we hang up.

“At least we’ve got a plan now,” I say.

“Let me tell you about Ivy,” Ryn begins. “She sings in a band over in Cotown.”

“What sort of band?”

“They do country and ballads. That kind of thing. They’re pretty good. Gabe and I went to see her perform a couple months ago. She sure can sing. Weird how you can know someone your whole life and not know they’ve got a hidden talent.”

“We should go see her perform before we make any decisions.”

“Deal. Hey, I know what. We could double date: me and Gabe and you and Oliver.”

I bark out a laugh. “In his dreams.”

She quirks her eyebrows at me. “In *his* dreams?”

“If you’re insinuating that I find the man who is singlehandedly trying to destroy our business attractive, then you’re wrong. He’s the enemy, nothing more.”

“I don’t think he’s trying to do it singlehandedly. He’s got some baristas on his side, too.”

We share a smile.

“See? You’ve got this, sis,” Ryn says.

I watch as the front door swings closed behind Mr. Duarte, leaving us alone in the coffeehouse. “I hope you’re right, Ryn. I really hope you’re right,” I reply, smiling back.

Deep down, I know this battle has only just begun. Oliver won’t go down without a fight—but neither will I.

Chapter 10

Oliver



I'm in my office at the back of the coffeeshop, going over the numbers for the branch's first week, when my phone lights up, telling me my sister wants to talk.

"You're calling me in the middle of the morning? Don't you know how busy and important I am?" I jest as I answer the call.

"How could I forget? You tell me literally every time I talk to you," Olena replies with a laugh. "How are things, Ollie? Have you conquered the world of coffee in small town Washington yet?"

"It's only been six days since you left town."

"So, another couple of days and you'll be top dog, providing everyone in town with their coffee needs. Especially those busybody women who peppered me with a million questions on opening night. Seriously, it was like a police interrogation, all about who Oliver Langdon is and whether he's single and what sort of women he dates and telling me how handsome and eligible you are over and over again. It was enough to make me want to vomit my mini muffin."

"You know what a police interrogation is like?"

"Only from TV. And nice swerve on the interrogation, by the way."

I chuckle. "I've only been in town for a short while but I already know

the Empress Collective likes to stick their noses in everyone's business. I've been told they try to matchmake any single person within a 50-mile radius. I'm not sure they've got a lot to do."

"They have a name, and it's *the Empress Collective*?"

"It's just the name I'm giving them. They're always together and they're always gossiping. They seem like the empress type."

"Because they show leadership qualities, have regal demeanors, and strong military strategies?"

"Believe me when I say those women could easily command any army, from what I've seen. It's a good thing Hunter's Creek doesn't have one."

"So, who do you think they want to matchmake you with?"

My mind instantly turns to Marlowe Cole. Being matchmade with her would be nice. Complicated, but nice. Not that I need nice complications in my life, particularly not of the romantic kind.

"You can move on, you know, Ollie," she replies in a tender voice. "Let things go? It's been a long time. It would be good for you to meet someone new."

My chest tightens. "Maybe," I reply elusively.

Of course, I know exactly what she's referring to. The fact that I haven't dated anyone seriously since the disintegration of my last relationship. Sure, I've seen a few women over the last couple years, very casual, but that's as far as it's gone. It's best that way. If you don't put yourself out there, you won't find your girlfriend of two years in a compromising position with your own brother.

"I get the hint. I'll move on," Olena replies when I don't say another word. I shoot her a grateful look.

"How's the new site? Busy?"

I tap my pen against the papers on my desk. Truth be told, after the initial flourish of excitement surrounding our grand opening and the following few days, business hasn't been exactly fast. More like moving along the freeway at a steady enough pace, but inevitably being overtaken by the faster, sportier cars.

"We launched with a hiss and a lion's roar."

"And now?"

"Now we're kind of meowing our way along."

Olena sucks in a breath. "That doesn't sound great, Ollie."

"It'll be fine." I hope to convince both my sister and myself. "We're new

in town. People have to discover us. We didn't shout about our opening because we kept it on the downlow, so these things can take time. We timed it so we'd be open for the big summer festival they hold here each year, which is only a couple of days before the movie premiere for Leo's latest. That's when we'll really get put on the map."

"Do you think the fact it hasn't gone as well has anything to do with the coffeeshop across the street? What was it called?"

My mind turns once more to Marlowe and how I busted her taking a sneaky peek around the coffeehouse in her subpar disguise that was fooling no one. Especially not someone who had paid attention to the shape of her mouth, the set of her jaw, the shade of her hair, the way her body moves.

I clear my throat.

"It probably does, but this is a busy enough town to support both of our businesses. I see no reason why we can't coexist."

"I like that. It's a lot more of a...*kind* approach than Mom usually takes to these situations. Remember that independently-owned coffeeshop in Springfield last summer? It closed its doors within the month."

I feel a twinge in my chest. We had done what we always do when we move into a new area: we smashed the competition, forcing a small coffeeshop called Full of Beans to close its doors faster than you could say *big chain coffee is here to stay*. I remember the owner, a portly middle-aged man by the name of Santos, who told me we had successfully sucked the very soul from his town, right before he closed up shop and moved away.

It's times like those I wish I didn't have a conscience. I wish I was more like my mother: ruthless, determined, unstoppable.

If she did, she'd look at me the same way she used to look at Robert.

"The Second Chance does things like home-baked pies and muffins and proper lunches. Different from our offering of coffee and snacks. I can't see why we can't coexist."

As the words leave my mouth, even I know the chances of them surviving with us in town are low, particularly with us literally right across the street.

"Well, I would say the owner is doing her best to make sure they're the only coffeeshop on Main Street, Hunter's Creek."

I pull my brows together in confusion. "I thought you were back home?"

"I am, but there's this little thing called the Internet. You may have heard of it."

"You're hilarious. What have you seen?"

“Pull up your Instagram.”

I do as she instructs. A quick search for the Second Chance Café brings up their page. My eyes widen with each successive post, starting the day after our grand opening last week.

“Have you found it yet?” she asks.

“I sure have.”

“I would say your pretty neighbor has gone on the offensive.”

There have been at least a dozen posts in the last week, starting with an image of Marlowe looking so very beautiful in one of those feminine blouses she wears, her hair in a high ponytail as she holds up a blackboard with the words *Second Chance Café, your local favorite*. The next ones show her holding pies with a big grin on her face, reading a book in front of their big bookshelf while cradling a cup of coffee, and to one I spend most of the time on, an image of her smiling face, a coffee in one hand and a slice of pie in the other.

Then I flick to the latest image. This one is of her holding a chalkboard with *Down with corporate coffee chains! Come visit your local! (The Second Chance Café, in case you wondered.)* written on it.

Well, that’s a little aggressive. Cute, too with the parentheses and the way she’s smiling at the camera, but aggressive all the same.

“She looks good,” Olena comments, reflecting my thoughts exactly. “Although I’m not sure about some of the messaging or dancing,”

“Dancing? There’s no dancing.”

“Check them out. They’re on TikTok.”

I open the app and do another search. I find a video of Marlowe and her sister, Ryn, doing a dance to the Bruno Mars song, *Count on Me* in front of a sign that reads *Second Chance Café, favorite in Hunter’s Creek since 1989. You can count on us!* The video lasts for about nine or ten seconds before the two women fall down laughing.

Part of me thinks it’s cute and endearing, and it definitely does weird things to my belly as Marlowe’s entire face lights up when she laughs.

The other part of me—the sensible, business savvy part, not to mention the wounded part that wants nothing to do with a woman like Marlowe—frowns simply because it’s endearing. I know if I like it then others will like it too, which has the potential to translate into more customers for Second Chance Café—and less for us.

I brush it off. “So, they’re taking to social media. That’s fine. They’re just

a couple of women with their amateur videos and posts. We've got corporate muscle behind us. Successful corporate muscle. I'll talk to the marketing guys and get them to put more effort into promoting our branch.”

“They're doing pretty well considering they're just a couple of amateurs. Look at how many likes they've got.”

I read the number. 12.3 thousand.

“Not bad,” I concede. “It must have hit an algorithm or something.”

“All their posts and videos are popular.”

A click on several more of the videos shows me that my sister is right. Their reach has gone way beyond the population of Hunter's Creek, that's for sure.

“Is it having an impact?” she asks.

“Do you mean are we getting less customers here because they've all fallen for two pretty girls dancing to pop songs?” I shift in my seat. “Our numbers aren't great,” I admit.

“What's 'not great'?”

“They're strong enough, but they're not as good as we usually expect.”

“Oh.”

The word hangs in the air between us. Olena knows as much as I do that I need to make a success of this site.

“You know what? You should go over there. See how they're doing.”

“Are you crazy? The woman who runs the place hates me.”

I think of the way Marlowe told me there was nothing I could offer her right before she turned on her heel and walked away from me last week. That was the last time I saw her. Well, that was the last time we spoke. I'll admit, as chance would have it, I've been near windows or the door when she's walked by, and once I saw her walking toward me in the street and was totally prepared for another confrontational conversation—the idea of which had me needing to suppress an anticipatory smile—when she turned into a store, totally oblivious of my presence.

And I'll also admit that it had occurred to me when I went swimming in the pond a couple of days ago that I might bump into her there, just as I did that first time we met. Not that I purposefully went at the same time, of course. It was entirely coincidental. Really, it was.

In the end it was all for nothing anyway because she didn't turn up. I got an especially good swim in that afternoon.

“I'm not sure Marlowe will want to see me. We're not exactly on the best

of terms these days.”

“Could that be because you opened a coffeehouse in direct competition to hers right across the street?”

“You should be a psychologist,” I deadpan.

“Don’t worry about her. If she’s there, she’s there. You can be pleasant to her while you check the place out. You could even flirt with her, although I get the feeling you’ve already done that.”

“I haven’t been flirting with her,” I protest and I’m glad for the fact that we’re not on a video call or she would see that I’m lying. “Just because a girl is super pretty doesn’t mean I automatically flirt. She’s also extremely irritating and...and...doing TikToks.”

I can almost feel the arch of her eyebrows as she replies, “Of course I believe every word you’re saying, Ollie. Every. Single. Word.”

“You make me sound like I spend my entire life flirting with women.”

“Not all women. But probably her.”

How can my sister know me so well? Oh yeah, she’s my sister.

I can hear Zander crying in the background. “Hey, Ollie? I’ve gotta go.”

“Is he okay?”

“There, there, baby,” Olena coos. “You’ve got a bump on your head. Let me kiss it better for you.” To me, she replies, “Minor injury. Probably not life threatening. Talk tomorrow?”

“Sure thing.”

“And Olly? Go check out the competition. You’ll thank me for it later.”

“I will.” I hang up the phone and it’s only then that I wonder whether she wants me to visit the Second Chance for business reasons, or personal.

Chapter 11

Marlowe



“A little farther and you've got it,” I say from my position on the sidewalk outside the Second Chance. I’m steadying the ladder as I peer up at the new sign.

Christopher, standing high up on the ladder, successfully fits the sign onto the hooks where the old sign used to hang. When he’d removed the old one it had virtually fallen apart in his hands, the rust was so pervasive. In a way, we've done the town a favor by replacing the sign. It could have fallen on someone's head.

Christopher holds it in place before he tentatively releases his grip, his hands ready to catch it should it fall. He grins down at me once it’s secure. “Done.”

“Awesome!”

“Coming down,” he announces.

“You know I could have done that,” I tell him as he climbs down the ladder and back onto the sidewalk beside me.

“We men need to have our uses or else you women will realize you can do everything without us and we’ll be obsolete.”

“Oh, we already know that,” I reply with a laugh.

“You do? I'd better go alert the men.”

“You do that. And thanks again. It looks great, right?”

We both look up at the sign. It's hooked onto the wrought iron arm and is swaying softly in the breeze, catching the morning sun. Like the last sign, it's wooden and traditional looking, with the words *Second Chance Café* in a friendly but legible cursive font, with the subtitle, *home of the best pies in the county* underneath a drawing of a steaming pie. I wanted to highlight our pies as a point of difference from our new neighbor, and Aunt Sheila agreed.

It's fresh and eye-catching, and I feel so proud of Ryn, who both designed and painted it.

“I hope it will help.” Christopher nods across the street to our new neighbor, pulling his lips into a line.

“I do, too,” I reply on a sigh.

“How's business? Picking up? Harper mentioned things have been a little slower since the launch of the place that shall not be named, if you don't mind me misquoting *Harry Potter*.”

“Go right ahead and refer to that place as Voldemort. We know we're definitely the good guys in this equation. And besides, it's better than what Ryn's taken to calling the place.”

“What's that?”

“Stupid Coffee.”

He huffs out a laugh. “It's not exactly sophisticated.”

“No, but it's very Ryn.” I cross my arms as I glare at Steamy Coffee. “They had a few days of stealing almost all our business, which was super worrying. But we realized a lot of our customers just wanted to check the place out. Nothing more. They did that and now they've come back. Well, some of them, anyway.”

I watch as a group of workers from the mill walk out Steamy Coffee's front door. One of them, a guy named Grant who I went to high school with, notices us and offers us a sheepish wave as he skulks down Main Street.

“With all the increased tourist traffic in town these days, there's probably room for both of you,” Christopher observes.

He's right that we have a lot more visitors in town than we ever used to. We've got the filming of the big movie to thank for that. With the Summer Festival and the worldwide movie premiere happening soon, odds are both the Second Chance and Stupid Coffee will do well, for at least awhile. People like coffee and they like food, a fact we're counting on.

“What other changes are you making? Ryn mentioned a few things at

lunch at your parents' place on Sunday.”

“We've been hitting social media hard. Ryn even got me to dance.” I roll my eyes. “We also bought a proper coffee machine. Second hand, but that doesn't matter. Ryn's inside trying to get it to work right now.”

He raises his brows. “How's that working out?”

I think of the disasters we've had since we first powered the machine up. Ryn and I did a barista evening class along with Valentina, one of my part-time staff members, where we were taught the rudimentary rules of how to operate the machine and make a cup of coffee. But human error seems to be playing rather too much of a part in the process.

I make a face. “Not well.”

He laughs. “I'm sure it'll be a learning curve, but worth it in the end. Right now, I'd better get this ladder back to Jim's Hardware. He was kind enough to lend it to me, but I'm sure he'd prefer I bought it.”

“Thanks again, Christopher. Oh, and you can tell the men we still need them from time to time.”

He smiles at me as he closes up the ladder with a creaking sound. “They'll be happy to hear it.”

Inside the Second Chance, Ryn is practicing her milk steaming skills—and making a mess at the same time.

I breeze past the Ladies' Committee who have returned after their foray into enemy territory last week.

“That'll be \$20, thank you, Dana,” Mrs. Ashbridge says, her palm outstretched. “Pay up, now. Don't be shy.”

Mrs. Jacobson opens her purse and reluctantly hands over two crisp \$10 bills. “I didn't think she'd mess it up that much again,” she grumps.

“Milk everywhere!” Mrs. Sommerfeld exclaims in delight.

I slow my pace. Did I just hear what I thought I heard? Are they actually betting on my sister messing up with the coffee machine?

Mrs. Sommerfeld leans in and says, “My bet is she drenches herself in water next time.”

“I'll take that bet,” Mrs. Jacobson says eagerly.

“That was Marlowe,” Mrs. Sommerfeld replies, and I'm reminded how the machine spurted water at me as I tried desperately to find an off switch, instead setting the coffee grinding mechanism off. I was drenched and had to go home for a new blouse.

It wasn't my finest moment.

“I'm sure her little sister is capable of drenching herself in water, too,” Mrs. Sommerfeld continues.

“We're trying our best,” I say to them in my sweetest voice. Inside I'm fuming.

“Oh, Marlowe. I didn't see you there,” Mrs. Jacobsen mutters, casting her eyes down as though the table has suddenly become extremely interesting.

No, I'm sure you didn't.

“We're just having a little bit of fun,” Mrs. Sommerfeld explains. “We are here though and not at the new place,” she adds as though her presence in the coffeehouse can make up for their new gambling habit.

“You could do one of your videos. Call it ‘coffee machine catastrophes’. People will love it,” Mrs. Ashbridge suggests.

“I'm not sure we want to showcase ourselves as inept,” I reply, even if we are inept right now. We're working on changing that.

“You're not inept, honey. You're just learning the ropes. Why don't you get my niece to help you?” Mrs. Jacobson suggests.

“Who's your niece?” I ask.

“Why, your sister's roommate, Ivy. She was a barista in college at one of those big chain places,” she replies. “Not that we want to mention *those*.”

“She sings as well as makes coffee?” I ask. “We need to get Ivy in here right now.”

“You do,” she agrees. “Although she does have a full-time job at the mill, you know.”

My mind is already whirring. “Thanks for the tip.”

I walk behind the counter where Ryn looks at me in despair.

“Why won't this work? I've done everything we were told to do in class and still the coffee's turned out like this.” She pushes a coffee cup toward me and it slops coffee grounds and milk across the counter.

“What happened to the frothy milk?” I ask as I pick up a damp cloth and begin to wipe up the milk splatters.

She wipes some spots of milk from her face. “There's something wrong with our milk. It won't froth.”

I glance at the line of customers, looking increasingly concerned they're not going to get their caffeine fix—at least not in a palatable form, anyway. It's one thing to shout about ourselves on social media, attracting customers new and old. But it turns out it's another to actually make coffees with our fancy new machine.

“We're having a couple of technical issues right now, but if you bear with us, I promise it'll be worth your while,” I tell the line with a cheery smile.

“We want our coffee now!” demands Mrs. Chisholm, an elderly woman in a threadbare flannel with about a thousand creases on her withered face.

“It will be ready soon, Mrs. Chisholm,” I reassure her.

“It better be,” she replies as she pulls her brows together, causing her face to almost fold in on itself.

Being an inhabitant of Hunter's Creek, I've known Mrs. Chisholm my whole life, and for as long as I've known her, she's always been old and grumpy and unpleasant. In fact, I think I've only ever seen her smile once, and that may have in fact been a grimace.

“When are you going to start dancing?” she asks.

“Excuse me?”

“Dancing,” she repeats as though I'm a few logs short of a wood pile. “My granddaughter told me the girls in the Second Chance have taken to dancing. Now ordinarily I would dismiss what she says as total nonsense because she's down in the Florida these days and I figured the heat had gone to her head. But then Chester Dunlop showed me a video on his TV phone, and now I want to see it.”

There's a murmur among the people standing in line.

“The dancing is just for TikTok, really, not here,” I explain.

“We want to see it,” she repeats. “Don't we?”

There's a rumble of agreement from the patrons and I flash Ryn a nervous smile.

She shrugs. “I'm game if you are.”

“But we're terrible,” I say under my breath.

Aunt Lisa appears at the kitchen door, a questioning look on her face.

“I say let's give the people what they want, and if they want to see the proprietor and her most important employee dance, then we've got to do it,” Ryn announces as she removes her apron.

People burst into spontaneous applause and someone calls out, “Go Second Chance Babes!” to more cheering and applause.

The Second Chance Babes? Oh, good grief. I didn't want to do the dancing in the first place. I only did it because Ryn insisted it had a good chance of working online. Which it did. But the last thing I expected was to have to do it in front of a live audience at my place of work.

“We'll do it,” Ryn announces as though she's our spokesperson who

makes such decisions.

Don't I get a say in this at all?

The patrons all seem thoroughly pleased by this idea, and despite my protests and threats of violence delivered under my breath to my sister, she drags me around the counter to an area without any seating.

"Aunt Lisa, queue up the song," Ryn instructs, and to my surprise Aunt Lisa does just that, the familiar beats of the Bruno Mars song filling the air.

Ryn begins to nod her head along to the music, her eyes flashing to mine. "A 5, 6, 7, 8." She bursts into the dance moves we had practiced for our videos. With all the eyes in the room on us, I've got no choice but to follow.

We place our hands in front of our chests, our elbows out to each side before we push them to the left, bending that knee, then to the right with a bend of a knee, then squat down as our arms lift above our heads. In my head, I'm reminding myself to "pop, lock, and drop it," as Ryn taught me, and after we've repeated this move a few times, I forget to think about it and instead simply do the rest of the routine.

I find myself beaming at my sister and I actually begin to have fun, despite the challenges of the new coffee machine and the fact that we've got a long line of customers waiting for their coffees.

Wait. A long line of customers waiting for their coffee? Just last week that would have felt like a dream! Sure, the coffee machine might be a mountain yet to be conquered, but at least we have the customers in the café.

We finish the dance with a flourish as Bruno Mars croons, taking an impromptu bow as the room bursts into cheers and applause.

"You can't make coffee but you sure can dance!" Mrs. Chisholm announces.

"We can make coffee," I reassure both her and the rest of the room.

"We can?" Ryn asks and I glare at her to make her shush.

"We'll serve our regular coffee, and as an apology for our current coffee challenges, we would like to offer everyone a free slice of pie of your choice while we get your coffee."

There's a wave of "thank you" and "you're the best" that rolls around the room as I slip behind the counter and begin to slice up the pies and hand them out to the customers.

I notice Ryn on her phone. "Now is not the time, Ryn. We need to get the coffee machine working. I can only hold them off for so long."

"Keep your hair on, sis. I'm calling in reinforcements."

“Reinforcements?”

“You'll see. Right now, I'm going to clean this machine up, ready to be wielded by an expert.”

I'm about to reply when a woman I've never seen before in my life approaches the counter. I can tell she's not from around here. Dressed in what looks to be an authentic Chanel jacket and skirt, she's wearing a chunky gold necklace and red lipstick, her bobbed hair sleek and professionally styled.

I offer her a smile. “What flavor of pie can I get you, ma'am? We've got good old apple pie, of course. That's a staple here. But we've also got blueberry and boysenberry, and rhubarb and strawberry, which has proven unusually popular today.”

“I'm not interested in pie, thank you,” she replies without a smile, her tone more than a touch haughty.

Definitely not from around here.

“That is totally your choice. Would you like something else while we wait for the coffee machine to work?”

Her face has been entirely impassive up until this point when her painted lips lift into a whisper of a smile. “Your coffee machine isn't working? Oh, that's right. That's why you did the dance. To distract everybody.”

Judgmental much? Who is this woman?

I offer her my most winning smile and reply, “Did it work?”

“It did for me,” Mrs. Chisholm responds from her seat by the counter, her mouth full of pie. “This pie is delicious. Tell your aunt thanks.”

“Oh, I've been baking the pies for a while now.”

“You have?” She takes another mouthful and chews thoughtfully for a moment before she says, “I would never have guessed.”

That's about as much of a compliment as I could expect from Mrs. Chisholm.

The woman in the suspected Chanel suit clears her throat. “Who's the proprietor here?”

“Well, my aunt owns the place but she's not here right now.”

“When will she be back?”

“Not for some time, I imagine. I'm running the place for her.”

I think her eyebrows lift toward her hairline, but it's not entirely clear due to the fact that her forehead doesn't seem capable of moving. I suspect this woman is no stranger to the Botox needle. “And you are?”

I stretch my hand across the counter. “I'm Marlowe Cole. Welcome to the

Second Chance Café.”

She glances at my hand before she purses her lips and takes it reluctantly in hers, as though I might give her leprosy or small town-itis.

“I see,” is her response as she drops my hand. Not, “My name is Ms. Whatever and thank you for welcoming me to your establishment.” Not even, “thank you”. Just, “I see.”

The coffee machine makes a weird groaning sound and I do my best to ignore it.

“Did you need to talk to me about something in particular?” I ask when she doesn't offer anything else.

“No, no. I was simply interested to meet the proprietor of this coffeehouse and am really quite surprised at the lengths you're prepared to go in order to attract customers.”

“Oh, do you mean the dance thing? Because my sister and I only did that because Mrs. Chisholm's granddaughter... had seen...” I trail off as I take in the expression on her face. It's one of haughty superiority, like we're really quite ridiculous.

“I think I've seen everything I need to see here,” she says.

“Okaaaay,” I reply, unsure what this whole thing has been about.

It's then that I notice Oliver, my arch nemesis, the man most likely to destroy me, breezing through the door as though he has every right to be here. Which he doesn't, of course. No right, whatsoever.

Why is he here? Doesn't he know we're locked in a battle?

And most importantly, why does he have to look so dang good? Really, there should be a law against looking that good. How can you hate somebody when your heart leaps into your mouth every time your eyes land on them?

I can't help but sweep my gaze over him. He's wearing the same kind of look as the last couple times I've seen him—a pair of chinos, sensible but expensive looking loafers, and a white polo shirt that does criminal things to his dark eyes.

He has the audacity to offer me a breezy smile before his gaze roves around the room, as though looking for something.

His customers.

I almost snort laugh at the thought. We might not be able to provide them with coffee right now, but at least they're here.

He walks over to the counter. No, that's not it. He *swaggers* over to the counter, like he owns the place, all long limbs and broad shoulders and big,

bulky maleness. He's got a smile, teasing the edges of his mouth, his dark eyes trained on me.

An image of us together flashes before my eyes. I'm in his arms and he's gazing down at me, telling me I'm the only woman for him before he kisses me like he really, really means it. I catch my breath.

Not helpful, Marlowe.

This guy is the enemy. He wants to destroy the Second Chance. I can't go having daydreams about kissing him.

As he arrives at the counter, I find myself standing up taller, ready for whatever he's going to deliver me.

“How are you today, Marlowe?” he asks in his velvety rich voice.

“I'm great, thank you, Oliver.” I'm deeply disappointed in myself when my voice comes out all breathy.

“That's good to hear.” His totally kissable lips pull into a smile, rendering his face even more ridiculously handsome.

“Yes, it is. Good, that is,” I reply. “As you can see, we are rather busy today.”

Someone clears their throat.

I'm so preoccupied with Oliver that it takes me a moment to remember the snooty, strange, and altogether superior woman standing in front of me.

“I'm sorry, did you say something, ma'am?” I ask her, dragging my eyes from Oliver's.

Those painted lips quirk into another small smile. “I wish you luck with all your endeavors,” she says in a deeply cryptic way.

“Err, thanks?”

She lifts her chin, turns, and if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I would not have believed it. Oliver's gaze lands on her and he stops dead in his tracks, his face morphing from arrogant jerk to stunned child in the blink of an eye.

“Oliver,” she says through tight lips.

He blinks a couple of times before he opens his mouth to speak. “Hello, Mom.”

Chapter 12

Oliver



I pull the door to my office closed and turn to face my mother. “I didn't know you were coming.”

She looks around my office before she slides her jacket off and places it on the back of my desk chair and sits down. “I can see that.”

Feeling judged by this woman is nothing new for me. Nor is her sitting in my seat. Everything about my mother screams she's the boss and no one should forget it. Not even her son.

Unperturbed, I ask, “What brings you to Washington state?”

“Can't a mother drop in to see her son without needing a reason?”

“Of course.” I try out a smile as I take a seat in the visitor's chair.

We both know we don't have the kind of relationship where either one of us “drops in” to see the other.

“How are things going here?” she asks.

“It's still early, but we've made a strong start. The launch was great. Most of the town came to the grand opening, as well as people from the larger neighboring towns.”

“People sure do love their free stuff. How has business been since the launch?”

I pause for a beat before I admit, “It hasn't been quite as spectacular as

we'd hoped.”

“Oliver, we didn't expect it to be spectacular. We expected it to be difficult.”

“The little Gaulish village that repelled the Romans.”

She ignores my reference to the comic book. She didn't appreciate it the first time it was brought up and she sure as heck doesn't appreciate it this time, either. “Has your competition continued to profit, despite our newfound presence here?”

“You mean the Second Chance Café?” I ask and immediately regret asking such a stupid question. Of course she means the Second Chance. The only other coffeehouse in the town is a little place called Mary's off the beaten path that hardly has any customers, as far as I can tell.

“With all the dancing and carrying on over there, it's more like a Vegas review than a coffeehouse.”

“Dancing? Oh, you mean the videos on social media.”

“No, dear boy, I mean the actual dancing I just witnessed across the street at your competitor. That Marlowe Cole and barista who doesn't seem to know how to make coffee.”

I couldn't stop the smile from claiming my face for all the tea in China. Or all the coffee in America. Marlowe and Ryn performed a dance in front of the coffeehouse patrons—and I missed it?

“You seem to find that amusing,” Mom notices.

“I was simply reflecting on the fact that they need to resort to gimmicks in order to keep their customers.”

“All I'll say is it's a good thing the young woman who's running the place is pretty or they would probably have no customers at all. Their coffee machine doesn't work.”

“They serve drip coffee. That's where we have them beat. Our mocha and cappuccino with the vanilla swirl and cream were particularly popular at launch.”

“They might have served drip coffee in the past, but they've clearly upped their game recently. I saw the coffee machine. They clearly haven't benefited from a barista training program. What am I saying? They're just a small, independent coffeehouse without our kind of muscle. I suspect they're trying to play you at your own game.”

“Most coffeeshops have coffee machines, Mom. The fact they didn't was quite unusual.”

“It's a good thing they have no idea how to use it, but they will soon enough.” There's a warning tone in her voice.

“We will continue to offer our wide variety of coffee choices, made expertly here by our fully trained baristas,” I assure her.

“You seemed quite taken with Marlowe Cole, if I'm not mistaken. She's pretty, I'll grant you that, but don't let her get in the way of our plans.”

“I assure you that's not going to happen.”

Despite Marlowe's allure and the fact that I find myself drawn to her, she's not part of the bigger picture for me in Hunter's Creek.

“Good. We don't want you to be distracted from your goal.”

“I'm one hundred percent committed.”

She steeple her fingers and leans her elbows on my desk. “Tell me something then, Oliver. Why do you think they had so many more customers in their coffeeshop than you do in yours? I counted three people when I walked through earlier. Three, Oliver. And this is only week one.”

“Strictly speaking, this is the second week we've been operating.”

She glares at me.

I clear my throat and reposition myself in my chair. “They might be winning today's battle, thanks to their social media efforts and evidently the dancing staff. But Steamy Coffee will win the war. You can count on me.”

“Can I?”

“Absolutely,” I reply, resolute. “We can run some promotions to get more customers through the door. We can offer the two-for-one deal we did last month in Phoenix. That worked perfectly, if you remember.”

I had spent time in the searing heat of Phoenix, Arizona, helping the manager get her numbers back on track after a slump in profits through spring. We'd tried a number of different approaches, but the two-for-one deal was the sweet spot, and I left knowing we had won a bunch of new customers for the store.

“Of course we have our loyalty program, but I suggest we also offer some happy hour deals, particularly when the Second Chance is open, our super successful muffin and coffee combo deals, and I started running some app deals yesterday.”

“You're throwing the book at this.”

“I'm trying to put my best foot forward,” I correct. I don't want her to think I'm throwing everything at this like some desperate soldier on the last stand. I want to appear calm and in control, with an array of options close at

hand that will make this site a success.

“Why do you think people are resistant?”

“I think they're used to what they've always had. They're set in their ways. There's this one group of women—I call them the Empress Collective—”

My mother widens her eyes.

“—who I managed to get to have their daily coffee here a couple times last week, rather than the Second Chance. I feel like if I can get them, I can get others.”

“So, target them. Give them what they want.”

What they want is for me to fall in love with the dancing queen across the street.

Not that I'm about to mention *that* to my mother.

“The problem is the Second Chance pies are good and people flock to the place just for them. Our food offering is less...exciting.”

“People around here find pies exciting? I will never understand small town people, no matter how long I have to stay in a place like this.”

Have to stay in a place like this?

“But Hunter’s Creek is charming, Mom. The old buildings, the cute shops, the people, the way it's surrounded by this amazing forest. There's this pretty little pond just out of town that has a platform you can swim to—” I trail off as I notice the look on her face. My mother has perfected a look that can wither at twenty paces, thanks to many years of being a tough boss, and I’m its current recipient.

“You sound a little over-enamored with this place, Oliver.”

In my mother's estimation getting “over-enamored”, aka emotionally involved, is a massive no-no. If you get emotionally involved, you start to care, and that's the last thing you want to do. People who care about a town and its people don't do what they need to do. Their vision is blurred.

They fail.

And I cannot fail. I need this.

I bow my head. “It's just pretty, that's all.”

The truth is, I’ve become attached to this place in the short time I've been here. The town streets are so pretty with their old-fashioned building fronts and trees lining the streets. A lot of the houses have the American flag hanging over the doorway, and some are painted in different shades of blues and greens and yellows, making for an attractive palette. The weather is warm and not too hot, although they tell me it can rain a lot. The people are

friendly and easygoing. Sure, some of them are a little on the nosy side, but they're good people.

“Keep it that way. And that coffeeshop across the street with the dancing women aren't going to survive if you do your job properly. You know that, don't you?”

Smashing the competition is Steamy Coffee's modus operandi. I know that and my mother knows that. But the more time I spend here the less I want to smash anything, particularly not Marlowe's Second Chance Café.

“As I said, they have a different offering from us. We can coexist.”

“Oliver, I sincerely hope you won't let any kind of *feelings*—” she says the word with a curl of her lip “—get in the way of your goal here. You took this project on and I expect you to deliver on it. No compromises.”

I bow my head. “Of course. I know what I need to do.”

“I'm glad to hear it. I had thought I may call Thomas Moriah.”

I snap my attention to her. Thomas Moriah is the company lawyer. If my mom is thinking of calling him it's probably in response to Marlowe's more negative social media posts.

“Don't do that,” I say. “I'll talk to her about it.”

“Good. Now, take me through the current financials and your plans through the coming months. I'm due back in Seattle for a dinner tonight, and then I'm off to Minnesota.”

As I lean over my desk and point to the figures to date and talk about all the ways in which we plan on attracting and keeping new customers, I can't help but let my mind slide back to Marlowe, the beautiful, dancing proprietor of the Second Chance Café, whose business I'm expected to grind into dust by whatever means possible.

Chapter 13

Marlowe



I slide the key into the front door of the Second Chance and glance across the street. It might be closing time for my coffeehouse, but Steamy Coffee is still steaming ahead, if you'll excuse the pun.

Not for long, I hope as I check that the door's firmly locked and make my way down the street. Our newest marketing strategy kicks in soon with the launch of our dinner menu. We'll be closing up at our usual time and opening again at 5:00. We've already got a stack of bookings, the locals eager to try our recipes for dinner as well as for breakfast and lunch, and with Ivy and her band set to play, I think we're in for a spectacular launch—ininitely better than free mass-produced coffee and plastic snacks per Oliver Langdon. At least in my opinion.

It's been a couple of days since Oliver turned up at that café and got surprised by his mom. I say surprised, but it was more like blindsided. The look on his face when he realized she was here has stayed with me since. It was like he transformed from easy, breezy—and I think a touch flirtatious—to something akin to shock. If you've ever seen that famous painting *The Scream*, you'll know what I'm talking about.

I get it. She's one scary lady. She certainly made me feel like I was being judged—and not coming up roses. But she's his *mom*. Surely, she doesn't

treat him like that?

Despite myself, I feel a tinge of pity for him. But just a tinge.

He's still the enemy.

I pick up my phone and keys and am about to leave when I decide to take a quick look at Mike's Instagram. It's been days since I checked it, and I'm surprised when I realize that I hadn't even been thinking about it—or him.

I suppose the war with Oliver Langdon has been taking up most of the real estate in my mind.

A quick scroll shows me there are only a couple new posts: one of the view of someplace he had hiked over the weekend, and another of his dessert at a restaurant I don't know in Seattle.

I don't know what I'm looking for. Evidence that he's still happy with his wife? That he regrets what he did to me? Considering he's never posted about anything of any actual substance—nothing about me or his wife— I can't be surprised his feed tells me nothing.

And a big part of me doesn't even care.

Huh. Interesting.

Smiling to myself, I slide my phone into my purse.

I climb into my car and drive the short distance home. I've been living with my parents since I got back to Hunter's Creek, although my plan has definitely been to find my own place sometime soon.

I push my way through the front door and into the empty house. Mom and Dad are both at work, so I've got the place to myself to unwind from the day before they get home. You see, my family loves to talk and talking is what I do all day, every day. Sometimes you need to zone out and forget about everyone else for a while, maybe get lost in a book, listen to some music, or go for a swim in the pond.

The thought is so tempting. The feel of cool water on my skin as I glide across the pond, floating on my back and gazing up as the clouds float gently by on the light breeze, the birds chirping and the breeze rustling the trees.

Bliss.

Unless of course my personal time is interrupted by men in swimming trunks who have no business being there.

But there's no pond for me today. There's no time. Today is the day of the working bee, beautifying the town and making it shine for the movie premiere. As much as I might like to float in the pond water and gaze at the sky, there is no rest for the wicked.

I slide out of my heels, my feet thanking me, and change into a pair of shorts and a white V-neck T-shirt, slipping a pair of old tennis shoes on my feet. I tie my hair in a messy bun on top of my head and lather on some sunscreen. The sun is beating down and those fair-skinned among us definitely need that protection to avoid looking like a shiny red beach ball in the morning.

Arriving at the town square a few minutes later, some people are hard at work, planting shrubs and flowers, power washing sidewalks, and sweeping up, while others are standing around chatting, holding Steamy Coffee mugs in their hands.

I pull my lips into a line and try not to let it bother me. If the Second Chance were open, they would be getting their coffee from us.

At least I hope so.

I spot Mrs. Jacobson among the coffee-sipping crowd and make a beeline for her.

She looks up as I arrive, putting her hands around the coffee cup so I can't read the label.

Too late, lady. Busted.

“How wonderful of you to come, Marlowe. I know how busy you are running that coffeehouse, especially now that you’ve announced you're opening for dinner, and with live music, too,” she coos. “You’re a superstar!”

“I don’t know about that, but we're super excited about our new offerings, Mrs. Jacobson. Hey, everyone. Great work so far. The town square is already looking amazing,” I say.

“We need to put our best foot forward,” Bernie the butcher says.

“It's not every day the world comes to Hunter’s Creek,” Alfred Whitlow, the retired lawyer adds to murmurs of agreement.

“We sure are lucky,” Mrs. Jacobson says. “Now, Marlowe. I've got you painting the bandstand. Lewis Bernhardt has already done the roof and ceiling because he's got the big ladder, so I need you to paint the rest of it. You’ve been assigned a partner, who already has the supplies ready to go.”

“Sure thing,” I reply with smile. “Who's my partner?”

“I am,” a deep voice says from behind me.

I turn to see Oliver, in a pair of blue plaid shorts and a white T-shirt, a mischievous grin on his annoyingly handsome face, as though this is the funniest thing to happen all day. Well, maybe it is to him, but it sure as heck isn't to me.

“You?” I splutter in disbelief.

“Me.”

“But you're not... you're from... why?”

Oliver is the last person I thought would volunteer his time to help beautify Hunter's Creek. I would have thought he would be too busy trying to conquer the world of coffee to participate in something so trivial.

“You seem to be having some trouble completing your sentences, Marlowe. Perhaps you need a cup of coffee from Steamy Coffee? I can go get you one, if you like. We're still open, unlike some places in town.”

I glare at him. The nerve of that man! And he's still smiling at me as though he's saying nice things, when we all know he's making digs at not just me but at my aunt's coffeehouse.

How rude. And unnecessary.

“No, thank you,” I say through tight lips. I swing back to Mrs. Jacobson. “This must be some kind of mistake. Surely, I'm paired up with one of my sisters or Gabe or, really, anyone else.”

Anyone but him.

“Harper and Christopher are already working down the street, Ryn is at her beauty school class, and Gabe is at the glass blowing studio. So, you see? There's no mistake,” she replies smugly.

I blink at her a few times. It's like she has an encyclopedic knowledge of everybody's whereabouts. If I didn't know she was one of the gossip queens of the town, I'd be thoroughly freaked out.

Then it dawns on me. Of course it isn't a mistake. This is all totally planned, part of the Ladies' Committee's scheme to matchmake Oliver and me.

Don't they know that's never going to happen? Never. Going. To. Happen.

“Mrs. Jacobson, is there really no one else?” I ask under my breath. I'm not too proud to beg.

“You were the last two to volunteer, dear. It makes sense that you work together. Besides, all the other young folk are tied up doing tasks right now, and we really do need that bandstand painted.”

I open my mouth to protest and then close it again. The last thing I want to do is come across as some kind of princess, only volunteering if I get to work with my family or friends. But Oliver Langdon? Seriously? Of all the people in this town.

I set my jaw. I know when I'm beat, and there really is no arguing with Mrs. Jacobson when her mind is set.

"Where are the paint and brushes?" I ask through gritted teeth.

"I've got them," Oliver replies, holding up a large pail of paint and what must be a paper bag of paint brushes. "The other paint colors are already set out over by the bandstand, so we're ready to go when you are."

"Thank you, Oliver. We are so grateful to have you on our team." Mrs. Jacobson purrs in that weird, breathy voice she uses with him. "I suggest you two get straight to work," she says with a clap of her hands.

With the enthusiasm of a snail faced with crossing a desert, I turn to Oliver and say, "I guess we'd better get this over with then."

"You seem thrilled to be doing this," he observes as we make our way to the bandstand in the center of the square.

"I'm happy to be useful for the town." I let the unspoken words hang between us.

His lips quirk, something I've learned to expect with this man and his smug demeanor. He seems to find everything I say amusing.

What's with that?

"You really are quite the charmer, Marlowe. No wonder you chose to work in a customer service environment."

Huh!

"How's *your* customer service environment?"

"Busy. Yours?"

"*Super* busy."

"That's good."

"Oh, it's more than good. It's great."

Okay, so I might be exaggerating just a little right now, but the last thing I want to do is give him the satisfaction of knowing that we've had to work our butts off to attract our regular customers back since he opened up.

"Great, huh? Is that because of the new coffee machine you got?"

I shouldn't be surprised he knows about it. Well, too bad, Oliver. We can play you at your own game. Well, once we get the coffee machine working, that is.

"Oh, wait. You don't know how to get it working, right? That's what I heard."

"I do too," I shoot back, despite it not being the truth.

"That's weird. The customers I talked to told me you gave everyone free

pie because you couldn't get the machine to work. One of them told me you and your sister got drenched, although that could have been an exaggeration.”

I twist my mouth. Which of my faithless customers told Oliver about my coffee machine woes?

“We’re experiencing some minor technical issues right now, but I’m sure we’ll get it working soon enough,” I sniff.

“So, in the meantime you’ll just keep dancing?”

“Excuse me?” I sputter.

Why does the idea that he’s seen our dances embarrass me so much more than others seeing them?

“I heard you’ve been putting on dance acts for your customers. In fact, I hear they’re quite popular with customers waiting for their coffee.”

I chew on my lip. “One time, Oliver. It was one time. And it was only because a customer wanted to see it. One of our regulars, in fact.” If by “regular” I mean someone who visits the coffeehouse once every six months or so and spends her entire time complaining.

“I was sorry I missed it.”

“Why? So you could laugh at me?”

“I didn’t say anything about laughing at you.”

My eyes flash to his and I see that spark of the flirtation that fueled our first meetings, back when he was just an attractive and mysterious stranger—and not my coffeeshop enemy.

But the last thing I’m going to do is flirt with this man or think about him in his swimming trunks, all glistening skin and sinewy muscles....

Marlowe, stop.

He’s my enemy. Nothing more.

I clear my throat.

As Oliver gives one of the paint cans a decent shake, I pull the brushes out of the paper bag and unwrap them, laying them out, ready for use.

“We’ll need to wear these, unless we want to get paint on our clothes.”

Oliver hands me a white coverall with a central zipper.

I throw my gaze over it. “I think I’m good.”

“Come on. You’ll look cute. Like Casper the friendly ghost, only with red hair.”

I arch my brows at him. “It’s auburn, actually. But, of course, be my guest if you want to look like a kids’ cartoon character yourself.” I wave my hand in front of him like I’m a game show host.

He drops the white coveralls beside the paint cans. “These are old clothes. I don't care if they get paint on them.”

“Good for you.” My tone of voice may be a touch sarcastic. Why would I care if he got paint on his precious T-shirt and shorts? He’s a Langdon. He’s got more money than sense.

He cracks open the paint can and pours some into a couple of trays. Handing me one, he says, “Where do you want to start?”

“How about the areas that need painting?”

“You know, your talents are wasted in your job. The government could sure do with a mind like yours.”

Well, would you look at who's being sarcastic now?

“Is that so? And what could the government do with your brain? Fry it up with onions?”

I know I’m being petty. I’m acting like we’re in some TV show about bickering high school kids, but I. Do. Not. Care.

Oliver Langdon deserves all my pettiness. All of it.

He sucks in a breath as though I’ve scalded him with my words. “Marlowe Cole, I never knew you could be so savage.”

I offer him a simpering smile, dripping in insincerity. “In that case, you can watch as I steal all your customers.”

“Is that right? So how come we had so many of your former customers in my coffeehouse today? In fact, some of them have to-go cups here.” He looks over my shoulder, narrowing his eyes as though searching the crowd. “Oh, there they are. Do you see? There has to be at least seven or eight of them. They're the ones holding the cups that say Steamy Coffee, in case you were wondering.”

I don't give him the satisfaction of turning around to look. Besides the fact that I've already noted who had those coffee cups on my arrival, I don't want to make him feel like he's making a valid point. Even if he is.

Instead I say, “Let me see the color scheme.”

“No response to the fact that *all* of the people with coffee cups here got them from my coffeehouse?”

“It’s only because the Second Chance is closed and yours is the only place open on Main Street right now. Plus, we're not so brash as to splash our name across our takeout cups.”

“Brash, or good marketers?”

We share a look. It's clear we're not going to see eye-to-eye on this—or

on anything, for that matter.

I thrust my hand at him, palm up. “Can I see the color scheme? We really should start this before we lose the daylight.”

“You didn't say please.”

Seriously? Who does this guy think he is? My dad?

“Please,” I grind out.

He smirks at me, that self-satisfied smirk he seems to enjoy so much. “Since you put it so nicely. Here.” He pulls a folded piece of paper from his back pocket and opens it up. It's a drawing of the town square bandstand, showing which color goes where. It starts on the brickwork at the base of the bandstand, that needs to be repainted brick red—no points for originality there—moving to the poles that hold the structure up, which are to be painted in white, and black and gray for the steps and floor.

“It's exactly the same scheme,” I say.

“Tanya told me it's a spruce up, rather than a new design. Two coats on everything.”

I raise my eyebrows at him. “Tanya?”

“Tanya Jacobson. I believe you know her. She's the one who has this crazy idea of matchmaking us.”

I feel a blush claim my cheeks at the thought of Oliver knowing about the ridiculous Ladies' Committee's scheme. “Of course I know who Tanya Jacobson is. She's been the librarian at the town library forever. It's just *I* call her Mrs. Jacobson out of respect.”

“She asked me to call her Tanya the day I met her,” he replies, as though I should be affronted that he gets to call the town's chief busybody by her first name. Which, between you and me, I am a little affronted by. But there's no way I'm telling Oliver that.

So, I do what any adult would do and ignore him.

“I'll start on the columns if you want to get a start on the red brick?”

“I thought *I* might start on the columns and *you* could start on the red brick,” he shoots back.

Is he deliberately disagreeing with me? What am I asking? Of course he is.

“I would prefer to paint the columns.”

“Me too,” he counters.

We glare at one another.

“Fine. We'll both paint the columns,” I say through gritted teeth.

This man!

“I do love a woman who can compromise,” he replies, that smirk firmly in place.

I dip my paint brush in the paint and begin to drag it up and down the first column. “I imagine you get that from a lot of women, Oliver.”

He chuckles as though I've said something funny. “Do you now? Well, you'll just have to get to know me better and find out.”

“I know you plenty already, thanks.”

“You think you know me?”

I turn to face him. He has a paint-dipped brush in one hand and has just reached up to apply some paint high on the column, exposing a strip of slim, taut, and tan belly.

I bite down on my lip and look away. The last thing I want to do is revisit those thoughts about Oliver's naked torso.

Not helpful.

“I know your type,” I sniff as I dip my brush in my tray of paint and begin to apply it.

“What is my type, in the world according to Marlowe Cole?”

I pause, as though running through the possibilities in my brain, which of course I don't need to. I've already come to my conclusions about Oliver Langdon. “You're confident, privileged, successful. Oh, and undoubtedly good with the ladies.”

He snort-laughs. “Good with the ladies? Where did you get that idea?”

“You know what I mean. You've got that air of confidence and you look”—I wave my hand at him—“like you do. Women go for that kind of stuff.”

“Marlowe Cole, is that a compliment?”

I return to my painting. “No. It's a fact.”

“A fact that also happens to be a compliment.”

“Feel free to take it as such, if you wish,” I sniff, suddenly sounding like I'm a character from *Bridgerton*.

“I will take it as such. And thank you.”

I don't need to look at him to know he's smirking at me. I can feel it, boring through the thin material of my T-shirt.

It's also a lot safer not to look at him, just in case there's another unexpected flash of taut belly. That, I could do without.

“Anything else you care to share about my type?”

“Why? Because you like talking about yourself so much? Figures.”

“I’m just interested in what you think about me.”

“You really wanna know?” I ask.

“Oh, yes.”

“All right. You’ve got an air, like you know life is always going to work out for you. You lead a charmed life, and I bet you don’t even realize it.”

“A charmed life? How so?”

“People like you have it easy. Your mom just happens to run the most successful coffee chain in the Pacific Northwest, and I bet my last dollar you’re the total apple of her eye. You get whatever you want from Mommy, her precious son who she totally dotes on.”

His paintbrush pauses for a moment and I wonder if I’ve hit a nerve.

“That’s a lot of assumptions for one person to make,” he replies, his tone even, controlled.

Yup. Definitely hit a nerve.

His gaze lingers on mine, and I swear I see something in his eyes that makes me instantly regret my words.

I can’t revel in my triumph. I can’t enjoy this moment. I feel...what do I feel? As I look at Oliver, pasting on a smile that looks as fake as Ryn’s eyelashes that day she learned how to add falsies, I feel something akin to...*guilt*.

“Sorry,” I murmur. “I have no right making assumptions about you or your life.”

All he does is give me a brief nod before he dips his brush in the paint and goes back to work.

Guilt twists inside. I might not like the guy, I might wish he and his big corporate coffee chain hadn’t come to town, but even if he’s all the things I said he is, I don’t want to hurt him.

Chapter 14

Oliver



I'm not going to lie, Marlowe's assumption that my mother dotes on me stings. If only she knew the truth, that it's in fact the opposite. That I'm here in Hunter's Creek in my latest attempt to prove myself to her. To show her I'm as good as the actual son she doted on. My brother.

Sure, I get that it was all part of the little sparring competition Marlowe and I have going on right now—a sparring competition that was only making her that much more appealing in my eyes, up until about a minute ago—and I'm sure she doesn't know how deep her words cut.

The thing is, I know I don't have the sort of relationship with my mother that I see others have. That I want. It's not that I want to be doted on. I'd take being seen for who I am for starters, instead of always feeling second best.

When I was a kid, Mom wasn't around a whole lot. She was a single mom of three, with no family support, trying to get a new business off the ground. Despite the fact that I understand how it was hard for her and that she had to put her priorities somewhere, I wish that her priorities were us.

After Marlowe stormed out of my coffeehouse that day she came by in her “disguise” and running straight into her dad—literally—I'll admit I hung back and observed their interaction. Although it was clear she was initially suspicious of why her parents were visiting her competition, it was obvious to

anyone who cared to look that they not only love each other, but genuinely like each other, too.

I decided in that moment that self-reflection on the state of my own relationship with my mom wasn't advised.

Who wants to look in a mirror and find their relationship wanting?

Much better to focus on getting this painting done, and maybe even get back to the flirtatious sparring we were involved in before Marlowe accidentally pierced me with her words.

At least she apologized. That makes her a decent person. She hit her target and saw how effective it was, but instead of shooting the final killer blow, she pulled back.

Marlowe Cole has a heart.

But then I knew that all along.

I stand back and survey our work. The bandstand has started to look a lot glossier. After we've completed one coat of paint on all the columns—me stretching up to the high parts that Marlowe can't reach—we turn our efforts to the red brickwork that runs around the base of the structure, opening up the red paint bucket and beginning to work on the brickwork.

“I have a question,” I begin, piercing our mutually held silence. “I've seen more than just your dancing online. You've got some slogans going on there, too. Something about corporate coffee chains and how evil they are? Tell me if I've got that wrong.”

“I thought you said you had a question, Oliver.”

“You're not denying it.”

She stops painting. “What's there to deny? You've opened this new glitzy coffeeshop in direct competition with my aunt's place and you expect us to sit back and let it happen?”

“There are many ways to skin a cat.”

“That's a delightful expression.”

“What I mean is, you don't need to attack us in order to promote yourselves.”

Her fist is on her hip now. “Why not? Your very existence is attacking us. We need to take a stand. We need the townsfolk to understand that if they choose your place, not only are they choosing big corporate coffee, but they're hurting the small, local, much more ethical coffeehouse.”

“You're insinuating that my company doesn't run an ethical business? That's quite an accusation, Marlowe. I wouldn't go saying that kind of thing

lightly, if I were you.”

“That sounds a lot like a threat to me.”

How did we get to this point? One minute I'm taking her jibe about my relationship with my mother to heart and the next we're discussing whether the company my family owns operates a shady business? Talk about getting derailed—and *not* going back to the flirty banter I enjoyed from before.

“All I'm saying is, I understand why you're doing it, but I wish you could go about it in a less confrontational way. Accentuate your positives rather than our negatives. Perceived negatives, that is.”

“Or what?”

Wow, this woman will not back down. What was it I was just thinking about her having a heart?

“I don't want there to be any repercussions from what you're saying online.”

“That's definitely a threat.”

“No. It's not a threat. It's me trying to help. What you need to understand is Steamy Coffee is a big corporation with a lot of muscle behind it. I don't want you getting yourself in any hot water over saying something online that could be taken out of context.”

She narrows her eyes at me. “That's just a smooth way of threatening me.”

I huff out a frustrated breath. “You can see it that way if you want to. I mean well.”

She returns her focus to painting as she says, “Now he's telling me what I want to do.”

I huff out a breath. “You're impossible, did you know that? What am I asking? Of course you do.”

Our gazes lock, two opponents on the battlefield, sizing one another up. Her hands are balled into fists on her hips, splatters of paint on her hands and bare legs, and I don't think I've ever seen her look more attractive—and angry.

I'm the one to break the staring contest. “You've got a little paint here.” I point at a patch above one of her eyebrows where there's a streak of brick red paint.

“I do?” She attempts to rub it off. “Better?”

All she's done is smeared the paint further and I can't help but wonder if she is the only woman on whom smeared paint actually looks good. “If the

look you're going for is Apache warrior Princess, then sure. That's a lot better."

She shoots me one of her if-looks-could-kill looks that I've grown to expect. "A little bit of paint on my forehead isn't going to make me look like an Apache warrior."

I shrug. "Sure. Whatever you say."

She has a questioning look on her face, clearly wrestling with whether she actually does look like an Apache warrior Princess, or whether I'm just messing with her.

"You're absolutely no help, did you know that?" she tells me.

"Is that a rhetorical question? Because after our 'discussion' today it sure feels rhetorical to me."

I know I'm being difficult, but so is she and sparking off this woman has become my new favorite sport.

She makes a weird, frustrated sound before she snatches the paint brush from my hand and storms off, telling me she's going to wash them.

I admit it. I watch as she goes. Can you blame me? She's a beautiful woman wearing a pair of jean shorts and a white T-shirt that shows me just how womanly she is, her irritation with me propelling her along as she storms across the town square.

I'm still watching her when she glances back over her shoulder at me with a scowl. I lift my hand in a wave, offering her a smile. Of course it only serves to irritate her more, and I laugh as she glowers at me.

Messing with her is so easy. And fun. Definitely fun.

A few minutes later, I've already started on another area when Marlowe reappears, holding the wet but clean brushes in one hand and a couple of bottles of water in the other.

I straighten up and take one of the bottles. "For me? Marlowe, you shouldn't have."

"Oh, I know that. Your good friend 'Tanya' gave them to me."

"You mean Mrs. Jacobson," I tease as I unscrew the lid and take a long, deep drink, grateful as it quenches my thirst in the warmth of the summer evening.

I lower the bottle to see Marlowe staring at me.

"What?" I ask.

She blinks and looks away. "Nothing."

There's something in the way she says it that has me smiling to myself.

She was checking me out. I know she was.

The thought does good things to my belly.

I put my water bottle in the shade. "Give me yours," I instruct and she passes me her water bottle, which I place next to mine. "Look. Our water bottles can be side by side without arguing. Do you think we could manage it?"

"I'm not the one arguing," she says mildly as she dips her brush in the paint and begins to apply a coat. "That is one hundred percent you."

"I think it's technically impossible for one person to argue on their own."

"Patrick Chadwick manages it, so I'm sure it's possible."

"Who's Patrick Chadwick?"

"The older gentleman who walks around town a lot."

I look at her blankly. That describes half the population of Hunter's Creek. "Which one?"

"He's got thinning white hair and wears a plaid flannel shirt."

"Is it red?" I ask leadingly.

"Yup."

"That literally reduces the options to every male in this town." I deliver my response with a triumphant lift of my chin.

"No, it doesn't."

"You can't tell me you haven't noticed the love affair people have with plaid flannel shirts here. Even Christopher Young, the lawyer, wears one sometimes, and he comes from New York. I might need to get one myself."

She throws her gaze over me. "I'm not sure you're the Hunter's Creek type."

I know she means this as an insult, but I ask her what she means in the most innocent way I can muster.

"You're just not a small town, Washington state kinda guy, that's all."

"Is this gonna be because I'm a Langdon again, because I told you, we didn't grow up with a whole lot."

"Maybe?"

Definitely.

"So, how come you don't wear a plaid shirt every day?" I ask as I dip my brush in the paint and resume painting once more.

"It's not like it's a uniform, you know. You don't get issued a shirt when you arrive in town or anything."

"If it was a uniform, you'd clearly be breaking the rules. No plaid, no

jeans, no work boots. You're a rebel."

She scoffs. "A rebel?"

"You look more like you're going to a corporate job in a city than running a small town coffeeshop."

"So do you."

"I don't wear a suit."

"But you don't look like you belong here, either."

"So, we're a couple of misfits."

Her eyes flash to mine, but she keeps her mouth shut. Have I said something I shouldn't?

Of course, what I want to tell her is that she looks good in what she chooses to wear to work every day, but I know coming from me it will sound disingenuous.

"Shall we focus on painting? It seems as though I've done a lot more than you," she says.

"Is that so?" I run my eyes over her section and then mine. She might be right, but I'm not going to let her know it. "I would say I've done a lot more than you, but then I'm a fast worker." I collect some more paint on my brush and slap it on the brickwork.

"And I'm not?"

"You could really up your game."

Indignant, she quickly paints a section, flicking paint over a shrub in her haste.

I eye the shrub. "Oh, it's like that, is it?"

"Like what? I'm just a faster painter than you."

"Is that so?"

Our respective sections are now growing closer and closer, and when I slap on some more paint, some of it accidentally splatters onto the bare skin of her leg.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to do that," I say immediately because I didn't mean it. Not consciously, anyway.

She looks at the splatters of paint on her leg and back up at me. With the paint smears on her face and this latest addition to her leg, she looks reminiscent of a Jackson Pollock painting. The thought has me smiling—right up until she splatters my leg with paint.

"Oh, Oliver, I'm so sorry," she says, her eyes wide.

I couldn't tell you what came over me exactly, but it was akin to the little

kid inside of me wanting to break free and have some fun. I aim my brush at Marlowe and flick some of the brick red paint at her. It splatters across her white T-shirt like a dark blood stain.

“Oops.”

Her jaw drops open as she looks down at her top and then back up at me, her eyes wide. “You did not just do that.”

“The evidence points to the fact that I *did* just do that. Total accident. Of course.”

She narrows her gaze as though sizing me up. And then, in the blink of an eye, she stabs one side of my chest with her brush, leaving behind a red blob of paint.

Her face is a study. She looks both satisfied with her efforts and shocked by them at the same time.

“You gave me a nipple,” I tell her.

She presses her lips together, her eyes dancing. “Well, I suppose I should even that out for you.” She stabs the other side of my chest with her brush, leaving me with two red blobs, one on each pec.

“All I did was splatter a tiny bit of paint on your shirt. You've made me look like I'm wearing some kind of weird male nipple shirt.”

I notice her bite back a smile. “Actually, I think it looks more like eyes so I'm going to have to do this.” She dips her paintbrush in the bucket and paints a semi-circle across my stomach.

It tickles, and the fact that she's almost touching me makes my belly do some weird things.

“That's better. Now you look like a smile emoji, which is fitting because that's what you do all the time: smile.”

Only around you.

I feel the laughter bubbling up inside of me. It's the emoji, it's the situation, it's the paint, it's the fact that the woman I've been thinking about is so close to me I could reach out and touch her.

A moment later I let it out, laughing at the sheer absurdity of the woman who runs my competition, the woman my mom has told me to stamp out, the woman I am increasingly attracted to, has painted a massive smile on my torso.

After a beat, Marlowe joins me, her laughter tinkling on the breeze.

I dip my brush back in the paint and flick it at her again, this time with significantly more paint. She squeezes her eyes shut as the paint lands across

her T-shirt and her face, forming a long diagonal line.

“Oh, no you didn't,” she scolds.

“Oh, yes, I did. And you know what? I'm gonna do it again.”

Which is exactly what I do, this time running my paint brush right across her belly. Her retaliation is swift and assured. Needless to say, when she thrusts her paint brush at me again this time she paints a line across my forehead, down to my jaw, stopping only when she gets to my shoulder.

“Not the hair,” I complain as my hand flies to my head. Sure enough, I'm covered in paint. “Anything but the hair.”

This she finds totally hilarious, a snort-laugh erupting from her. Which of course makes me laugh all the more, as well as paint her again, this time right across her legs.

All mayhem breaks loose. We're flicking paint at each other, slapping it on, until eventually Marlowe picks up her tray and chucks its contents right at me. At this point our formerly white T-shirts now look like we've been involved in some serious hand-to-hand combat, both of us laughing big belly laughs, having the time of our lives, and not quite knowing how we went from making metaphorical stabs at one another to this.

But I know which one I prefer—despite the cleanup ahead.

“You're going to pay for that, Cole,” I say as I scoop up some more paint and take a hold of her arm.

She turns back, giggling, her eyes dancing, and suddenly I don't want to paint her. I want to do something else with her entirely. *Something else* involves a whole lot less paint and a whole lot more of just me and her. Alone. Together.

With that thought, the atmosphere between us shifts and we both freeze, our gazes locked for a beat, two. My heart thuds like a drum, my veins flowing with the unspoken desire I've felt for her since the moment I laid eyes on her at the pond.

Her breaths are short and sharp, her chest rising and falling with each one she takes. Her gaze drops to my mouth before she lifts it back to my eyes and I know. I just know. She feels this, too. She wants to kiss me as much as I want to kiss her, no matter all the paint and all the mess and even all the people milling around nearby.

I drop her arm but she doesn't move. I take a step closer to her, my heart banging against my rib cage.

“Marlowe,” I murmur and I'm surprised at how breathless my own voice

sounds.

“Yes?” she breathes and I swear she’s looking at me with the answer I’m looking for. The answer that has my heart doing cartwheels across this paint-splattered bandstand.

A very stern, raised voice punctures our bubble, that was full of so much promise.

“What in the name of lumber do you think you’re doing?!”

Marlowe and I freeze.

“Busted,” she mouths and we share a smile.

I straighten up, resisting the urge to hide the evidence behind my back. But let’s face it, hiding the paintbrush isn’t going to do a thing. We’re covered in the evidence. Literally.

Tanya Jacobson crosses her arms over her chest, her brows raised as she takes in the scene. Marlowe and I are side-by-side, covered in paint, looking as guilty as a couple of kids covered in chocolate beside a half-eaten cake.

“Well? What do you have to say for yourselves?” she asks.

“We’re sorry,” Marlowe says.

“Yes, we’re sorry,” I echo. “We got carried away.”

“We weren’t thinking,” she adds.

Marlowe’s eyes flash to mine and a jolt of electricity whizzes through my veins.

She’s right. We weren’t thinking. We were messing around, lost in the moment, allowing our inner kids to come out to play. And it was exhilarating. If I could, I’d have a paint fight with Marlowe Cole any day of the week. That way I’d get to hear her laugh. I’d get to see the joy on her gorgeous face. I’d get to be close to her, not thinking about coffeehouses and competition and all of the stuff that has driven our relationship.

I’d get to be with the beautiful and interesting woman I met at the pond, the one I wanted to know better.

“Look at the state of you! You’re both covered in paint and you’ve splattered it all over the columns and the floor. Look! And look at the plants!” She points at the row of flowering plants beside the bandstand. “Eunice and Barry spent all afternoon planting them.”

“We’ll replace the plants,” I tell her as other volunteers wander over to see what the commotion is. Their eyes widen when they take in the state of the two proprietors of the Main Street coffeehouses.

“And we’ll paint over the mess, too,” Marlowe adds. “We’ll make it look

just perfect. I promise, Mrs. Jacobson.”

“You’re right. You will,” she replies, her jaw set.

The crowd murmurs and I notice Tanya’s frown lifts when she spies the other members of the Empress Collective. They must be loving this. We might have made a mess, but they’ll conclude their matchmaking efforts have well and truly paid off today.

They’ll have us married before the end of the week.

I glance at my partner in crime. Why am I not freaked out at the idea of marrying Marlowe Cole? I mean, it's not as though I hear wedding bells in our future anytime soon or anything, but I could definitely see myself with her. In love with her. Married to her.

I suck in a sharp breath.

What am I thinking?

Thoughts of love and marriage with a woman I barely know, who clearly sees me as her enemy, and who, despite the flirtatious paint battle we've just shared and what felt like some serious sexual tension, has made it clear that she thinks I'm an overprivileged jerk.

When I've dated women, the very idea of marriage had me throwing on my running shoes and sprinting to the nearest exit.

Why not with Marlowe?

When Evelyn left, I swore I'd never marry again. It wasn't worth it. But, with Marlowe, the thought has my heart expanding.

Which is certifiably insane for so many reasons.

1. We barely know one another.
2. We're business enemies.
3. She clearly hates me.

That last point plays on my mind. Does she hate me? She stands to lose a lot if Steamy Coffee is the success my mom wants it to be. Her aunt could lose her business and Marlowe would be out of a job. So that makes us business rivals, but does that mean she hates me? She throws barbs at me, she acts like I'm the corporate devil, but there's a definite attraction between us that I know I, for one, cannot ignore.

And I want to know Marlowe Cole a whole lot better.

Chapter 15

Marlowe



“It’s broken!” Ryn calls out in frustration as she drops a metal milk jug on the counter with a *clang*.

Customers turn to look, and I blow out a breath.

Since the day we got our new—okay, second hand but new to us—coffee machine, it hasn’t worked properly. It’s sprayed us with water and left coffee grounds in the coffee and has generally been a horrible investment, and definitely not serving the purpose Aunt Sheila bought it for.

And we still see customers traipsing past our windows, sucking on their Steamy Coffee takeout.

Of course, we assumed the malfunctioning coffee machine was down to user error because we’re total novices. But enough YouTube clips and going over and over my notes from the short barista course we took, I’ve come to the conclusion that there is most definitely something wrong with this machine.

“It’s definitely broken,” Ivy declares an hour later when she pops in on her lunch break. “I know. I’ve used a few different machines and none of them spray water directly at you every time you use them.”

“It definitely does that,” Ryn says as she pats her face dry with a paper towel. “We need to send it back.”

“We can’t send it back,” I say. “Aunt Sheila got it from a friend of a friend. It’s not like it came from a store. And we’ve got the repair guy coming in a couple days. We’ll just have to serve regular drip coffee until then.”

“But everyone will go to Stupid Coffee for their coffee fix!” Ryn protests. Is it immature of me that I like the nickname for the coffeeshop across the street?

Probably.

But I don’t care.

“I don’t blame them. Drip coffee is so last century,” Ivy sniffs helpfully.

Ryn nods. “So last century, sis.”

Valentina, one of my baristas and a girl who was a couple years behind Ryn at Hunter’s Creek High, breezes in through the kitchen door. “Hey, everyone. Machine’s still not working?”

“It’s broken,” Ryn states once more.

“Yes, we all know it’s broken. We don’t need to keep reminding ourselves,” I snap.

Ryn throws her hands in the air. “No need to go all big sister on me. I’m just pointing out a fact.”

Ivy pulls her lips into a line. “Definitely a fact.”

“Still?” Valentina scoops her long dark hair into a ponytail. “Pity. I could murder a triple shot venti espresso right now.”

I arch my brow. “You mean like the one from Steamy Coffee?”

She has the good grace to give an apologetic shrug.

“Machine trouble?” Mrs. Jacobson asks, appearing at the counter along with Mrs. Ashbridge.

“It’s broken,” Ryn points out for what must be the gazillionth time today.

“We’ve got a repairman coming to look at it in a couple days,” I tell her. “Would you like your regular coffee today?”

“Could you at least make it taste like one of the Steamy Coffee ones?” Mrs. Ashbridge asks. “Add some syrup and some cream or something.”

“I’m sure we could do that for you,” I reply, wondering if we even have syrup.

“I know who can help you with this machine,” Mrs. Jacobson announces.

We all turn to look at her.

“Oliver Langdon.”

My eyes widen. “Oliver?”

“Why would the super-hot Steamy Coffee owner help? This is the competition,” Ivy points out.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Mrs. Jacobson replies with a sly grin. “Do you have any idea why he might help, Marlowe?”

I twist my mouth. Subtlety isn’t Mrs. Jacobson’s strong suit.

“Marlowe, dear, you’ve got some paint in your hair.” She points at my hair as though it’s not one hundred percent obvious that she’s referring to the fact that Oliver and I shared a moment when we were painting the bandstand, a moment she definitely sees as entirely engineered by her and her scheming Ladies’ Committee.

Ever since the Paint Incident, as I’m referring to Oliver’s and my paint fight at the bandstand, I’ve avoided him like the plague. It’s not just because I’m embarrassed that we acted like a couple of nine-year-old kids, throwing paint at one another when we should have been beautifying the bandstand. That was bad enough. What’s really gotten to me is how much I enjoyed being with him. It started with snide comments and banter, took a regretful detour in which I inadvertently hit on an uncomfortable topic, and then moved to us actually getting along. So much so, in fact, at one point, after we’d thrown enough paint at one another to paint the entire bandstand, we had a moment. As in an almost kissing moment.

It was like we simultaneously decided we’d had enough of flirting through the medium of paint—because let’s face it, that’s what we were doing, even if we didn’t fully realize it at the time—and it was time to take things to the next level.

The kissing level.

The very thought has my pulse jumping to life.

And I really thought it was about to happen. I was convinced. Picture this: we’d locked eyes, his speaking volumes to me as his lips parted. My heart had thrashed in my chest, screaming at me to grab him and kiss his face off, and I was convinced he wanted the exact same thing. We’d even begun to lean toward one another, closing the already small distance between us as I breathed in his deliciously intoxicating Oliver scent.

Of course my head had been screaming at me that this is the man who’s trying to destroy my aunt’s coffeeshop. This is the man I should hate.

But I’d silenced it, lost in the moment, the spark I’d felt the moment we met growing into an unstoppable fire, telling me how much I wanted his lips on mine.

If we hadn't been interrupted, it would have happened. I know it. And I can only imagine how incredible it would have been.

All I can say is thank goodness for Mrs. Jacobson—which is not something I would have ever thought I'd say. If she hadn't turned up when she did, things would have turned so much more complicated. Complicated in a very, very bad way.

Oliver Langdon is the guy I'm supposed to hate. He's the guy who's trying to destroy my aunt's business. We're enemies, pitted against one another in this battle of the coffeeshops. It's a battle I'm determined to win. It's a battle I need to win. My aunt is depending on me.

And if there's one thing I've learned from that whole dating my boss bonanza back in Seattle, it's that mixing business with pleasure is a recipe for total disaster.

"I'm not going to get Oliver to help with the coffee machine, Mrs. Jacobson," I tell her.

"I think he'd be more than happy to help. Wouldn't you, Dana?" she replies.

"Oh, yes. *More* than happy," Mrs. Ashbridge agrees with a knowing grin.

There's only one thing to do and that's offer the ladies free slices of pie and direct them to a table on the other side of the coffeeshop. Which is exactly what I do.

"Are you all set for Saturday night?" I ask Ivy as I search under the counter for syrup to make the coffees I promised. I'm sure we had some somewhere.

"Sure am. We've been practicing every evening after work," she replies with an excited smile.

"Which is why Ivy has had to buy me ear plugs and apologize to the neighbors on the regular," Ryn adds with a roll of her eyes.

"You know we have to practice at our place, girl. Seth lives in an apartment, Joanna lives with her parents, and Carlos's garage is full of car parts and stuff," Ivy replies.

"As long as you're well practiced and ready to go. That's all that matters," I tell her. "Saturday is opening night, our very first dinner service, and it has to go well."

I try not to let how nervous I'm feeling come out in my voice.

"You betcha," Ivy replies. She claps her hands together and gives an excited squeal. "I cannot wait. It's going to be so fun to be up there

performing in front of the whole town.”

“Girl, we don’t have enough tables to fit the whole town,” Ryn replies.

“All I’m saying is, everyone I know in this town is coming to dinner,” Ivy replies.

“We’re already fully booked.” I feel a pulse of excitement and nerves. Saturday night is our first dinner service. Aunt Lisa has agreed to run the kitchen with the help of a chef she knows from Cotown and their kitchen hands, Valentina and I are at the front of house, and Ryn has Gabe making the special cocktail we chose to mark this occasion: the very first time the Second Chance Café opens its doors for dinner.

It’s a cross between a Moscow Mule and a Tom Collins, which sounds terrible but is in fact delicious.

“Aha!” I pull out a bottle of vanilla syrup from behind a stash of coffee beans and instantly put it to use in making coffee for the Ladies’ Committee.

Ryn pulls her apron off, rolls it in a ball, and stuffs it under the counter.

I pull it out and begin to fold it. “How many times, Ryn?”

“I can’t stop to have a riveting discussion on folding with you right now, Mom. I’ve got a class to get to,” Ryn says as she breezes past me toward the kitchen. “You coming, Ivy?”

“I’m not going to your beauty class,” she protests, following her roommate and friend all the same.

“No, but you can drive me home to help me get to my beauty class.”

“I’m not your servant, you know.”

“No, you’re way better than that. You’re my roommate.”

The kitchen door swings closed behind them.

I chew on my lip as I look at the expensive coffee machine. It had seemed like such a great idea to offer the same fancy coffees as Steamy Coffee. It was simple. It should have worked. Instead, all it’s done is cost money, cause stress, and frequent changes of clothes when it spurts water at us.

With the syrup added to two cups of drip coffee, I squirt some whipped cream on the top and say a little prayer that the concoction is at least vaguely similar to Steamy Coffee’s.

“Here you are, ladies. Two vanilla coffees with whipped cream.”

Mrs. Jacobson and Mrs. Ashbridge inspect the coffees as I place them on their table.

“They look terrific,” Mrs. Jacobson says with a smile that’s convincing no one. “Don’t they, Dana?”

“Oh, yes. Terrific,” Mrs. Ashbridge echoes. She lifts the cup to her lips and takes a sip. She gets cream on her upper lip which she licks away. “So good. Thank you, dear.”

“You’re welcome,” I respond, although it’s clear as day that she’s being kind. “I’ll be able to make the real deal once the machine is fixed.”

“Which might be sooner than you think,” Mrs. Jacobson says, her eyes on the door behind me.

I turn, expecting to see a repairman, miraculously arriving to fix the machine early. But really, what are the chances of that? It’s not a repairman. It’s Oliver, the man voted in my head as the one most likely to kiss me.

At the sight of him my pulse begins to race, and I find myself standing up taller and wondering what to do with my hands. I mean, I don’t usually even give my hands a second thought, but right now, as he strides across the floor to us, they feel like thoroughly foreign club-like appendages. In the end, I go with sticking them in the pocket of my apron.

Of course, as his eyes land on mine, his lips lift into his habitual smile—the one that does things to my blood pressure—and I take a deep breath to steady my nerves.

“Good morning, Marlowe,” he says, the depth of his voice making my insides tickle. “I thought you could use some help with your new machine.”

“Aren’t you the nicest man, coming over here to help poor Marlowe,” Mrs. Jacobson coos.

“It only seems right. After all, two coffeeshops can co-exist peacefully on Main Street in Hunter’s Creek, as far as I can see,” he replies smoothly.

Mrs. Jacobson winks at me. “See, Marlowe? Oliver here is waving his white flag. Now we can all get along, just as we always do in this town. And the two of you can get to know one another as something other than business rivals.”

“You’re so right, Tanya. I’d like to get to know Marlowe as someone other than a business rival,” Oliver replies, his eyes on me, and my belly fills with little birds flapping their wings.

Mrs. Jacobson looks like she’s about to burst with happiness as she clutches her hands in front of her chest and beams up at us. “I knew putting you two together to paint the bandstand would do the trick.”

Of course I knew the Ladies’ Committee orchestrated Oliver and me working together. It doesn’t take a genius to figure that out. And they have been trying to matchmake us since the moment he stepped foot in town. If

Oliver is right and our two coffeeshops can co-exist, serving different townfolks' needs, then would it really be so bad to let the Ladies' Committees plan work?

"It sure did give us a chance to talk," Oliver says.

"Talk and throw paint around like a couple of toddlers, you mean," Mrs. Jacobson scolds, but there's joy in her voice and her face is lit up with a smile.

"Sorry about that," Oliver says.

"Yes, sorry about that," I say and heat fills my cheeks, which does not go unnoticed by either Mrs. Jacobson or Mrs. Ashbridge—or Oliver.

Dang you, peaches and cream complexion.

I don't know how long Oliver and I smile at one another, but my guess is it's long enough to make Mrs. Jacobson clap her hands together in glee. The sound breaks the moment, and I clear my throat and adjust my apron.

"Want me to take a look at your machine for you?" Oliver asks.

"Do you know how to fix machines? I thought you were more on the boss end of the equation."

"I might be now, but I wasn't always. My mom made sure we knew every aspect of the business before we moved into management. I've had to fix a few of these in my time."

I want to ask him who the "we" is that he's referring to, but now is not the time.

"That's really kind of you, but we've actually got someone coming to fix it Monday."

He waves my argument away with his hand. "That's days away and we've got the festival and premiere coming up real soon. Let me take a look right now."

"Go on, Marlowe. Let the handsome man help you with your machine," Mrs. Jacobson encourages with a giggle. An actual giggle. The woman is in her 60s!

"He's your knight in shining armor," Mrs. Ashbridge adds and I'm about to protest that I'm a totally capable woman when I change my mind. Fact is, I do need some help, and if Oliver is the person to provide that help, then I'd be a fool not to take it.

Especially now that we've got this *thing* between us. A thing my heart is telling me to watch and see what unfolds.

"If you think you can help, that would be great," I concede.

Our gazes meet once more and I see a softness in his eyes that does weird things to my insides, telling me to trust him—at least as far as helping me with the coffee machine is concerned.

Together, we make our way around the counter to the coffee machine. I watch as he pushes up his sleeves, exposing his set of muscular, tan forearms, and begins to check it over. He presses buttons, pulls levers, checks water and coffee bean levels, going through everything Ryn and I did ourselves.

Standing beside him, it's impossible not to breathe in his scent, a tempting mixture of mossy forest floor after the rain with a touch of adventure and masculinity.

Yes, my mind is waxing lyrical about this gorgeous man beside me, and for once I'm happy to let it as I watch him work, his muscles flexing, his brow furrowed.

I'm not going to swoon or anything silly like that, but oh, my, Oliver is quite something.

I've misjudged him. I've let the fact that we run competing businesses cloud my opinion of him. Oliver is a good man, and he's showing me that right now.

Perhaps there really could be a future with him as more than just business rivals?

Mrs. Jacobson has followed us to the counter and she watches us carefully, her face a picture of matchmaker joy. She waggles her brows at me, and I look away, trying to douse my heated cheeks with cooling thoughts.

Oliver looks up at me. "Do you have a screwdriver?"

"We do," a voice behind me says and I turn to see Aunt Lisa standing at the door, her hands on her hips as she eyes him suspiciously. "How do we know you're not going to break it permanently?"

"Because I'm not a bad guy in a crime novel?" he suggests.

I press my lips together to bite back a smile.

Aunt Lisa crosses her arms, not amused. She clearly hasn't had the same epiphany as me, still seeing Oliver as the enemy.

"Look, I get it. Why would your competition want to help you with the thing that's going to improve your offering?" he says.

"Why, exactly," she replies.

"The thing is, Marlowe and I got to know each other a little better a few days back and I consider her a friend. Isn't that right, Marlowe?" His eyes flash to mine and heat spreads across my chest.

“That's right. We're going to do our best to co-exist,” I tell her.

“You've made peace with the enemy?” Aunt Lisa scoffs.

“We were never enemies,” Oliver replies and I raise my brows at him.
“Okay, maybe a little.”

“Or a lot,” I murmur.

“I don't know about you, but I like to help my friends, and I think I can help with your machine. To do that, I need to open it up to have a look. We have these machines in some of our stores, so I'm pretty familiar with them,” Oliver says.

I'm completely convinced he doesn't have a nefarious plan, but I want my aunt to give the green light.

“What do you think, Aunt Lisa?” I ask.

“Come on, Lisa. This handsome young man is trying to help our Marlowe as her new *friend*,” Mrs. Jacobson encourages.

Could she lay it on any thicker?

Aunt Lisa assesses Mrs. Jacobson, Oliver, and me before she uncrosses her arms and states plainly, “I'll go get the screwdriver. But I'll be watching you, Oliver Langdon.”

Oliver grins. “I would expect nothing less.”

A moment later, Oliver has unscrewed a panel and has begun to tinker with it, his brows pulled together in concentration.

Mrs. Jacobson leans on the counter with a smug look on her face. “I do like to see a man at work. Don't you, Marlowe dear? It's better than going to the movies.”

I roll my eyes. As well as trying to matchmake us, Mrs. Jacobson definitely has a crush on Oliver.

But I can't blame her. I definitely have a crush on Oliver, too. And I'm not afraid to admit it to myself.

“A new machine should work perfectly. Do you have a manufacturers' warranty?” Oliver asks.

“We didn't buy new,” I tell him.

“Why not?” he questions and then thinks better of it. “Forget I asked that. How old is it?”

“Five years. It came from a coffeeshop in Oregon.”

He reaches inside the machine and something clicks. “I heard you'd had a few mishaps with your milk steamer. Milk?”

“Sure.” I collect a bottle of milk from the refrigerator and he pours some

into a jug and turns the steaming knob. Instantly, it makes that familiar squirting sound, and he froths the milk with expert hands, not getting even an ounce of water or milk on him.

He places the jug on the counter. "I think you'll find it works for you now."

I look from the perfectly frothed milk back at him. He's smiling at me and I remember thinking not so long ago that his smile was self-satisfied and arrogant, a product of his privileged position and wealth. Now I know it's simply his smile, and it makes him even more attractive. Not something I thought was possible.

"Thank you!" I exclaim.

Mrs. Jacobson bursts into applause. "Well done, Oliver," she gushes. "See, Lisa? Oliver isn't a bad guy in some terrible crime novel."

Aunt Lisa dips her finger in the milk. "It's frothy, I'll give him that."

"And he's still perfectly dry!" Mrs. Jacobson exclaims.

"How did you do that?" I ask in wonderment.

"A magician never reveals his secrets," he replies.

"So I see."

Aaaaand we're back to flirting.

"I'd better get going. I've got a business to run, which I just made harder by helping my competition out," he says.

"Hmmm," Aunt Lisa replies.

"You are such a nice man," Mrs. Jacobson says. "And so good with your hands."

I'm not going to let myself think about what else Oliver's hands may be good at.

Not helpful.

"I'll walk you to the door." I avoid Mrs. Jacobson's gaze. She will be beyond ecstatic right now.

"You walking me to the door feels a little bit like we're on a date in the 1950s, only in reverse," he says when we're out of earshot.

"I just wanted to say thank you without the audience."

He glances around us at the tables full of patrons. "You are aware that every single eye in the room is trained on us?"

I shrug. "I figured as much. We're quite the hot topic in town after the Paint Incident."

He lets out a low, rumbling laugh. "The Paint Incident. Is that what we're

calling it?”

“Well, it was an incident and it involved paint. So, yeah.”

“In that case, you be sure to call me next time you need someone to paint with.”

I could not stop the smile claiming my face for all the perfectly frothed milk in the world. “I’ll be sure to do that.”

He leans a little closer to me and my pulse responds with a sudden uptick in beats. “I hope the machine works well for you,” he murmurs. “And I meant what I said: we can co-exist.”

I straighten and swallow. “Thanks again. You didn’t have to.”

“But I wanted to.”

Our gaze lingers way too long for the current audience, but a big part of me does not care. I have totally misjudged Oliver Langdon.

“I’ll be going now then. Best wishes,” he says.

“Kindest regards,” I fire back automatically.

“You like—?”

“I love it,” I reply breathlessly.

We share another smile. Both *Schitt’s Creek* fans. Who knew?

“I bet you thought Hunter’s Creek was going to be like *Schitt’s Creek* before you got here.”

“Maybe a little?”

“I knew it.”

We share another lingering look before he pulls his attention from me and waves at our audience.

“Have a great day!” he says to everyone and they murmur their response, some people even pretending they hadn’t had their eyes superglued to us.

“See you soon, Marlowe,” he says to me and my mind fills with possibilities I wouldn’t have even dreamed of only a few short days ago. Possibilities with the man I thought I hated.

Chapter 16

Oliver



I turn to leave, my head full of Marlowe, when a tall man in a suit that looks totally out of place in Hunter’s Creek pushes his way into the coffeeshop. His eyes flick momentarily to mine and he nods his thanks.

“My pleasure,” I reply because right now someone could stomp on my foot in a pair of work boots the people of this town love so much and it wouldn’t put even a tiny dent my good mood.

Flirting with Marlowe will do that to a guy, I’ve found, and I know because I’m the guy who got to flirt with her.

I’ll admit, fixing her machine makes me feel pretty dang good, too. The way she looked at me when I said goodbye has my heart expanding in my chest. I knew the moment I laid eyes on her that she was beautiful. In her sundress, hastily thrown over her bikini, her long auburn hair piled on top of her head, her alabaster skin sprinkled with delicate freckles, no one could escape the fact that she is one attractive woman. But there’s more to Marlowe Cole than just her looks—if I got the chance, I could look at her all day long. She’s got a spark to her, an energy, definitely some serious sass. It’s intoxicating and I find myself thinking about her way more than I probably should.

I allow myself one final glance her way before I head back to my own

coffeehouse across the street.

I start. She looks different. Stricken. Her wide smile and bright eyes of only moments ago are gone. Instead, she's staring in shock at the man I stood back for. The tall guy in the suit.

Something tells me not to leave.

I step back inside.

"Wh-what are you doing here?" Marlowe asks in a low, even tone, as though she not only didn't expect to see this man, but that she doesn't want him here, either.

My protective side tells me to go to her aid, to help her with whoever this man is to her—or was, I find myself thinking.

But Marlowe isn't mine. We're not dating. Sure, I know I want to be so much more to her than her business competition and the guy who fixed her coffee machine. But I can't step in.

I'm gonna hang around and see how this plays out. I'll be here if she needs me.

"I needed to see you," the man says.

Marlowe lifts her chin and glares at him. "I've got nothing to say to you, Mike."

So, the guy's name is Mike.

I watch as the man scrapes a hand along his jaw. "Is there somewhere we can go to talk?"

"You and I both know there's nothing you can say to me that will change anything."

"Marlowe, honey."

Honey? Oh, *now* my interest is seriously piqued.

Does Marlowe have a boyfriend I don't know about? A boyfriend she's clearly in a fight with?

The thought has my chest tightening.

"Don't 'honey' me," she growls at him and I smile to myself. *Atta girl*. I should have known Marlowe could handle herself. I've had enough first-hand experience with it myself.

"Five minutes of your time. That's all I ask," he says.

Go take a hike, Mike. You heard the woman. She's not interested. She's—

"You can say your piece. But it's not going to change anything," she says, taking me by surprise. "You've got five minutes."

She flicks her gaze briefly to mine and I mouth the words, "Are you

okay?”

She gives me a brief nod, and I relax a notch. But I’m still not going anywhere. At the risk of turning into some kind of stalker, it’s better for me to be here than on the other side of the street in case it turns out she does need me.

She crosses her arms over her chest and says, “The clock is ticking, Mike.”

“Here?” He looks around and I grab the opportunity to check him out. He's got thick dark hair, pushed back from his face and the kind of slick corporate suit I see so often in the boardroom. Even as a guy I can see that he's put-together and good looking.

And he means something to Marlowe.

The green-eyed monster pats me on the back and grins.

“Here,” Marlowe confirms with a steely gaze that I know so well. “I would say you’ve got 4 minutes and 30 seconds left.”

“Okay. Here’s the thing.” He takes a deep breath. “I messed up.”

“You think?”

“Don’t be like that.”

“You can’t tell me what to say or feel,” she snaps.

I think I fall for her a little bit more.

He lowers his head as his shoulders slump. “I know I can’t, but I need you to understand that I love you. Through all this mess. I always have and I always will.”

Everything seems to stop as I wait to hear how Marlowe is going to respond.

She takes a beat before she uncrosses her arms and glances around. Her eyes land briefly on mine. I know I shouldn't be here, listening to this, but I want to do anything I can to protect her from whatever hurt this guy has caused her—and by the looks of her right now, it's a whole lot.

I hate this Mike guy for it.

“You're too late. I don’t love you anymore. In fact, I've moved on,” she says to him and I want to punch the air.

“No, you haven't,” he replies, his tone confident, almost smug.

He sure thinks highly of himself, I’ll give him that.

“Oh? And how would you know something like that?”

He leans an elbow casually on the counter like she hasn’t just told him she no longer loves him. “Because this is a small town and people talk,

Marlowe. I would know if you were with someone new. Believe me.”

“You have spies?” she asks, her voice incredulous.

He shrugs. “I visited a few times when we were together and I keep in touch with people. They tell me things.”

What the—? Who does this guy think he is, keeping tabs on Marlowe?

Okay, I can see how me thinking that while I'm eavesdropping on her personal conversation is a touch ironic, but I'm not going to dwell on that. I know I've got her best interests at heart. This guy? I don't think I can say the same for him.

“Well, your spies are wrong.”

“Honey, we both know you're alone and hurting and it's all my fault. I'm here to ask you to come back, to forgive me for what I did when I was just so, so stupid to have ever put what we have in jeopardy.”

“I'm not alone and hurting,” she replies, her voice small.

He reaches for her hand. “Are you sure about that?” She looks down at his hand. “Marlowe. Honey. We were good together, you and I. You know we were.”

Her features harden. “What are you doing here?” she grinds out in a low voice.

“I've got a few clients to see over in Cotown. I'm here for a few days, staying at the Pine Motel. I thought we could go to the Summer Festival together. It'd be like old times.”

“We went once, Mike. Once.”

“And I hope we will go many, many more times together. You, me, and those *The Sound of Music* singing kids.”

Talk about laying it on thick.

She pulls her hand away. “You're here for work, which means it was a convenient stop on a business trip.”

“It's not like that. I couldn't come before.”

“Why not?”

“You know why.”

This just keeps getting more and more intriguing. Heck, who am I kidding? I've totally bought into this unraveling drama, and I know which way I want it to end. Spoiler alert: it's not with Marlowe sailing off into the sunset with this guy.

“Why now?” she asks.

“Because I love you. I messed up, but I still love you. Please, Marlowe.

Come back to me.”

If it was anybody else it would be a touching speech. But there's something about this Mike that's making me suspicious, and it's more than just the fact that he clearly means something to Marlowe. What's more, he's hurt her, too.

“What do you say? Will you give us another chance?”

I hold my breath as I await Marlowe's reply. Does she want to go back to this guy?

Her eyes dart around the room, as if looking for a way out. She's a trapped animal, backed into a corner, looking for an escape.

And in that moment I know what I need to do.

In two short strides I'm behind the counter next to her. “Babe, I'm so sorry I'm late,” I say as I lean down and brush a kiss against her cheek. She smells like cinnamon and fragrant honey. “I've got the car out front, ready for our picnic, as long as you've packed a slice of that apple pie you know I love so much.”

Her eyes lift to mine in question, briefly, before realization puts a small, relieved smile on her face.

“I'll be right there, Oliver... dear,” she says awkwardly.

I turn to Mike and act as though I've only just laid eyes on him—and haven't been tracking his every move since the moment he waltzed in here. “Oh, hey. I didn't see you there,” I lie because a man that tall is hard to miss—plus the eavesdropping thing, but I'm not getting into that. “I'm Oliver Langdon.” I offer him my hand and he takes it in surprise.

“Mike Warner,” he replies slowly, as if he's trying to figure out who I am to Marlowe.

“Oh, Mike. Right. Gotcha.” I pretend Marlowe has poured her heart out to me about him and that I know all about whatever it is he did to make her react that way toward him. “What brings you to our town, Mike?”

“I came to talk with Marlowe,” he replies evenly.

“Which you've done now, so you're free to go,” Marlowe says, and I have to fight hard not to let a grin that's threatening my face bust right out.

Take that!

“But—” he begins.

Instinctively, I wrap my arm around Marlowe's shoulders. I offer him an impassive smile, the subtext of which is: *Get lost.*

He looks from my arm around her shoulders to her face. I see her lift her

chin once more as she plasters on a smile. “I told you. I’ve moved on and as far as you and I are concerned, we’re ancient history.”

“But what we had together was—”

“A mistake,” she finishes for him. “And if you don’t leave within the next three seconds, I may regret something else, too.”

“What?”

“This.” She picks up a jug of milk and without a moment’s hesitation, throws its contents in his face.

I grin. The woman’s got sass, I’ll give her that.

Mike sputters as he wipes his eyes. “What did you do that for?”

“You want some more?” she asks, her eyes like steel.

Man, is she hot.

He lifts his hands in surrender. “This isn’t how I saw this happening.”

“Well, sometimes life doesn’t turn out how you expect,” she tells him. “Leave.”

“It looks like rain. Hope you’ve got a jacket, man,” I add for good measure, because this has become so much fun.

He sizes me up as his newfound competition for Marlowe’s affections, his jaw locked, the milk Marlowe thrust at him only moments ago still dripping from his face and hair. He opens his mouth to say something but stops as Marlowe looks up at me with a smile and says, “I’m so sorry you had to see that.”

Believe me, I’m not.

I look down at her and a part of me—if I’m honest, a big part of me—wants us to be going on an actual date, with this strong, sassy woman not play acting for this guy who hurt her. My heart rate kicks up and I feel a tension growing within my belly. Marlowe feels good in my arms. Too good. How easy would it be to bend down and brush a kiss across her full and gorgeous lips right now? To feel her body pressed against mine? To breathe in her sweet scent?

“I’ll be back,” Mike says like he’s the Terminator searching for his prey.

But this guy is no Arnold Schwarzenegger. He doesn’t intimidate me.

“We’ll get the milk jug prepped for it,” I tell him brightly as I give Marlowe a squeeze. She giggles and it ends in a snort.

He throws another look her way before turning on his heel and stomping out of the coffeehouse.

Marlowe pulls back from me, letting out a breath, her face glowing. “That

was amazing.”

“You were amazing,” I tell her, missing the way she felt in my arms. “Throwing milk in his face was genius!”

“He deserved it.”

“I get the feeling he did.”

“Thank you so much for that, Oliver. I totally owe you. How did you know?”

“You looked like you needed some help, so I stuck around,” I reply. “I didn’t know you were quite the milk jug wielding ninja you are.”

She shrugs. “I’m a woman of many talents.”

“That, you are.”

We smile at one another and I have to resist the urge to take her in my arms and kiss her, right here, right now.

“You sure are the right man in the right place today.”

I want to tell her that for her, I want to be that man always.

Of course, I don't. As fun as it was to play act as she *slayed* that guy, I know I was a pawn in a charade. A willing pawn, but a pawn all the same.

I might have feelings for this woman, but I have no clue how she feels about me.

“Would you look at you two. We just knew this could happen,” a voice says and we both turn to see all three members of the Empress Collective, their hands clasped.

“Oh, this isn't—” I begin, only to be cut off by Marlowe as she hooks her arm through mine.

“It's all very new, so please don't go getting ahead of yourselves,” Marlowe replies.

Wait. She wants the Empress Collective to think that we're dating?

I don't get it. It's one thing to fake it in front of Mike, but it's another to fake it for what, in effect, will be the entire town before too long.

“Get ahead of myself?” Mrs. Jacobson questions. “Oh, dear girl, I thought Oliver helping with your machine was only a step toward you two getting together. I didn’t know you were already a couple!”

“It’s the bandstand that did it,” Suzie Ashbridge states.

“We strike again, ladies,” Tanya declares.

“Oh, yes! And throwing the milk in Mike’s face? Inspired!”

“Oh, yes, inspired,” the other one agrees. “Take care, you two.”

“Don’t do anything we wouldn’t do,” Tanya adds.

“We won’t,” I assure them as the ladies make their way from the coffeeshop to share the news with their friend.

“You want everyone to think we’re dating?” I ask when the coast is clear.

“Come with me.” Marlowe tugs my arm and leads me to the kitchen. She looks around to see if anyone is there. The place is empty.

“The thing is, if Mike is staying at the motel here, he’ll know if we’re not actually dating. Telling people that we’re a thing will get word out quickly enough that anyone he asks will say we’re together.”

I arch an eyebrow. “You want me to lie to everyone?”

“It’s just a teeny weenie little lie. Not a big deal. And it only needs to be for a short time. A lot of people do it, you know.”

“A lot of people pretend to date? Seriously?”

“Okay. Not a lot of people, but some people. I know some, in fact, and it worked out great for both parties.”

“This isn’t a rom com like the one that’s opening up here in a couple days.”

“Is the idea of dating me really so terrible?”

I want to tell her the idea of dating her is the opposite of terrible. I can’t do that. Not while she’s got this other guy hanging around and I’ve only just begun to win her trust.

“How would it work?”

“We have to be seen out around the place a bit together, that’s all. Until he leaves.”

“So, we’re not really going on a picnic?” I ask her with a smile.

Although I know she’s fighting it, she smiles back at me. “No picnic.”

“What about making out?”

She lets out a surprised laugh. “None of that.”

“No making out. Got it.” I grin at her and add, “Pity.” I watch for her reaction as the memory of how she felt in my arms washes over me. I wanted to kiss her then, and I want to kiss her now.

“That’s decided then,” she says in a clipped tone. “We can go to the Summer Festival together, too. Just in case he’s there.”

“Done. Hey, do you want to tell me who Mike is? I mean, as your fake boyfriend, I probably ought to know.”

That dark cloud passes over her face once more. “He’s someone from my past,” is all she offers me.

“I got that much.”

She chews on her lip and I wonder if she's considering telling me. But we both know we don't have that level of intimacy between us, the type where you tell the other person about your heartaches.

I let her off the hook. "Maybe some other time."

She pulls her lips into a smile, shaking off the memories. "Some other time."

Chapter 17

Marlowe



I regard my reflection in the bathroom mirror. The image is of a woman wondering about her very sanity. At least I'm dressed in a cute ensemble of a pale pink and mauve plaid sleeveless shirt and a skirt that grazes my knees, showing off my lightly tan legs—hastily applied last night from a bottle, of course. Really, who has time to sunbathe when you're embroiled in a battle with the cute guy who runs the competition across the street, who you realize you have feelings for, but you're also pretending to date to send a message to your ex?

Not me, that's for sure.

I smooth on some lipstick and smack my lips together. I'm making the guy across the street pretend to date me. The guy who I had thought was trying to destroy my aunt's café but also, somewhat confusingly, stepped in to save me on not only one but two counts yesterday.

Yup, wondering about my sanity right now.

This is the kind of thing a youngest sibling like Ryn would do. Heck, it's the kind of thing Harper *did* do with Christopher, making him pretend to be her boyfriend to stop every meddling old lady from setting her up.

But not me, Marlowe, the high-achieving oldest sister who's always had it together, who always knew what she wanted and how she was going to get

it. Drive, determination, a strong sense of who I am.

Right now, I don't even recognize myself.

But then...it's Oliver. *Oliver*. The guy who fixed our coffee machine. The guy who stepped in and saved me from Mike. The guy who I ended up having a paint fight with that was more than a little flirty. The guy who I feel more than just an attraction to.

Sure, even I can see that Oliver is probably not the best choice as a fake boyfriend—not that I ever thought I would have one of those. But the key word here is “fake”. Whatever I feel about him, whatever he is to me, is irrelevant, because this thing isn't real. It's make-believe.

And Mike turning up like that, out of the blue, asking me to get back together with him?

Talk about a brain scramble.

When I left my imploded life behind in Seattle, I didn't look back. Not once. What Mike did to me was unforgivable. If you care about someone, you don't trick them into thinking they're the only one in your life.

Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice? Not going to happen. *Ever*.

The chances that I would ever go back to Mike are about as high as winning the lottery without buying a ticket. And believe me, when it comes to Mike, I most certainly won't be buying a ticket.

But seriously, I don't have time for any of this. Today is the Hunter's Creek Summer Festival and I am up bright and early, ready to serve the endless stream of customers who visit our stall for coffee and my aunt Sheila's award-winning apple pie. Well, at least it won the award for the best in the county last year. This year with no Aunt Sheila to weave her pie magic who knows where we'll place, if at all.

I flick the bathroom light off, climb into my car, and park in the alley behind the Second Chance. I meet with the serving staff in the kitchen to outline the plan for the day. Valentina, Ryn, Aunt Lisa, and a couple of casual staff, Tia and Sammy, are ready to go. We've got a stall set up on Main Street outside the coffeehouse with a sign that tells everyone about our award-winning pies. Dad and one of my uncles have set up the cabinet on the sidewalk in front of the coffeehouse, inside which we place slices of pie, whole pies, and the ever-popular muffins, ready to be devoured by the festival goers. This year we've got an extra table set up to serve coffee from our new coffee machine, which Ryn and Valentina have assured me they can manage nicely now that it's working properly.

“It feels weird without Aunt Sheila,” Ryn says as she surveys the street.

The other stall owners are all setting up, and I find my eyes being drawn to Steamy Coffee across the street. The doors are already open, the aroma of freshly brewed coffee creeping out. Unlike us, they don't have a stall, but I'm quite sure they'll be super popular today with the festival-goers.

The Hunter's Creek Summer Festival is the biggest one of the year, in a town obsessed with all things festivals, and people from all over the county come for the tasty food, the rides, the games, the farmyard animals, and the fun. It's a great day out for families and friends or couples on a date.

Speaking of which, I have my very first official public appearance coming up with my fake date, Oliver, specially orchestrated for an audience of one: Mike. We haven't specified a time or anything. The day will be too busy for that, and besides, who knows when His Royal Cheating-ness will grace us with his presence? All I know is, we will be ready when he does, and hopefully it will be enough to send him away—back under the rock from which he slithered.

A trickle of customers grows into a long line and we're rushed off our feet, serving endless slices of pie with whipped cream, the coffee machine earning every cent we spent on it as it churns out coffee after coffee. I wonder whether I'll even be able to catch my breath today when a familiar face appears at the stall.

“Aunt Sheila!” I exclaim as I rush around to greet her.

“Marlowe, sweetheart. Aren't you doing an incredible job?” She pulls me into a hug and I breathe in her familiar lily of the valley scent.

“We're only trying to live up to you, you know,” I tell her honestly. “The pies are selling, and I need to drop one off for the competition when it opens up in a half an hour or so.”

“Don't you worry about that,” she replies as she waves at Ryn behind the coffee machine. “I baked one for the competition myself last night.”

“You did?”

Aunt Sheila leans a little closer to me. “Lisa is an excellent cook, but even with clear instructions from me on how to bake pies, I didn't want to leave things to chance.”

“Clever thinking. How's Uncle Johnny? Is he here?”

“He's not well enough to be here today, but he's here in spirit,” she replies, and I notice a cloud pass briefly over her features.

I give her arm a squeeze. “We all love Uncle Johnny and hope and pray

for the best for him.”

“I know you do, honey. And he knows it, too.” Her eyes get a little teary before. “Now, young lady. I believe you have been rather busy since you got back.”

“Busy?”

“Tanya Jacobson has been in touch.”

Oliver. Right.

“She has, huh?”

“She thinks she's taking the matchmaking crown from me, thanks to you and this Oliver Langdon who, between you and me, I think she'd really rather like to keep for herself.”

I let out a giggle and it ends in a snort. “I think you're right, Aunt Sheila.”

“Well, I'm very happy that you've moved on from that whole terrible business in Seattle. A gorgeous girl with a good heart like yours deserves someone great. Tell me, is this Oliver someone great?”

I look over at Steamy Coffee. Once more, Oliver is nowhere to be seen, probably inside serving an endless stream of thirsty customers. But I can't help smiling. Sure, this thing between us is make believe, but there is some truth in it, and I find myself looking forward to seeing him once more.

“That look tells me everything I need to know,” Aunt Sheila declares with a clap of her hands as some of the other members of the Ladies' Committee sidle up beside her.

“Sheila! How wonderful to see you,” Mrs. Jacobson says as she and the other women greet my aunt with enthusiastic hugs and chatter.

I take the opportunity to slide past them, telling the staff I'll be gone for about 20 minutes before I take a few short steps across the street. I spy Oliver behind the counter at Steamy Coffee, working alongside his staff to serve the throng of customers. The place is packed, and I catch his eye just as I'm turning to leave.

His face immediately creases into that knee-weakening smile of his and he raises his finger to indicate one minute.

I can wait a minute.

I step outside into the bright sun and immediately spy my parents on the other side of the street. They're chatting to some of their neighbors as they hold coffee cups and slices of pie in their hands.

I see Christopher with Harper as she wrangles her usual troop of singers in their matching green and white costumes through the crowds toward the

bandstand where they're due to perform a selection of songs from *The Sound of Music*, as has become tradition at these festivals.

It's then that I see him, weaving through the crowd, searching for me.

Mike.

My belly does a flip at the sight of him. Not in an excited, I-want-to-see-him kind of way. Believe me. The opposite of that.

I take a step back, hoping to disappear into the shadows, but all I do is step on someone's foot, who complains loudly about it.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't see you there," I tell the large man in jeans and a plaid shirt, who would do considerably more damage to me had he stepped on my foot.

"Watch where you're going," he scolds. "I almost dropped my hot dog."

"Well, I'm glad you didn't," I reply brightly.

He harrumphs as he slides past me to make his way down the street.

"Who's your new friend?" a voice asks beside me and I turn to see Oliver.

"I don't know but he was super lovely," I reply on a laugh. "I kind of stepped on his foot and he wasn't too happy about it."

"It's not surprising. This is the busiest I've seen Hunter's Creek."

"Welcome to the Summer Festival."

"I'm glad I'm here."

There's something in the way he says those words that has my heart expanding.

"I'm glad you're here, too."

"How's business today? You're looking just as crazy as we are." He looks across the street at the Second Chance stall.

"It's crazy, but my Aunt Sheila turned up, which is really great."

"She's the owner, right?" He asks and I nod. "She must be really excited to meet me."

I know he's being sarcastic, but the fact that my aunt thinks he and I are a new romantic couple seems to make her forget the fact that he's also our competition.

"You'd be surprised."

We share a smile until cool ice creeps its way up my spine, reminding me that Mike is nearby and Oliver and I have a job to do—and I don't mean running our respective businesses.

"Hey, I spotted my ex, so it might be showtime," I tell him.

"What did you have in mind?"

“I figured we could wander around for a while, holding hands. The whole town thinks we’re a couple now, thanks to the gossip network that’s alive and kicking around here, so it’s not like this will be a surprise to any of them.”

“Holding hands? That, I can do.” He takes my hand and I notice how small mine feels cupped in his, the touch of his skin sending a feeling of warmth up my arm.

We begin to meander up the street toward the town square, where the rides and games and farm animals are all located, which also happens to be the direction I spotted Mike in only moments ago.

As we walk, I notice how nice this feels to be with Oliver, holding his hand as we talk idly about the day's events. He tells me about the variety of customers he’s served today, from the tourists with their Hawaiian shirts and cameras around their necks, like some kind of tourist cliché, to the grouchy Mrs. Chisholm, who took forever to figure out her order as the line piled up behind her.

“You do have a complicated coffee menu, Oliver. Surely you know that.”

“You say complicated, but I say catering to everyone's needs. How’s your machine working out? I saw you had it outside today.”

“It's working, thanks to you.”

“That is the bare minimum we expect of our coffee machines.”

I nudge him with my shoulder. “You know you helped us out of a tight spot. If it wasn't for you fixing it, we wouldn't be serving coffee today.”

“Well, I'm glad I could help. There seem to be more than enough customers for both of our coffeehouses today.”

“And probably even Mary’s.”

“How does that place survive?”

“Because you're here?”

“Because it's always empty.”

I think of the small place on Donahue Street, run by local woman Mary O'Brien for as long as I can remember. Her coffee is weak, her muffins dry, but somehow her business survives year in, year out.

“I think she's put some kind of magic spell on the place.”

“To keep customers out?” Oliver asks and we share a laugh.

This feels good. It feels right. Getting along with Oliver like this is a thousand percent better than fighting with him, feeling resentful and angry.

I’m getting to know the real Oliver, and I like what I see.

“Marlowe,” a familiar voice says.

Mike.

“Whatever you do, don't leave me with him,” I say urgently to Oliver.

“Never.”

“Promise me.”

He looks deeply into my eyes. “You have my word.”

I nod, before I brace myself to turn and face Mike.

And just like that, Oliver's and my little bubble bursts.

Chapter 18

Oliver



I feel Marlowe’s grip tighten on my hand. I take it as a signal, stepping a little closer to act like a shield between her and the man who hurt her.

I go one step further and switch hands so I can place an arm around her shoulders.

I’m playing make believe boyfriend. No other reason.

She shoots me a grateful look and I can’t help but smile, warmth spreading through me.

She pulls her gaze from mine to our intended audience. “Hi, Mike,” she says with forced brightness, and I wonder if he can tell. “You remember Oliver, my boyfriend, right?”

Mike barely glances my way. “Sure.”

“Hey, man. I’d offer you a hand, but they’re all tied up right now,” I say, getting into this whole fake boyfriend thing. Making the guy who hurt Marlowe squirm is the icing on the cake.

Mike’s eyes narrow at me and I can only imagine what he’s thinking. Things like “get away from my woman” and “I want to punch you in the face.”

Sorry, buddy. Not happening. This woman is mine—at least in make-believe world.

And I wish in the real world, too.

“How's your day been? Have you gone on any of the rides?” Marlowe asks.

Mike glances at my arm held protectively around her shoulders. “Actually, I've been walking down memory lane a bit, Marlowe. It's hard not to, what with being back here in good old Hunter's Creek. I was remembering the last time I was here at the Summer Festival and how much fun we had. Together. You and me. Remember?”

Marlowe's cheeks redden. “I remember.”

“We went on the rides and ate cotton candy and a slice of your aunt's apple pie before we shared a couple of Long Island iced teas in one of the bars here.”

“Wow. That's a lot of sugar. I'm surprised neither of you fell into a diabetic coma,” I say.

Mike ignores me. “Remember how Gabe got dunked?”

“Gabe got dunked?” I ask. “You didn't tell me that, peaches.”

Marlowe's eyes slide to mine as she presses her lips together to suppress a smile.

I'm guessing it's the “peaches” that did it.

“That's right. You weren't here back then. Were you, Oliver?” he questions with a fake smile on his face, a smile I'd happily wipe off for him.

“What I lack in quantity as a resident of this town I hope I make up for in quality,” I reply smoothly.

“Men with limited quality often say things like that, I find,” he quips.

Oh, no, he did *not* just go there.

“Do you find that you hit your head on door frames all the time there, champ? Being that tall has got to be a real handicap for you,” I say.

“I do just fine,” he replies, clearly thinking he's got the upper hand here with his *quality* comment.

Marlowe nudges me in the ribs. I guess she wasn't looking for male one upmanship in this arrangement today.

“As I was saying,” Mike says pointedly. “Gabe got dunked when he was roped into helping support the elementary school. He's a good sport.”

“He is,” Marlowe replies.

“But you're new around here, right? You probably don't know many of the locals,” Mike says. He barely pauses to draw a breath before adding, “I miss being here. There's something about this town that's really quite special.”

The people, the festivals, even *The Sound of Music* singers.” He gestures at the bandstand. “It's special, like you are.” He gazes at Marlowe like she's his favorite flavor of ice cream.

“That's nice of you to say, Mike, but we've only just met,” I jest and receive an irritated look from him. “Since you love this place so much, you might have noticed the bandstand's been painted?”

Mentioning the bandstand is deliberate. I know exactly what memories it will bring up for Marlowe. Memories I like to reflect on, and they've got nothing to do with the actual painting.

“The bandstand?” he questions, looking suitably confused. “You mean that one over there?”

We all turn to see a bunch of kids in matching costumes on the freshly painted bandstand, singing a familiar song about a goat herder, as their teacher, also wearing the same costume, conducts.

“That's right, Mark. It was Marlowe and me who painted it and it was kind of the start of our new relationship.”

In case you were wondering, in no way did I get his name wrong on purpose, you understand. That would be petty of me. It was an honest mistake.

“It's Mike, actually,” he corrects.

“Mike. Right. You look like a guy I know named Mark.”

“Sure.” He shoots me a look that suggests murdering me has shot to the top of his list before he turns his attention back to Marlowe. “Can I grab a few minutes alone with you? I still really need to talk to you about something.”

“I told you, it's all in the past. I've moved on, as you can see. Right, pookie?” She gazes up at me with a goofy grin on her face.

“Pookie?” I mouth and she widens her eyes, telling me to play along despite the ridiculous nickname, which I'm sure she's only using to make me laugh.

“I am one lucky guy to have this cutie pie, and I use that term because her coffeehouse makes the best apple pies in the county. It's a *double entendre*, as they say,” I explain.

“It sure is, handsome,” Marlowe coos.

Mike clears his throat.

“You okay there, Mark? You don't have COVID do you?” I ask in mock concern as I lead Marlowe a step back from him.

“It's Mike, and I don't have COVID,” he grinds out between his teeth. Is it terrible that I'm enjoying this? As in really, really enjoying this?

“Did you test?” I ask. “He really should test. Don't you think, snookums?”

She bites back a smile. “It's the responsible thing to do,” she confirms.

Mike has clearly had enough.

“Look. I get it. You two are a new thing and me turning up in your life out of the blue like this has thrown you. I'm sorry for that, but I really do need to talk to you.”

I'll give him one thing, he gets an A for persistence.

The atmosphere around Marlowe has changed and I begin to wonder whether he's getting to her, whether she actually would like to hear him out. I know my job today is to pretend to be her boyfriend—a role I strongly suspect I could win an Oscar for after the little show I've just put on—but if Marlowe needs to talk to this guy to get closure or whatever it is she needs, I'm not going to be the one to stand in her way.

“Marlowe?” I question, sensing that she's swaying.

Her chest rises and falls, her gaze firmly on Mike. We wait an uncomfortable moment before she finally opens her mouth to speak.

“I appreciate you coming to see me. I imagine after what went down between us, coming here was a hard thing to do.”

“Thank you for acknowledging that,” he replies. “It's not easy being here with all the memories.” Sensing her defenses are lowered, he goes in for the kill. “Marlowe. We had a good thing going, you and I, and although I behaved poorly—”

She scoffs.

“Okay, I'll admit I behaved horribly. But that doesn't change the fact that I know I messed up. Marlowe, I miss you. I—” He glances at me, no doubt wishing I didn't have my arm wrapped around her shoulder. Or didn't exist. “I love you.”

Seriously? If I were Marlowe's actual boyfriend, wouldn't him telling my new girlfriend he loves her while she's in my arms be stretching the rules of general conversation a little. Or *a lot*?

Holding onto Marlowe as I am, I'm beginning to feel uncomfortable. I know she made me promise to stick by her, no matter what, but a part of me feels bad for this guy. He loves her. He's admitted to messing up. Whatever he did that hurt her so much, surely she can let him apologize?

And let me make this crystal clear: letting him apologize is the only thing I want him to do with her. And then preferably leave. For good.

But Marlowe has other ideas.

“Thank you for apologizing, but as I said, I’ve moved on. I don’t love you anymore.”

Harsh, but necessary.

“But—” he protests.

“Mike. Please. There’s nothing more to say on the topic.”

He looks nothing short of crestfallen.

“I will forever regret the way I treated you.”

“That’s...good.” As she tightens her grip around my waist, she’s got steel in her eyes. If he hadn’t gotten the message that she doesn’t want him anymore, he’d be blind to miss it now. “Enjoy the festival.”

Mike’s jaw tightens before he lowers his gaze. “For what it’s worth, I’m truly sorry.”

“I know,” Marlowe replies.

I watch as he slinks away, his tail between his legs like a scolded Labrador.

“Thank you so, so much, Oliver. You did an amazing job,” Marlowe gushes, as Mike’s retreating form disappears into the crowd.

“I did, didn’t I, *snookums*?”

She nudges me with her elbow.

“I’ll be your fake boyfriend anytime,” I tell her. “But maybe less of the ‘pookie’ and more of the ‘handsome’, because in the battle between those two, handsome wins, every time.”

She lets out a light laugh and it’s as though all the tension of the last few minutes evaporates around us. “You got it. Handsome it is.”

“Thanks, *snookums*.”

“No way. Not *snookums*.”

“You’ll always be *snookums* to me.”

She raises her brows at me but her face is creased in a beautiful smile. “I’ve changed my mind. Bring back pookie.”

I chortle as I shake my head at her. “I know you probably need to get back to your stall, but do you want to walk with me a while?”

“I can give you five minutes. After all, I owe you one.”

“Oh, how you owe me,” I say on a laugh and we begin to meander down Main Street together. “How are you feeling now that the whole Mike thing is

over?”

“Good. Better,” she replies as we pass the toffee apple stall where a few of the locals nudge one another and point.

Let them. I’m enjoying this.

“Super Fake Boyfriend to the rescue, huh?”

She rolls her eyes. “You’re not going to let me forget it. Are you?”

“Never.”

We arrive at the rides, the Ferris wheel looming above us.

“Hey, do you want to take a ride? I know you and Mike went on the rides last year, but maybe it’s time to make some new memories. Even if it is only with me.”

“There’s no ‘only’ about you,” she says, and as our gazes lock, I feel a flutter in my chest. “One ride, then I better get back to the Second Chance stall.”

“Deal.”

We make our way through the crowds, stopping briefly to say hello to people, who raise their brows and grin at us because word has clearly gotten out that we are the hottest new couple in town—this is Hunter’s Creek after all, where you can’t sneeze without people gossiping about it—and after seeing that the lines for the roller coaster, the bumper cars, and the haunted house are way too long for our busy schedules, we settle on the Ferris wheel.

We sit in the gondola and the attendant lowers the safety bar. Before long, the swaying gondola begins its ascent. Marlowe lets out an excited squeal as she clutches the safety bar.

“You okay there, champ?” I ask.

“Just getting used to not being on firm ground.”

“And a Ferris wheel is a pretty adrenaline-packed experience?”

“I’m not great with heights,” she admits.

“So why did you agree to this?”

“I was enjoying myself.”

We share a smile.

“Me, too,” I tell her, because what’s not to enjoy? I’m at the Summer Festival with the prettiest girl in town, sitting side by side on a Ferris wheel in the gentle summer breeze.

I look down at the ant-like people below us, going about their business. I spot Tanya Jacobson and her clutch of empresses, talking animatedly about something or someone. Probably me and Marlowe, if I know that group.

The gondola lurches and Marlowe lets out a squeal that makes me smile.

“Why are you grinning at me like that?”

“You’re cute, that’s why.”

Marlowe shifts a little closer to me, her thigh pressing up against mine, and I notice she’s gripping the safety bar across our laps.

“Are you okay?” I ask her.

“Fine.”

It’s not convincing.

“Why did you go on this with me if you’re not good with heights?”

“I got swept up in the moment, I guess. And I figured if Mike comes back, he’ll see us doing regular girlfriend-boyfriend stuff.”

The gondola lurches once more and she lets out another squeal.

“Can I do this?” I place my arm around her, pulling her against my side. As she did when we were putting on a show for Mike, she fits perfectly, her shoulder sliding under my arm, her body warm against mine.

“I think you’ve already done it,” she replies.

“Does it help at all?”

“It does. Thanks.” Her lips lift into a soft smile and the tension in her face relaxes.

“Keep looking at me, if it helps.”

“Is that because you like to be adored by women?” she asks.

Only by you.

As the gondola rocks again, I feel her stiffen in my arms and I tighten my grip around her. “I’ve got you,” I tell her.

“Thanks. I feel like I’m thanking you for a lot right now. The machine and Mike.”

“It’s all part of the service.”

As we’re swept further around the large circle, I feel like a teenager with my first crush, finally getting her alone, nestled against me. The feel of her body against mine, the aroma of her scent in the air, the look in her eyes, takes me back to that moment at the bandstand—the moment all those feelings I’ve been having for her were about to erupt into something a whole lot more pleasurable than fighting with the beautiful woman across the street.

As the gondola sways, she reaches for my hand and clutches it. Instead of the taut, anxious features of before, her eyes are dark and intense and I dare to think that maybe this isn’t make-believe anymore. Maybe she feels it, too.

With my heart pounding in my chest, I lift my hand to her face and slide

it around to the back of her head, tangling my fingers in her hair. She lets out a little breath, the intensity of her gaze on mine answering any final question I may have.

She wants me.

And oh my, do I want her.

“All right, folks. Your turn is over,” a voice announces beside us and I snap my attention from Marlowe to the man who is now lifting our safety bar and grinning at us like he knew exactly what we were about to do.

With the reluctance of a cat about to take a bath, I climb out of my seat and offer my hand to Marlowe. She steps out and we thank the guy before we walk slowly back into the throngs of people, still holding hands, still in our bubble of just Marlowe and me.

We come to a stop and start talking at the same time, both of us stopping for the other to continue.

“Oliver, I—”

“Did we just—”

“You go,” I tell her.

“No, you.”

“Do we have to be so dang polite?”

She worries her lip. “It's just that I think something might have been about to happen between us, like it almost did that day we were painting.”

“I liked where we were going just now. And when we were painting,” I reply, wanting more than anything for us to be alone, just her and me, holding her in my arms and telling her how truly amazing I think she is. Well, that and kissing her. Definitely kissing her.

“Marlowe!” Ryn elbows her way through the crowd, a frantic look on her face. “There you are. I've been looking everywhere for you.”

Marlowe drops my hand from hers, our moment gone.

We really need to look into where we have these moments in the future, preferably when we're alone with no potential interruptions.

“What is it? What's wrong?” she asks.

“We've run out of pies so I agreed to go get some more but Valentina and the others are completely swamped and Aunt Sheila has gone to the pie competition and we need you back there like about half an hour ago. I mean, where have you been all this time?” As though noticing me for the first time, she pulls her brows together and adds, “Why are you two looking so guilty?”

We share a look before Marlowe opens her mouth to reply, when her

sister waves her hand in the air. “Forget it. It doesn't matter. You can fill me in later.” She grabs her by the arm. “Let's go. Now.”

As Ryn pulls Marlowe away, she looks back at me and something in her eyes tells me that maybe, just maybe, the fake could in fact become real.

And that hope has me wanting to punch the air.

Chapter 19

Marlowe



“What's going on with your face?” my sister asks as I stack some pies in the cabinet the following morning.

Instinctively, my hand flies to my cheek. “Why? Do I have something on my face?”

Ryn leans back against the wall and runs her eyes over me. “You sure do.”

“Are you going to tell me what it is or do I have to guess?”

“You're smiling.”

“So? I smile a lot.”

“Not like that, you don't. Does it have something to do with holding Oliver's hand yesterday? You know you need to spill the tea about that.”

Suddenly self-conscious, I press my lips together and rearrange my face into my regular look—whatever that is. Of course, it doesn't work because the grin that's been in place since Oliver's and my almost kiss on the Ferris wheel yesterday refuses to budge.

The memory of the way it felt to be held by him, his warm, firm body pressed against mine, his arms wrapped reassuringly around me, kept me warm as I fell asleep last night. Since then, he hasn't left my mind, and I cannot wait to see him again.

Ryn raises her brows at me. “So? Are you going to tell me about it?”

“Tell you about what?” another voice says and I turn my attention to the other side of the counter where my other sister, Harper, is watching me in expectation. “What’s up with your face?” she asks.

I look between my sisters in exasperation. “Aren't I allowed to smile? I'm in a customer service job, you know. Smiling kinda goes with the territory.”

“But that’s a super smiley smile,” Harper comments.

“What’s a super smiley smile?” I ask, playing for time.

“Don't act dumb,” Ryn chides.

“Honey, we know you spent half the Summer Festival with a certain someone who may or may not run the coffeehouse across the street,” Harper says in about the most leading way she can.

“Everyone’s talking about it, so you may as well fess up,” Ryn says. She waves and smiles at Mrs. Jacobson and the rest of the Ladies’ Committee, who grin at her in response.

Harper nods. “Ryn’s right. Even Topher mentioned it to me today. *Topher.*”

Harper’s boyfriend, Christopher, aka “Topher” to her, isn’t exactly the gossiping type.

My mind wanders to Oliver and I could not stop the smile from growing on my face for all the espresso in Italy.

“Oh, sis. You’ve got it *bad*,” Ryn declares.

“No, I don’t,” I rebuff, but we all know I’m lying. “Okay. I give in. I like him,” I admit.

“*Like* like him?” Harper asks. “And before you say anything, I know that makes me sound like we're back in middle school.”

“Oh, she so does. Just look at her,” my youngest sister says as she sizes me up.

Of course, my cheeks decide in this moment to flame the color of a ripe tomato crossed with one of Gabe’s flannels, and any hope of playing it down in front of my sisters flies away on the wings of a passing bird.

“What does this mean exactly?” Harper asks.

“It means she wants to kiss his face off. That's what it means,” Ryn replies for me. “Unless that's what you were doing on the Ferris wheel?”

That's what I had *wanted* to do on the Ferris wheel, well, once I’d gotten my fear of heights under control, which was helped incredibly when Oliver reassured me by wrapping his arm around my shoulder and pulling me close.

Swoon.

How could I ever have thought that man was anything but wonderful?

“Oh, you did, didn't you? You sucked face on the Ferris wheel. How old are you? Thirteen?” Ryn asks.

“Did you?” Harper asks.

“No,” I reply with reluctance. “But I think it almost happened.”

Harper claps her hands together with a big grin on her face. “Honey, you so deserve to be happy, and if Oliver is your guy, then I'm so happy for you.”

That dang grin of mine grows until I strongly suspect I look like a Muppet with a flip-top head.

“Marlowe and Oliver sitting in a tree k-i-s-s-i-n-g,” Ryn begins to sing and I shush her.

“Actually, it was on a Ferris wheel, not a tree,” Harper corrects.

“Got it,” Ryn replies. “Marlowe and Oliver on a Ferris wheel k-i-s-s-i-n-g.”

I close my eyes and shake my head. “I sure do feel like I'm back in middle school now.”

A customer arrives at the counter and I tell Ryn to serve her.

“When are you seeing him again?” Harper asks.

“We didn't make any plans. It was pretty crazy yesterday at the festival. I'm thinking I might pop in to Steamy Coffee after the lunch rush?”

“Definitely do that.” She sweeps her gaze over my outfit. I took extra care in choosing what to wear today, knowing the chance I would see Oliver was pretty high. Instead of my usual skirt and blouse combination, I'm wearing a navy-blue sleeveless dress that buttons up the front with a white collar and a pair of white and blue striped pumps. “You're looking super cute. Definitely the perfect ‘pop in’ outfit to woo a guy. He obviously likes you.”

“How can you tell?”

“The way he looks at you, the way he smiles around you. Mrs. Jacobson told me to expect wedding bells by the end of the year, you know.”

I let out a startled laugh. “Wedding bells, huh? No pressure then.”

“None at all. How did it go with Mike?”

“It's done,” I say simply.

“What did he want?”

“Me.”

“Of course he did, but he can't have you because you've got Oliver.”

“Not yet.”

“To be determined.”

What can only be regarded as a rabble of townsfolk bursts through the door, talking excitedly among themselves. Among them I recognize Amelia Thompson, Joe Olson, Gary Garcia, and Ted Hill, all Second Chance regulars who I've known my whole life, and all members of the town council, led by Mayor Garcia.

“What in the name of lumberjacks playing hopscotch in the forest is going on?” Mrs. Jacobson questions.

It's a good question, albeit elaborately put.

“Thank you for asking, Tanya,” Mayor Garcia says. “We're here to protect the integrity and history of our small town.”

“By charging around and making a racket?” Mrs. Jacobson questions with a judging lift of her eyebrow.

“I'm sure Mr. Mayor and his co-councilors aren't doing that, Mrs. Jacobson,” I interject, sensing a possible emerging situation. Never a good thing for a coffeehouse to have its patrons arguing, let alone when most of those patrons are on the town council. “What can I get you all today?”

Mayor Garcia ignores my question. “We are your shining light, Marlowe.”

I don't allow my smile to slip. “You are? That's very kind of you, Mr. Mayor.”

Also, what are you talking about?

“So, will that be your usual orders?” I ask, more in hope than any real expectation that they're here to order anything.

“We've heard your worries and we're here to help protect what's rightfully yours, because your establishment is part of the very fabric of this town,” Mayor Garcia says.

I knew they weren't here to order anything.

“Well, Gary, technically it's Sheila's part of the fabric. Not Marlowe's,” Miss Thompson says, my former high school biology teacher, now retired.

“She's right, you know. This place has been Sheila Browning's for decades. I've enjoyed many a slice of pie and more than one of her excellent omelets over the years,” Mr. Olson says. “Her pie won the blue ribbon at the Summer Festival yesterday. Best in the county.”

“Her pies are good, but I like her toasted sandwiches, especially the ham and American cheese with a side order of jojos,” Mr. Hill says, referring to the fries we serve with many meals at lunch.

“Oh, I agree those are good,” Mrs. Jacobson says. “Although the ones Gabe serves over at the Black Bear are also pretty good.”

“Not as good as Sheila’s,” Mr. Hill sniffs, sticking to his pro-Second-Chance guns.

Mayor Garcia waves his hand in the air. “Can we get back on track, people?”

“Well, we have no idea what went off track in the first place. What are you all doing here?” Mrs. Jacobson asks.

Mayor Garcia straightens his shoulders as if to give a rousing council speech. “We can all agree that the Second Chance Café is a Hunter’s Creek institution. It’s important to us and it’s part of the very fabric of our town. We need to do whatever we can to protect this business and its heritage for the good of Hunter’s Creek.”

The small group of people erupts into applause and hoots of agreement. I’m still in the dark.

“That all sounds great, and I thank you for your enthusiasm,” I begin. “But what is this all actually about?”

“We’ve seen them. The people on the street, clutching them in their hands. We’ve seen them go inside and stay there for quite some time.” Mayor Garcia shoots Mrs. Jacobson an accusing look.

“I’m sure I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Mrs. Jacobson sniffs.

“Oh, I think you do, Tanya. We’re talking about that terrible place across the street,” the mayor says as he points dramatically out the window.

And then the penny drops.

“You mean Steamy Coffee?” I ask.

“Of course we mean Steamy Coffee! We’ve seen how few customers you’re getting these days and how you’re having to resort to dancing videos to try and attract people back,” he says.

I shift my weight, embarrassed. “There were only a couple videos.”

“And you’ve got this fancy new coffee machine that you don’t seem to know how to work—”

“Oh, no. It’s fixed. It works perfectly now,” I say.

He’s not listening. “—and now you’re being forced to open for dinner! Longer hours for your staff, and looking around, I would say you’re not bringing in enough money to be able to pay them.”

“I *am* paying them,” I protest.

“And do you know why? Do the people of Hunter’s Creek know why?”

I'm pretty sure they do.

"It's all because a large corporate coffee conglomerate, with family-unfriendly photos of half-naked young people, has decided to move into town and destroy your business."

"I quite like the photos of the half-naked young people. Particularly the lumberjack guy," Mrs. Jacobson says to me under her breath and I suppress a smile.

"We had a meeting about this before the Summer Festival and we have decided that we're going to do whatever we can to help you, Marlowe. We're going to protect your business and we're going to keep those big city folks from meddling in our affairs."

"Is Steamy Coffee really trying to meddle in our affairs?" I ask.

"It'll happen to all of us. Today it's Steamy Coffee. Tomorrow, who knows? It's only a matter of time, my dear Marlowe. Only a matter of time," Mayor Garcia says as though he's delivering a serious line in a movie.

"So? What are you going to do about it, other than prancing around in a noisy group and making speeches?" Mrs. Jacobson asks.

"We're organizing a rally," Miss Thompson says proudly. "For tomorrow, the day of the big movie premiere."

"A rally?" I ask.

I'm not sure I like the direction this is going. It's one thing to blow hot air, it's quite another to organize an actual rally about it.

"A rally," the mayor confirms. "We've heard you, Marlowe. We have heard you."

"I never said anything about a rally."

"We've been busy making banners, and we're all set to go, starting at 9:00 AM sharp tomorrow morning right outside Steamy Coffee," Mr. Hill says.

Miss Thompson asks, "Can we make it 9:15? I've got my grandnephew coming in to prune my hedges at 8:30 and I need to show him exactly how tall I need them to be. He got it wrong last time and they looked odd."

"Is it really going to take 45 minutes?" Mayor Garcia asks.

"It probably will. I've got a lot of hedges, Gary," she replies.

"It's true. She does," Mr. Hill confirms.

"All right. Change of plan, Marlowe. We'll meet at 9:15 AM sharp outside Steamy Coffee to make our point about how important the Second Chance Café is to Hunter's Creek and how we won't have big city, corporate

coffee destroying our town.”

The small group erupts into a round of applause and Mayor Garcia takes a bow.

Although I’m flattered that they want to help protect my aunt’s café, I’m not sure a rally at their front door is the way to go about it—and I’m pretty sure protesting outside of my new fake boyfriend’s business won’t go down all that well with Oliver, either.

Especially now that things are changing for the better between us.

I need to speak up.

“Excuse me, Mr. Mayor? You do know you don’t have to do this on my account. We’re fully booked for our new dinner service tonight, we’ve got Ivy playing with her band, and business has looked better over the last week or two. We’re good.”

“You see that’s where you’re wrong, Marlowe. You do need us. Your aunt needs us. The town needs us,” the mayor states as though he’s the President of the United States. “And you should be proud of yourself. Your posts on the Instagram and the other place with the name that escapes me. What is it? Ticker? Toocker?”

“It’s Ticker Tucker,” Miss Thompson offers.

“Thank you, Amelia. Those videos are the inspiration for our rally.”

“You’re going to dance?” I question, aghast. It’s one thing for Ryn and me to butcher hip hop dance moves, it’s quite a different thing for a group of septuagenarians to get out there and bust some moves on the streets of Hunter’s Creek. At least two of them have replacement hips.

The mayor and his council members erupt into laughter. “Wouldn’t that be a sight?”

Why, yes it would.

“We’re using your slogans. They were inspired!” The mayor’s eyes are bright with excitement. “Plus, some more we came up with ourselves.”

“Support your community, not coffee corporations!” Mr. Hill says.

“I like ‘small beans, big impact’,” Miss Thompson says.

“Brewing justice, one local coffeeshop at a time! Ditch big coffee, embrace the local brew! And my personal favorite: No more java giants in Hunter’s Creek!”

“I like refuse the buzz of corporate greed,” Miss Thompson interjects.

“That does have a nice ring to it,” Mr. Hill agrees.

“We should make some more banners.”

I throw my hands up in the air. “You don't need to do this. We're doing fine.”

“We're acting on principle, and as the mayor of this town, it is my civic duty to do what's right,” Mayor Garcia states and I open my mouth to protest, but he continues, “Perhaps we will see you at 9:15 AM sharp tomorrow morning, once Amelia has seen to her hedges. I can assure you we will be there and we will be doing the right thing for the people of this town. And on that note, we shall say farewell.”

Everyone in the coffeehouse cheers, shaking hands with the mayor and his council members as they circulate through the coffeehouse and then out onto the street.

Although I'm touched by the fact that they want to help me, the rally is so wrong—and such a strong statement. I need to warn Oliver—and make sure he knows I'm not part of it.

Chapter 20

Oliver



“You look happy, boss,” Naomi comments as I stand behind the counter, making myself a brew.

“Do I?” I ask, pushing the button to grind some fresh beans.

“You’re smiling like you’ve got a secret, and I think I heard you humming. As in actual humming.”

“Humming? Huh. I had no idea.” I tamp down the ground beans, insert the filter into the machine, and press the button.

“What gives?”

“I can be happy for no particular reason.”

“Not humming happy. Humming happy is a whole other level of happy.”

“Is it?” I ask absently.

Of course I know exactly why I’m humming happy, as Naomi put it, and it’s got everything to do with a certain coffeehouse proprietor. Even though I was only pretending to be her boyfriend yesterday, the thought that she could be mine—that I could be hers—has me wanting to break into dance like in those old Gene Kelly movies.

Of course, I haven’t done that. I’m a 21st century American guy. But the feeling’s still there.

With the dark liquid now streaming into my cup, I pour some milk into a

jug and begin to froth it before I pour it into my cup, creating my personal favorite, a latte.

“You're not going to say why, huh?”

“Nope,” I reply with a grin.

“Fair call. Hey, some things arrived for you out back. I had to sign for them, which I thought was weird because usually they just deliver everything to the back door.”

“Where did you put them?”

“In your office.”

I turn to leave when a man in a boiler suit with a gruff voice asks, “Who's in charge here?”

“That'd be me. Oliver Langdon.” We shake hands. “What can I do for you?”

“We're here hanging the banner out front. Just so you know.”

A new banner out front?

“That's great, but what banner?” I ask.

“I don't know,” is his helpful reply.

“Well, then I suggest we both go find out.”

I make my way back through the coffeehouse and out onto Main Street. There's a van parked out front, and two men are unloading a couple of ladders and setting them up.

“Hi, I'm Oliver Langdon. I run this place,” I say.

“What's up,” the taller of the two replies.

“A banner I don't know about, by the looks of things,” I reply, but the men simply stare at me blankly.

“You don't need to be here for this, I was just being courteous telling you we were here doing the work,” the first man says.

“Can I see the banner?” I ask.

“You can once we unravel it,” he replies.

Not helpful.

“Who sent you?”

He rummages through some paperwork on the passenger seat and produces an invoice, which he hands to me. I skim the contents until I locate the name of the person who sent it. Lupica Williams. I have no idea who that is, but apparently she works at the head office in the Marketing Department.

This sort of thing is unusual but it does happen. I need to stop the banner from being hung above the entrance to the coffeehouse before it becomes a

bigger problem: having to take it back down again.

“Can you hold on for a minute or two? Go grab a free coffee inside. Naomi will hook you up.”

The men stop what they’re doing and file inside.

I dial the number on the form and a woman's voice responds within a couple of rings.

“Hello, Steamy Coffee, you've got Lupica Williams.”

“Hi, Lupica. My name is Oliver Langdon and I manage the new Hunter’s Creek branch.”

“Mr. Langdon. It's an honor to speak with you,” she replies breathlessly.

The challenges of sharing the boss’s last name.

“Call me Oliver. I've got three gentlemen here who’ve arrived to hang a banner that apparently you ordered for me.”

“I'm so glad it's arrived, Mr. Langdon sir. Is the vehicle there yet?”

I pull my brows together. “The vehicle?”

“The pickup truck, to be more precise. It was agreed a pickup truck would be more practical for the lumberjacks in the town.”

“A pickup truck for lumberjacks,” I repeat.

I’m at a total loss as to what she's talking about.

“That's right, Mr. Langdon, sir.”

“Oliver,” I reply absentmindedly.

“Sorry. That's right, *Oliver*.”

It’s clear I need to ask more direct questions.

“Lupica, why would you be sending me a pickup truck for lumberjacks?”

“Because a regular car is great in the city, but it was agreed that it would be more suitable for the prize to be something the lumberjacks could use. I sat in on the meeting, so I got insight into the decision. It was pretty exciting.”

I've pulled my eyebrows so close together they’re at risk of forming a permanent mono brow. “Let me get this straight. Not only am I getting a banner I didn't order to go above my store’s front door, but you're sending me a pickup truck as some sort of a prize?”

“That's correct, Mr. Langdon, sir. I mean Oliver. It's a half ton truck in red, which was agreed is the favorite color of the residents of Hunter’s Creek, because research shows a lot of them wear red plaid flannel shirts. The additional staff will be with you by 4:00.”

Now I'm really confused.

“What additional staff? For the pickup truck?”

She laughs. “For the Hollywood promo, which is what this is all about. You were told about it, I’m sure.”

I take a steadying breath. It's like I've stumbled into an alternative reality in which I'm a game show host about to give away a bright red truck to a lumberjack.

“I'm sure this isn't your fault, Lupica, but I think there's been a mix up somewhere along the line. I didn't order a banner or a utility vehicle for a lumberjack, or anyone else for that matter, nor did I ask for any additional staff for whatever the Hollywood thing is.”

“You didn't?”

“I did not.”

“Well, in that case, allow me to inform you that you—”

“Let me guess: I'm getting a banner and a truck and some additional staff for some Hollywood thing.”

“You got it!”

“Okay,” I say with a defeated breath. I need to pursue a different path. “Thanks, Lupica.”

“It's my pleasure, *Oliver*,” she replies.

I press end as a large truck rumbles down Main Street, coming to a hissing, clunking stop behind the van.

The driver climbs out of the cab with a clipboard in his hands. “Do you know where I can find Oliver Langdon?” he asks.

“I'm Oliver Langdon. Let me guess: you brought me a truck?”

“You psychic or something?” he asks without humor. “Sign here.”

I scrawl my signature as I frown at the truck.

“Check this baby out.”

I walk to the back of the truck where I see a late model pickup truck in a red so shiny it's impossible not to look at it and smile.

People mill around it, nudging one another and pointing at it.

“We've got the stand, too, so just tell me where you want me to set it up and I'll do it.”

“Is that your new truck, Oliver?” Mr. Whitlow, the former town lawyer asks. “It sure is shiny. Kind of blinding, really.”

“It's not for me,” I explain.

“It's for one lucky winner in this town,” the truck driver tells him. “I wouldn't mind winning it myself. My bet is it's a sweet ride.”

Mr. Whitlow's eyebrows ping up toward his non-existent hairline. "Is that so? That's quite a prize for your coffeehouse to be giving out. You must have some serious financial backing and a strong desire to beat out any competition."

I glance over at the Second Chance café. What must Marlowe think? She's just bought a coffee machine to compete with us and we go and get a brand new shiny red pickup truck to compete with her?

Our playing field has become a cliff face for her to climb.

"Look, I think there's been some kind of mistake. I didn't order any of this stuff," I say as the truck driver begins to unlock the wheels of the pickup truck to roll it down the ramp and onto the street.

"Someone told me you're Oliver Langdon?" someone says from behind, and I turn to see another delivery person, holding another clipboard.

"I am," I reply in trepidation as I sign another delivery form. "What's this one for?"

"The red carpet, the VIP ropes, and a bunch of new uniforms, according to this list here," she replies. "Where do you want them?"

"Left in your van, ideally," I reply.

She lets out a deep, hearty laugh. "I like your style, Oliver Langdon. You got a back door? I could take it all around there for you."

I nod dumbly. "Sure. It's over there." I point at an alleyway a couple of buildings over.

"Got it. Have a great day."

"Err...you too," I mumble.

"You betcha." She climbs back in her van and drives slowly around the truck and banner-hanging guys' van, turning into the alleyway.

As the van pulls away, I see Marlowe on the other side of the street, a look of wonderment on her face. I step around the truck and wait for the slow-moving traffic to pass, everyone rubbernecking to get a look at what's going on at Steamy Coffee.

What must she think?

"Marlowe!" I call out as I wave at her.

She's no longer looking at me. With her arms crossed, she's staring at the banner that's half-hung above the entryway. It reads *Sip and Win! Grab the best coffee in town and seize the chance to win a new truck!*

A creeping sense of cold climbs up my back.

"Marlowe!" I call out once more. "Let me explain."

“Explain what exactly, Oliver?” she shouts back.

Frustrated with the sheer volume of slow-moving traffic, I step in front of a car, my hands raised, and dash across the street to get to her. A horn blares.

I reach her and hastily say, “I didn't order any of this. You've got to believe me.”

“So, you're telling me a gaudy new pickup truck has just fallen from the sky and landed on Main Street, right outside your door?”

“It's not like that.”

“Really? Because from where I'm standing, that's exactly what it looks like. Other than the falling from the sky part, that is.”

“Marlowe.”

She holds her hand up. “You can blame whoever you want to, because I'm pretty sure you're not going to take ownership of this yourself, not after... things have...developed between us. But I do need you to know one thing, so listen up. You've declared war.”

“War? Come on. It's just a stupid truck that someone from the corporate office sent me. It doesn't need to be war.”

“Weird, because that's exactly how it feels, only I don't have a corporate office who can send me a truck, or roll out a red carpet, or any of it.”

I turn to see a red carpet literally being rolled out at the entrance, complete with ropes with gold hooks hanging from gold statuettes that look a lot like oversized Oscars. Naomi is standing at the far end of the red carpet, her face pinched in confusion, and when she catches my eye she mouths the words, “What the heck?”

I don't have time to answer Naomi right now. I've got Marlowe to pacify. But when I turn back to her, she's gone.

Chapter 21

Marlowe



I cannot believe it. It's beyond anything I've encountered before in my whole freaking life. The nerve of that man! His sheer manipulative arrogance! For all his sweet words about our two businesses co-existing in harmony, all that flirting with those eyes and that irritatingly sexy smile of his—the smile I now know is categorically smug and arrogant and all things superior—and then stepping in and being all heroic and protective when Mike was here, acting as my fake boyfriend when all along he was planning this big promotion that would blow the Second Chance right out of the water. And not just any promotion. Oh, no. A flashy Hollywood promotion in which someone will win a brand-new truck. A truck!

Stupid Coffee indeed.

If that's not a big old apple pie to the face, I don't know what is. And I'm the one with pie on my face, thinking Oliver saw me as anything but his business rival, the desperate woman who needed him to pretend to date her so her ex would leave her alone.

My entire body flushes with mortification.

To think I thought he wanted something more with me, that I thought he felt things for me the way I do for him. Or did. Those misguided middle school feelings are quickly flying into the rear-view mirror, that's for sure.

I storm through the Second Chance, electricity sparking off of me, turning heads. I've probably got steam coming out of my ears like some angry cartoon character, and right now I don't care who sees me. I am angry with a capital A.

I push my way through the door to the kitchen and begin to pace back and forth, my rage swelling inside me like a balloon in a room full of cacti. Seriously, I'm just waiting for the inevitable pop and the comical "whoosh" of air to escape. Although the way I feel right now is anything but comical.

Aunt Lisa looks up at me from the stove where she's frying up some bacon. "You look like you're set to explode there, honey. What's going on?"

"I knew I couldn't trust him. I knew it was all hot air. He's a corporate type who knows what to say to get what he wants, but there's zero honesty. Zero integrity. Zero anything!"

"I could ask who you're talking about, but I'm pretty sure I know already."

"You will not believe what he's done now," I fume as I continue to pace. "He set up a promotion where someone can win a new truck. A *truck*, Aunt Lisa." I throw my hands onto my hips. "How can we ever compete with that?"

She transfers the sizzling bacon to a plate and turns to face me. "We can't. Period."

"You've got that right. We can't give away a truck. We can't even give away a toy truck, let alone the shiny new version he's got sitting out there on the street. And to think I thought he was a good guy, coming over here and fixing our coffee machine. It was just his way of throwing us off his scent, and I'll tell you something, his scent stinks."

"Are you sure he really fixed the machine and didn't do something to it to make sure it stops working?"

We share a look, and together we head out from the kitchen, our pace quick.

Valentina looks up at us with a smile on her face and a jug of milk in her hands. "Everything okay?"

"Is the machine working?" Aunt Lisa asks.

Valentina pours perfectly frothy milk into a couple of coffee cups. "Sure is. Tastes pretty good, too. Want me to make you one?"

"I'm not sure Marlowe needs caffeine right now," Aunt Lisa replies for me.

I shoot her a tense smile. “Aunt Lisa’s right. But thanks, Val. Keep up the good work.”

I was being paranoid and stupid. Oliver fixed the machine. Period.

“He probably fixed it out of guilt, knowing what he was up to behind our backs,” Aunt Lisa hisses under her breath.

I open my mouth to reply when Valentina salutes. “Sure thing. These are for your parents.” She picks up the coffee cups, ready to deliver them.

“My parents are here?” My eyes dart around the coffeehouse until they land on Mom and Dad. My heart squeezes at the sight of them, right here when I need them the most. “I’ll take them over.”

Valentina hands me the cups. “Getting this machine working could not have come at a better time with the premiere. Oliver is such a great guy.”

Aunt Lisa frowns.

“The jury’s out on that,” I mumble in response, although I know the jury has already found him guilty as charged and sentenced him to life.

I deliver the coffees to my parents.

“Marlowe!” Dad stands and pulls me into a hug.

“Careful, Dad. I’ve got hot coffee in my hands here,” I reply as I place the cups on their table.

“Don’t they look amazing. I’m so happy you got your machine fixed,” Mom says.

Yes, but at what price?

“Can you sit with us for a while?” she asks.

“Yeah, pumpkin. Take a load off,” Dad says and I notice my parents sharing a look of concern between themselves.

I slump down in an empty chair, suddenly weighed down by lead in my pockets, aka Oliver’s latest move.

“Mmmm. This cappuccino is delicious, pumpkin,” Dad says, grinning at me with a milk moustache.

“Honey, you’ve got a little milk here.” Mom points at his top lip.

“I thought it might lighten the mood,” he replies. “You know, with everything that’s going on.” He gestures across the street in the least subtle way ever.

“You’ve seen the truck, then,” I say in defeat.

Mom places her hand over mine. “It’s hard to miss, honey,” she says in that soothing tone I love. I know it from fights with friends and breakups with boyfriends and cut knees. It’s the voice she used with me for two solid weeks

when I got back to town after my life imploded in Seattle.

“I don't know what to do about it.”

“The townsfolk won't fall for anything that flashy,” Mom says. “Hunter's Creek people are simple folk. We're country people. Good people. We all love the Second Chance. They won't fall for Steamy Coffee's latest ploy to get people to eat their terrible food while those scantily clad young people grin sexily at one another.”

“What scantily clad young people?” Dad asks.

“The ones in the photos. The ones your brother loves to talk about like they're works of art or something. They're not. They're just young people with too few clothes.”

“Oh, that's right. The pretty lady and the half-dressed guy in the flannel. You're right, he sure likes those photos,” Dad says.

“It's great that Uncle Brian is spending so much time at Steamy Coffee that he notices their photos,” I grump.

“You do know the fact that they have to resort to giving away a truck to get people inside says a lot,” Dad says.

“Exactly. You're good at the things that count: good food and now good coffee. Fancy coffee. People don't need gimmicks and big prizes. They want a decent meal or snack in an enjoyable and inviting atmosphere with people they know and love. Isn't that right, honey?”

“Your mom is right,” Dad says firmly.

I chew on my lip as I turn my gaze to the street. They may be right, but now that the delivery trucks are gone, I can literally see hordes of people walking in and out of Oliver's coffeeshop.

I recognize a few of them as local townspeople, but a lot of them are out-of-towners, here for the movie premiere. They're customers we should have in here, eating our food and helping us pay back the cost of the new coffee machine.

“He's a double crosser, that Oliver Langdon,” Aunt Lisa says as she arrives at the table. “He makes you think he's a good guy and then he turns and pulls something like this.”

“Are you sure it's Oliver? He runs the shop here, but does he make all the decisions?” Mom asks.

“Of course he makes all the decisions,” I snap. “Don't go thinking he doesn't. His mom runs the entire chain. He was probably in on the meeting when they decided how to make sure they come out as top dog here in

Hunter's Creek."

"It's a flash in the pan. People will be excited by the idea of winning a truck until they realize that the food here is so much better. And now that you have coffee just like theirs, there really is no stopping you." Mom flashes me a hopeful smile but I'm not feeling hopeful in the least. "Anyway, tonight's the night you open up for dinner for the first time. That's exciting."

I groan. Dinner.

"I just hope no one cancels now," Aunt Lisa says. "Truck mania. That's what we're facing. They'll all go crazy for it."

"They won't cancel," Mom says. "Why would they? You're serving dinner and you've got a band. What have they got?"

"A brand new truck, Mom." My tone is as bitter as the darkest coffee roast.

The door to the coffeeshop swings open and in barges Mayor Garcia for the second time today, accompanied by Miss Thompson.

"Marlowe Cole? Where is Marlowe Cole?" he barks.

I'm almost afraid to respond. I raise my hand tentatively in the air. "I'm here, Mr. Mayor."

"In the bosom of her family," he says with outstretched arms as he approaches our table.

This guy should be on the stage.

"You'll need all the support you can get for the battle ahead, especially now that they have upped the stakes so significantly."

"What are you talking about, Gary?" Dad asks. My dad went to school with Gary Garcia way back when. He never calls him Mr. Mayor.

"The impostors, of course," he replies with gusto. "The big city, corporate, faceless chain that's destroying the very fabric of our town."

My parents look confused.

"Steamy Coffee," Miss Thompson clarifies.

"Did you see they're giving away a truck now?" Aunt Lisa asks.

"Who's giving away a truck?" Fleur McFarland, one of the customers at the table next to us asks.

"That terrible place across the road," Aunt Lisa replies and I notice as Fleur and other customers turn to look out the window.

"It's despicable, underhanded, Big Brother tactics," Aunt Lisa continues.

"I'm not sure it's Big Brother tactics exactly, Lisa," Dad corrects.

"It's terrible. That's what it is," she replies, shooting him a glare. "And

your sister's business, the one your daughter is running for her right now, is under serious threat. Serious!"

Fleur and her friend, Emily, rise to their feet and start to leave. They shoot me sheepish looks as I catch their eye.

"We...we have to go. I'm needed back at the police station and Emily needs to get back to the office," Fleur says as the two rush past me and out the door.

I watch as they and other customers rush over to Steamy Coffee to check out the truck.

Thank you, Oliver.

"You should join our rally," the mayor says to my aunt. "Tomorrow, right before the movie premiere. We're picketing outside their premises at 9:15 sharp. We've got a reporter coming from Cotown."

"We've got protest signs and everything, and my nephew, Lucas, has promised to put us on his podcast," Miss Thompson adds proudly.

"I'll be there," Aunt Lisa replies, her chin lifted in defiance.

"But Aunt Lisa, it's at our busiest time," I protest as anxiety grips my chest. "I need you here making food for whatever customers we have left."

"Customers? Look around you, Marlowe," Aunt Lisa says and I notice one solitary customer still in the place. "We have no customers. Well, other than Iris Henshaw, that's only because she's mostly deaf and hasn't realized what she's missing out on across the street. You'd do much better to close this place down for a few hours and make your point."

"Your aunt is right. You need to join us in this rally. After all, we're doing this for you," the mayor says.

Yes, I'm angry with Oliver. Angry and confused. One minute he's wonderful and I'm fantasizing about a future with him, and the next he's holding such a lavish competition that he's poached all our customers but one.

Even if he didn't know about the promotion as he claims, he hasn't done anything about it.

"Wake up, Marlowe," Mayor Garcia says, snapping my attention back to the room. "The Second Chance will be the first to fall and then we'll have every big chain store in America arriving in town, sucking the character from Hunter's Creek. We'll be Anywhere-ville, Washington, and no one will want to visit and no one will want to film movies here."

Aunt Lisa, Miss Thompson, and even my parents burst into spontaneous

applause.

“Nicely put, Gary,” Mom says.

“You've come a long way since that speech competition in the 6th grade,” Dad observes.

I let out a defeated sigh as I look across the street at Steamy Coffee. Oliver is outside, his back to me as he talks with somebody on a ladder.

Something hardens in my chest.

There's no way I'm letting him win. I let him dupe me once with his sweet words and heated looks. I refuse to let him win this battle—or this war.

I look back at the expectant faces, finding the mayor in the group. “I'm in.”

Chapter 22

Oliver



“Mayhem” doesn't even begin to describe the past couple of hours. From the truck delivery to the huge hanging sign to the red carpet to the new staff to the flood of customers coming through the door, it's been a stream of endless to-dos. If it wasn't for the fact that I have a refuge in the form of my office at the back of the store where I've just managed to grab a few minutes to myself, I may well have snapped.

I hold my phone in a tight grip in my hand as it begins to ring. I drum my fingers with a repetitive beat on my wooden desk as two rings become three, four, five. Finally, after the sixth ring, she picks up.

“Oliver, can this wait? I'm in the middle of something here,” my loving mother says to me by way of answering.

I tighten my jaw. “Actually, Mom, it can't wait.”

“Really, Oliver, I'm in the middle of something important.”

“Mom, I need to talk to you,” I respond with steel in my voice.

She lets out a resigned sigh. “What is it? Can you make it quick?”

“That depends. Can you collect a bright red truck and a bunch of new staff quick?”

“It all arrived? Good.”

“No, not *good*. I didn't order any of this. I didn't even know about this

lavish competition.”

“It's not lavish. We can afford it.”

“I think most people would think a coffeeshop giving away a brand new, top of the line truck is lavish, Mom.”

She lets out a light laugh, as though I've said something amusing and not simply stating a fact. “You've been in that small town too long, Oliver. You've lost perspective. It's just an ugly pickup truck.”

I tighten my grip on the phone, trying not to growl. Growling will do no good, not with Melody Langdon. I know. I have a long, personal history with what she regards as “inappropriate emotional outbursts”, most commonly as a child, of course, but also as an adult when we didn't see eye to eye.

“Look. I'm in a delicate position with the townsfolk here and I don't want to do anything to compromise that. You setting up this whole promotion without my knowledge is not going to go down well.”

“A delicate position? What position is that, exactly? And if you tell me it has something to do with that pretty little thing who runs the coffeeshop across the street, I'll tell you right now: I won't be listening to a word you say. We don't let our emotions get in the way of business. It's a very straightforward rule, Oliver, and one I would have thought you would understand by now.”

“It has everything to do with Marlowe's coffeeshop. We've made our peace. I've told her we can co-exist. We have two different offerings and neither of us need to put the other out of business.”

“Why would you say something like that?”

“Because it's the truth.”

She laughs again, although this time it's got an edge to it. “My dear boy, we don't like to share. You know that.”

“But other independent coffeeshops have survived when we've moved in. Not a lot, I admit, but some with a strong customer base. Why not the coffeeshop in Hunter's Creek?”

“Because it's right across the street from you, of course. We don't want people to think they've got a choice. We want them to see the Steamy Coffee sign and think ‘I know that brand, I trust that brand, and as there is no other choice here, I will buy my coffee there’. It's simple.”

“We know we've got all the brand recognition we could ever need. This is about what's right, Mom. We're doing pretty well here. We can co-exist with the Second Chance.”

“You have feelings for her,” she states blandly.

It takes me by surprise.

“She's a good person.”

A person I'm pretending to date but want to date for real. I don't add that particular part. My mom already thinks I'm a screw-up and let's face it, the optics on this newfound thing between Marlowe and me doesn't exactly scream “business leader with his crap together”.

“She's beautiful,” my mother says.

“That's not what this is about.”

“I know. It's about doing what's right, apparently, although I didn't see you kicking up quite the fuss when we opened in Springfield last May.”

I pull my lips together. Opening a branch in Springfield meant one of the small, independent coffeeshops went out of business. I always feel bad when that happens, but my mom? Sometimes I wonder if she gets a sick thrill from winning.

“Oliver, my advice is to forget that woman and her little place. There are plenty more pretty little things out there for you to play with, my dear boy.”

Seriously?

“Marlowe Cole is not a pretty little thing, as you so delightfully put it, Mom, and I'm not ‘playing’ with her. She's a smart woman, trying to run a business in a small town.”

“Are you sure? From where I'm sitting it seems you've been quite taken with this Marlowe Cole.”

“It's not like that, Mom,” I say in a tight voice.

But it is like that. I am “taken” with Marlowe, and I don't like hurting her. I saw the look on her face when she took in the truck and the carpet and everything going on. We'd found some kind of middle ground, agreed on a way to co-exist in this town. I think I'd even gotten her to trust me.

I know she liked me.

Now? Now she'll think it was all part of some grand scheme to win her trust and then pull the rug out from under her.

I squeeze my eyes shut as something unpleasant worms its way inside.

“Stick to the script, Oliver, and we will all come out of this well.” The edge to her voice now unmistakable.

“Not all of us.”

“I didn't get where I am today by pandering to people simply because they're attractive. To succeed in life, you need to put yourself first. Robert

understood that. Robert delivered results—until he let a woman cloud his judgment.”

Robert Langdon, the Patron Saint of Steamy Coffee. We should head to Rome to get him canonized.

“Now, I'm not going to listen to any more of your quibbling. You have an opportunity to make a real success of this location by capitalizing on the fact that there is a movie premiere tomorrow. Eyes will be on that small town you seem to love so much. Do not let me down.”

There's no getting through to my mother. It's like she had any empathy she once possessed surgically removed, replaced with grit and steel.

But worse than that, far worse, is the creeping sense that she thinks history will repeat itself. That I'll follow in Robert's footsteps, letting my feelings for someone get in the way of doing my job.

I can't do that to her. She may be a tough, uncompromising boss, but she's my mom, and she's hurting.

“I'll run the promo,” I say on a defeated sigh.

“Make me proud.”

I bow my head. She may as well have said *make me love you as much as I love your brother*. Because that's exactly how this feels. She's testing me to see if I can step up, take the position my brother held, in both the company and in her heart.

The line disconnects before I have a chance to respond, but she already knows what I'm going to say. I don't have any choice but to follow through with the promotion. I need to allow the cards to fall where they may.

But I at least owe it to Marlowe to apologize.

I glance at the time on my phone. It's after 4:00 so her coffeeshop will be closed. I know they're launching their dinner offering tonight because I made a booking for one. Now, I'm not so sure I should go.

How would she take it? Would she see it for what it is, me trying to support her in her new endeavor?

I breathe out a sigh. I would be an idiot to think that, after what's happened today.

But I need to see her. I need to explain that although I didn't orchestrate the promotion, I need to let it run.

I only hope she can find it in her heart to forgive me.

Chapter 23

Marlowe



I do my best not to look at Steamy Coffee as I do one final check before we open for our very first dinner service. Really, it's virtually impossible to miss the huge illuminated sign and the even huger shiny red truck, sitting like a taunt, right across the street.

No one in town has missed it, and our afternoon customers found it hard to talk about anything else. Our second-hand coffee machine feels like such an amateur move in comparison, which of course it is. A machine that arrived in need of repair could never compete with a dangled carrot like that truck. Not in a million years.

“When do you want us to start our first set?” Ivy asks. She's wearing a black sparkly cocktail dress that shows off her beautiful skin, her blond hair falling in soft waves over her shoulders.

“Ivy, you look gorgeous,” I tell her.

“I don't feel gorgeous. I'm a hot mess right now. So freaking nervous.”

“You're going to be amazing,” I reassure. “You forget, I've seen you perform. You're awesome.”

Also, *don't freak out on me now.*

Her tight features relax into a smile. “Do you think?”

“I know.”

“Thanks. You know, Ryn always complains that you're a bossy big sister, always telling her what to do, but I think you're great.”

That sure sounds like Ryn.

“Errr, thanks?” I reply.

“Nice dress, by the way.”

I glance down at my emerald green dress with the A-line skirt that skims my knees, with its deep V neckline and cap sleeves. I bought it for a dinner date with Mike, excited to find it on sale at Nordstrom. I haven't worn it since, but I thought it was about time I let the ghosts of my past go and create new memories in a dress like this. New, positive, wonderful memories.

“If you're all set up, we'll see you back here at 7:30?” I say.

“Oh, I'm staying. I've got a date.”

I raise my eyebrows. Ryn had told me that Ivy had a thing for her boyfriend, Gabe, which had been a little awkward when Ryn realized she herself was in love with him. I'm glad to hear she's moving on.

“Who's the lucky guy?” I ask as I scan the room to ensure each table is properly set, complete with tealights and small vases of wild flowers Harper and Christopher collected for us this afternoon.

“Adam Wilson.”

“The Adam Wilson you went to high school with who works at the mill?”

“Yup. He's been asking me out almost every month since 10th grade and I decided to say yes this time. I mean, it's not like I've got 'em lining up down the street.”

Is that a great reason to say yes to the man?

I pull my lips into a smile. “Adam's a lucky guy.”

Or a pity date.

A group of people arrive at the door and I glance at the clock above the bookshelves. It's opening time.

“Everyone ready? Our first customers are here,” I say with a tinge of nerves.

There's a lot riding on tonight.

“Janelle and I are awaiting the very first orders,” Aunt Lisa says from the entryway to the kitchen. “We've got this, Marlowe.”

“I was born ready, sis, just like my man here.” Ryn drapes her arm around Gabe's wide shoulders. He's a lot taller than she is, so it makes her look lopsided and goofy. But he grins down at her as though she were the best thing since ice cream was invented.

“I'm so glad you're here, Gabe. I wouldn't know where to start with cocktails,” I say to him.

“You needed the best in town and Gabe's the best. Right, honey?” Ryn purrs.

“I can't tell everyone I'm the best,” he protests. “That would make me look like a total jerk.”

“Well, you *are* the best,” she replies with love in her eyes. “All those years bar tending at the Black Bear was training for this very moment.”

“I thought you were referring to something else,” he replies with a waggle of his eyebrows.

I shudder. I do not need to hear about this, and besides, who needs love thrust in their face when they're looking down the barrel of permanent singledom and the only guy who's sparked any kind of interest in me has turned out to be a smooth-talking double crosser, intent on putting my aunt's coffeehouse out of business?

Not me, that's for sure.

“And I'm ready, too,” Valentina confirms with a broad smile as she takes her place at the makeshift podium with me by the front door. It's something my dad threw together with some spare lumber from the mill. It does the trick and it definitely looks rustic, which is much more of an enforced vibe than an intentional one.

I square my shoulders in an attempt to bolster my determination. I'm not going to lie, today has been hard. But tonight will be different. It has to be.

“Okay,” I say in as bright a voice as I can muster. “Let's open those doors and let our hungry dinner customers in. Good luck, everyone.”

“We don't need luck, honey. It's all going to go great,” Aunt Lisa says with a firm nod of her head.

Oh, how I hope she's right.

I greet our first customers who are, unsurprisingly, my family. Mom and Dad and Harper and Christopher, here eager to support my new venture. They're enthusiastic and excited, and I seat them at a table by the window, which we lined with fairy lights after closing time this afternoon. Once darkness falls, the whole room will glow with little lights. So pretty.

Customers begin to stream in and before long we're full, but for one solitary table.

“Who booked the last table?” I ask Valentina.

She runs her finger down today's page of the new calendar I bought

especially for opening night, landing on the final booking of the evening for one Mr. Blaine.

“I don't know anybody with that last name.”

“He must be an out-of-towner,” she says. “Ohhh, maybe he's a movie star and he's here early for the premiere, only he's using a pseudonym so none of us know who he is.”

“Well, whoever he is, he's three minutes late.”

Just as the words leave my mouth, the door wooshes open and in steps our mystery guest in a flutter of rain. We watch as he shakes his umbrella out by the front door and stacks it with the others in the trough we provide for this very reason.

He turns to face us and my jaw drops to the rustic podium.

“Good evening, Marlowe. Valentina,” he says smoothly, as though he hasn't spent the afternoon setting up a promotion that could very well be the death of the Second Chance.

I'm too stunned to speak. Of all the nerve!

“Oh, hey, Oliver,” Valentina says lightly because she has no idea how manipulative and deplorable this man truly is.

I do. I know. And he's the last person I want here tonight.

“What are you doing here?” I ask with a razor-like edge to my voice.

“I'm here for dinner,” he replies as casual as can be, as though he hasn't just made the checkmate move in our particular game of chess.

But then I suppose in his job at Steamy Coffee he does this sort of thing all day long. We're just his latest hapless victims.

“I've got a booking under Mr. Blaine. I thought you might have figured out that was me.”

“How the heck would I have figured that out?” I hiss as I throw my eye over what he's wearing. He's replaced his usual jeans with a pair of dress pants, his T-shirt with a pale blue button-up shirt that looks criminally good against his skin. His bomber jacket has been discarded in favor of a navy blazer, and the overall look is one of city style—and money.

“Rick Blaine,” he says simply, and the penny drops with a sickening clank on the hardwood floor.

Rick Blaine, Humphrey Bogart's character in *Casablanca*.

I gawk at him. “You used the fact that I love that movie to make a booking for yourself?”

He pulls his eyebrows together. “Has this offended you in some way?”

I throw my hands onto my hips. “You cannot be serious right now.”

Sensing I'm about to blow my top, Valentina steps in, saying, “Hey, Oliver. You were so kind fixing our coffee machine. It's working like a dream now. Did Marlowe tell you?”

“You're welcome, Valentina. It's the least I could do.”

“You got that right,” I sniff.

Valentina's eyes widen at me. Turning to Oliver she asks, “Are you here on a date?”

That would be the icing on the cake. I would not put it past the guy.

“No. That is to say, I'm...err... here on my own tonight,” he replies awkwardly. “Table for one.”

Ha! *I bet you're feeling awkward, dude. As awkward as a cat trying to sneak into a doghouse.*

“Who's that for?” Valentina gestures at something in his hand and I drop my gaze to see what it is. “Or do you make a habit of wandering around with a flower?”

He's turned up at the very place he's trying to destroy holding a...a single stemmed red rose?

What kind of a monster is he? A manipulative, confusing, unforgivable, annoyingly attractive monster. That's what.

I open my mouth to ask that very question when he does the last thing I would expect of him.

He offers me the rose. “For you, Marlowe.”

I look from it to Oliver's face and then to Valentina. She gestures for me to take it, and as I do, a small thorn cuts into my skin.

Why does that not surprise me?

Valentina nudges me in the arm. “You need to thank him,” she hisses under her breath.

“Sure. Thanks, Oliver,” I murmur, not meaning it in the least.

“I had hoped you would sit with me if you got the chance,” he says. “Although I understand why you wouldn't want to do that now with... you know.”

I tighten my jaw. Of course I know. The whole town knows. But we're full of people from the town right now and the last thing I want to do is ruin our opening night by doing what I really want to do with his rose, namely shoving it down his throat.

I know. Not exactly friendly. But then I'm not in a friendly frame of mind

right now.

“I’ll take you to your table if you like, Oliver,” Valentina offers.

“Sure, thanks. I hope to talk to you a bit later?” he says to me.

I harrumph. I have zero intention of talking to him.

Valentina begins to lead the way but Oliver doesn’t move.

“Actually, there’s something on my mind and I’d really like to talk to you about it now,” he says as he pulls his phone from his pocket.

I look down at it. “You’ve prepared a speech?”

“I thought it was best.”

I shake my head. “No, thanks.”

“You won’t listen to what I have to say?”

I fold my arms across my chest. “Nope.”

“Could you read it instead?” He offers me his phone, which I take and place on the podium.

“Can’t you see I’m busy?”

“It’ll only take a few minutes of your time. Please, Marlowe.”

“Not here. Tonight is too important to us.”

“If not here, then would you come outside with me?”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Why?”

“I want to explain.”

I let out a sharp laugh. “I bet you do.”

“Please?”

I glance through the window. It’s still light out and the rain is falling more steadily than before. “It’s wet out,” I state blandly.

“We could talk across the street. I closed up early and sent everyone home.”

“Why, when you’ve got your fancy new promotion going on?”

My voice is dipped in gooey sarcasm. Dipped, rolled, submerged, baked right in.

“I could make you a coffee?” he says, and there’s a flash of sincerity in his eyes that tugs on my heartstrings, reminding me of the man I thought he was. The man I had wanted to kiss.

My resolve slips a fraction. Perhaps he has good intentions? Perhaps he really needs to talk to me? To explain.

That’s my heart talking for sure. My head knows otherwise and it’s screaming at me not to entertain Oliver Langdon for one moment further. I’ve got a job to do tonight. Responsibilities. I can’t go swanning off with him to

visit his coffeehouse, which he has allegedly shutdown—and one quick glance across the street at the dark Steamy Coffee shows that at least he's not lying about that.

But the thing is, when you've seen a glimpse of a person you really like, a person packaged in an Oliver Langdon case, and you've seen the sort of man you've always dreamt of being with, the heart is always going to win.

Chapter 24

Oliver



I'm gonna be honest. I'm surprised Marlowe has chosen to come across the street with me. Surprised and pleased. She was so furious back there, I half expected her to send me packing, proclaiming that I was dead to her. Or something equally dramatic.

I don't blame her. Of course I don't. How can I? She doesn't have all the facts. To her, I'm a double-crossing jerk, telling her one thing and then doing the exact opposite.

I'm just grateful I've got the opportunity to put the record straight.

I unlock the front door and we make our way inside. I fumble around in the dark until I find one of the light switches and immediately the photographs of the sexy young couple light up, lending a harsh glow to the room.

"Do we have to have them looking at us?" Marlowe says, her voice heavy with irritation.

"I can switch them off. Just give me a sec." I fumble with the switches until I find the low light option we use in the evenings. The wall lights illuminate, the strip lighting under the counter and above the artwork glow, the light soft. Romantic even. Not that any romance will be happening tonight. Not between Marlowe and me, anyway, no matter how much I want

it. That much is painfully clear.

“So? What do you want to talk about?” Marlowe has her arms folded across her chest as she glares at me. But really, despite her anger, it's hard to tear my eyes away. Even in her obvious fury she's breathtakingly beautiful. Wearing a dress that makes her look feminine and pretty, the green color contrasting perfectly with her raven hair, which she's wearing in long waves.

But as gorgeous as she is right now, I've got some serious mistakes to make up for.

“I need to explain what happened—” I begin, only for her to cut me off.

“Do you mean when you put the huge, super unsubtle sign about your competition above the door to your coffeeshop? Or when the red carpet was rolled out? Or when the giant truck turned up and blocked Main Street?”

“It didn't block Main Street.”

Why am I making this point?

“Whatever, Oliver,” she grinds out in response.

“I get it. You're angry.”

She throws her hands onto her hips. “Well, would you look at who gets bonus points for observation skills. Well done, Oliver. But you forgot to add that you are one confusing dude. One day you're Mr. Nice Guy, fixing our machine and stepping in like a hero in front of Mike, pretending to be my boyfriend to help me out, and the next you're pulling this new give-away-a-truck stunt without telling me.”

“It's been quite a couple of days.”

“Quite a couple of days?”

“If you would just let me explain—”

“Is this normal behavior for you? Do you spend your time going around gaslighting your competition, leading them on and then pulling the rug out from under them?”

“Gaslighting?”

“What else would you call it?”

I open my mouth to respond when there's a metallic thud, like a deadbolt being activated on a prison door. I look up in apprehension.

“What was that?” Marlowe asks, her eyes darting around the shop.

“I don't know. It sounded like it came from the front door, but there's no one there.” I march to the door and peer out. The streetlights have been switched on, parked cars line the street, and I can hear music and laughter coming from the Second Chance. But there's no sign of anyone.

I check the door. It's locked.

Weird. I don't remember locking it when we came in.

And then it dawns on me.

“The new alarm system. It's been activated because we walked in here after hours.”

“There's no alarm going off, Oliver.”

“It doesn't work that way. There's no actual alarm. It simply locks everything down and sends a message that someone's here.”

She arches an eyebrow. “To capture the bad guys?”

“Exactly.”

“Can't you push some buttons into a pad or something to switch it off?”

“No, I can't.”

“Why not?”

I twist my mouth. Marlowe's got an expectant look on her face, waiting for me to solve this new puzzle. But the problem is, I can't solve this particular puzzle. I'm not equipped. “I, err, don't know the code.”

She lets out a sharp, bitter laugh. “You're telling me the boss of this place doesn't know how to operate the security system?”

“That's exactly what I'm telling you.”

“A likely story, Oliver,” she scoffs. She's scowling at me like I've orchestrated this whole thing, as if it's part of some nefarious plan to get her alone.

Although I want to be alone with her—for reasons other than simply explaining what happened today—I wouldn't know the first thing about how to pull something like this off.

Can't operate the security system, remember?

A thought occurs to me. “Naomi knows how to use it. She was here when it was installed.”

“Do you mean the Naomi currently at the Second Chance enjoying a tasty meal with her friends?”

“Ah.”

“Can't you call somebody else? Surely more than one person on your staff knows how to use the security system, even if the boss seems to be out of the loop.”

“Now why didn't I think of that?” I reply.

“You tell me, Sherlock.”

“The problem is, I can't. I don't have my phone. You took it from me back

at the Second Chance. Remember?”

“You're blaming me for this? You passed it to me so I could read some speech, if we're going to get technical about this.”

“Yes, but you put it down on your weird looking podium thing instead of giving it back to me when you didn't want to read what I had to say.”

“I'm so sorry, Oliver. I didn't realize we would need your phone because your stupid new security system would lock us in this shop together. Dumb of me, I know.”

Her words sink into my brain. We're locked in this shop together. Alone.

An entire cocktail of emotions slams into my chest.

“What about your phone?” I ask.

She runs her hands down her thighs and my eyes follow their progress. It's pretty dang sexy, and for a minute I wonder what she's doing, but I'm more than happy she's doing it.

She reaches her lower thighs and stops. “No pockets,” she says.

“Pockets. Right.” I clear my throat.

“Next time I do something huge with my aunt's coffeehouse, like launching a dinner service and bringing in a band, I'll be sure to wear something with pockets so I can carry my phone at all times. Particularly if you're around.”

“There's no need to get snarky.”

“It is what it is, Oliver Langdon.”

“Has anyone ever told you you're a touch feisty?”

“Well, has anyone ever told you you're a...” She searches for her insult. “A...*man*?”

I can't help my lips from twitching, but it takes a Herculean effort not to crack a smile. Something tells me smiling right about now could be the death of me.

“What about a landline?” she asks.

“This isn't the 1990s.”

“We've got one.”

“Good for you.”

“There's no need to be rude about it.”

“I'm not being rude,” I protest, even though I am being a little rude.

“How do we get out of here?” She stomps over to the front door and rattles it. It doesn't budge. That door is locked down like a prison cell.

“There's a back door, right?”

“Yeah, but it'll be locked, too.”

She sails past me in a fit of fury, and I call out, “Where are you going?”

“Recent experience tells me I'd be crazy to trust what you say, Oliver, so I'm going to check it myself.”

I can't argue. The optics aren't good for me right now, even if I know the negative stuff isn't my fault.

She disappears from the room and I hear her rattling the back door. Of course it doesn't open. I might not know the code to the new system, but I at least know what it does, and we're stuck in here like a couple of caged lions.

“I told you. We're locked in,” I call out.

She reappears, her features pinched. “I need to get out of here.”

“I'm working on that.”

“You are? Because right now it looks like the only person who can help us is Naomi and she's at our dinner and band evening, which is not due to finish for about an hour and a half minimum, which doesn't matter because you have no way of contacting her anyway.”

I shrug. “That about sums up the situation.”

As the boss I should know what the security code is, and how to operate the system. But with everything that's been going on the past few days, it totally slipped my mind and I trusted Naomi to be in control.

Marlowe begins to pace up and down like she's one of those caged lions—which is probably exactly how she's feeling right about now. “I cannot believe this, Oliver. This is our big opening night, the first time the Second Chance has ever opened for dinner. We've pulled out all the stops. We've got a great new menu and a band and everything. We've all worked so hard for this.” She slumps against the wall, the fight going out of her. “It was going to be so good and I wanted to be there for it.”

My heart squeezes at the sight of her, leaning against the wall, a defeated look on her face.

And it's all my fault.

“For what it's worth, I'm sorry.”

It sounds weak even to my ears, although it is genuine.

She lifts her gaze to mine. “I'm not sure you are sorry.”

“You think this was some grand design to get you alone?”

She heaves out a sigh as she slumps further down the wall, sitting on the floor, her legs sticking straight out in front of her. “I don't know what to think. One minute you're telling me we can co-exist because our businesses

have different markets and you're being all nice and...stuff, and the next, you're offering a fancy new truck to some lucky winner in town."

"I agree. I look pretty bad."

"Excuse me if I'm finding it hard to believe what you say."

Cautiously, I take seat on the floor beside her and lean my head against the wall. "That's fair."

"You're right, it is fair. It's about the only thing that's fair in this whole situation."

"I *am* sorry," I repeat, this time in a softer tone, a tone I hope she will take as genuine. "I've hated these past several hours, wondering what you must think of me."

"I bet you've guessed what I think of you by now."

I look at her. The fight has gone right out of her as she slumps against the wall, her head back, the profile of her face next to me.

"I wanted to talk to you and explain what happened today. That's why I prepared a speech on my phone. That's why I brought you over here."

She tilts her head to face me. "What's there to explain? You said one thing and then did another. It seems pretty straightforward to me."

"No. I said one thing and my *mom* did another."

Her eyebrows lift. "You're blaming this on your mommy?"

I ignore the derision in her voice. "I said 'mom' and you know it."

She lifts a shoulder. "Semantics."

"Most importantly right now, she's my *boss*. She signed off on this lavish promotion that I knew nothing about until it all turned up on my doorstep this afternoon."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing."

She pauses for a beat as she studies the opposite wall, digesting this new information. Finally, she turns back to me and says, "Oliver Langdon, you are such a mama's boy." The bitterness in her voice is gone and it's now gentler, teasing, maybe even a little flirty?

Flirty might be a step too far right now.

"A mama's boy?" I ask with a laugh. That's the last thing I am—and the last thing my mother sees me as, too. "Not exactly, but I need you to know that I meant what I said about co-existing. It's completely possible with our different offerings, particularly now that you're doing dinners as well as lunches and breakfasts. We're more of a coffee and snack place."

“Plastic snacks, you mean.”

I lift my lips into a small smile as our gazes lock. “Plastic snacks.”

“So, you admit it,” she says, returning my smile, her eyes soft.

“This doesn't leave these four walls.” I offer her my hand. She takes it and we shake. It feels nice to have her hand in mine, to feel her soft skin. But it's short-lived as she pulls it away too quickly.

She presses her lips together and turns her attention to her feet. “You really didn't know about the truck and the competition?”

“I really didn't know.”

She studies my face. “Okay.”

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For believing me,” I say simply.

“What can I say? I'm a sucker for a guy who can't operate his own security system.”

I let out a laugh, feeling lighter than I have since all this began. “I would have led with that, had I'd known.”

Her features are relaxed and her full lips lift into a ghost of a smile.

“I need to tell you that the competition is still running. Legally it has to, now that it's been advertised. I want to be transparent with you. I want you to trust me that there will be no more surprises, even though I know this truck thing doesn't help you at all.”

“Actually, it does help.”

I know she's not referring to the competition anymore. She means me, and the fact that I haven't intentionally misled her with the things I've said.

“No more surprises?” she asks.

“No more surprises.”

She presses her lips together.

“Our two businesses can co-exist. I'll make sure of it,” I say.

“You must know that people will flock here for a chance to win that truck. Whoever does your marketing knows how much people around here love a good pickup truck, even if the color is a little too racy for most of them.”

“You don't like the red?”

“It's not about what I like, it's about what all the guys out there like.”

“I think the color was based on the fact that half the population here wears red plaid flannel shirts most days.”

“They might like red on their shirts, but not on their vehicles. They’re more of a black or gray vehicle kind of people. Practical and easy to maintain. Doesn’t need washing quite so much.”

“Pity. Guess I’ll have to drive the red truck myself now.”

She lets out a laugh and it ends in a snort. “I cannot see you driving a truck.”

“Why not?”

“You’re too city.”

“Hey! Is that your way of saying I’m not tough enough? Because I need you to know I am plenty tough enough to drive that truck.”

“Oh, really?”

“Really.”

Her beautiful face is lit up in a smile and it tugs at my heartstrings. Hard. It would be so easy to reach out and cup her face in my hands, draw her close, and touch my lips softly to hers.

Easy, but probably out of the question.

Chapter 25

Marlowe



Sitting the way we are, close enough that our legs could touch, with the way Oliver is looking at me—as though he's thinking less about our war and more about us—has my body on high alert. My heart is drumming and those dang tiny birds in my belly are flapping their wings like they're at a Taylor Swift concert.

As I look up into his soft brown eyes, his face creased in the smile that makes my knees weak, part of me wants to fall into his arms. To pick up right where we left off at the Summer Festival.

But Oliver's words ring in my brain. *I need to tell you that the competition is still running.* The competition that will have our customers flocking to Steamy Coffee. The competition that we simply can't fight.

That's the grim truth.

In the end, whether Oliver was the one who orchestrated it or someone else is immaterial. We've brought a teddy bear to a knife fight, our big investment in a second-hand coffee machine is like a drop of creamer in Oliver's gallon of coffee. There's simply no way we can compete, and with the town filling up with visitors for the movie premiere tomorrow, I know exactly where they'll be heading. Spoiler alert: it won't be the Second Chance.

“Marlowe?” Oliver asks in a gentle voice that does nothing to calm those

Taylor Swift dancing birds. Slowly, he reaches out and takes my hand in his. It's not like before when we shook hands. This time it feels different. Personal.

Intimate.

“Can we get back to being friends now? I'd hate to think you were over there at the Second Chance angry with me.”

“I'm not angry with you. I'm—”

My mind flicks through tomorrow's events. Oliver's competition. The movie premiere.

The rally.

I jerk my hand from his as though it's scalding hot.

“What just happened?” he asks, confused.

I reposition myself so I'm leaning one shoulder against the wall and facing him. This needs to be done properly. “I need to tell you something and you're not going to like it.”

“I'm sure it can't be that bad.”

“It's not great—but I need you to know that this wasn't my plan at all. I had nothing to do with it. But in the interests of no more surprises, you need to know.”

He smiles. “Okay.”

“The thing is there's a rally planned for tomorrow.”

“A rally? About what?”

“You. Well, not you per se, more Steamy Coffee.”

“Hold up. You're telling me that you're part of a protest against my coffeeshop?”

“I didn't orchestrate it. It was suggested to me.”

“But you've gone along with it?”

“At the time I said yes, I thought you had planned this whole competition to beat us. I was angry and hurt and confused. That's why I said yes to the mayor.”

“Wait. *The mayor?*”

“Mayor Garcia is in charge of the protest rally that's happening outside Steamy Coffee tomorrow morning at 9:15.”

His brows are pulled together as though he can't quite get his head around what I'm telling him. I can't blame him. It's not every day the mayor of a small town protests over a coffeehouse chain. Not in Hunter's Creek, anyway.

“I know it sounds crazy, but the thing is, he's part of the Historical Society and they are super focused on preserving the traditional aspects of the town, which of course includes the Second Chance Café because not only is it in a historic building—”

“Steamy Coffee is in a historic building.”

“Yes, but it's new to town and it represents all the things the Historical Society hates. New, big chains, not being local.”

He lets his head fall back against the wall with a *thunk*.

“I feel terrible about this. That's why I'm warning you.”

He snaps his attention back to me. “It doesn't have to be a warning. You can call it off. You can tell the mayor that you don't support it, because if you don't support it then there's no point holding the protest. You're the one affected. Right?”

“Sure.” I twist my hands in my lap. “At first I told him no, that I wouldn't be involved.”

“And then?” When I don't immediately reply he says, “Let me guess. The truck appeared and you saw red.”

“I like what you did there.” I prod him gently in the arm and try out a smile.

It doesn't land well.

“Okay, full disclosure. I've given them the green light already. They've got signs and everything. They're super excited about it.”

His features are taut. “I see.”

“I'm sorry. As you put it, I saw red.” I clasp my hands and look down at them, regret and shame twisting inside.

“I wish you'd trusted me,” he says.

“I wish I had, too.”

We sit in silence, my heart aching. If I had known before that Oliver hadn't chosen to run the competition himself, I would never have said yes to the mayor. We've got this thing between us that keeps pulling me back to him, despite the fact that I should probably hate him.

But I'm powerless to deny it anymore.

I want to be with Oliver. I want him to be mine.

I lift my head and look at him, resolute. “I'll try and stop it. I'll do my best. You have my word.”

“But it's the mayor,” he replies on a disbelieving laugh.

“I'm sure I can get him to see reason. I'll go talk to him, as soon as we get

out of here.”

“Thank you.” He reaches for my hand once more, and this time, I have no intention of pulling it away.

“I’m sorry,” I murmur.

“I’m not sure I wanna get out of here now. What about you?” he asks, his voice now breathless. There’s a hopeful look in his eyes that makes my heart squeeze.

I might have come here tonight to give Oliver a piece of my mind, but now I want to give him so much more.

I want to give him *me*.

The realization has the air being sucked from my lungs, and as I swallow I notice my mouth is suddenly dry.

“I don’t want to leave, either,” I tell him. I gaze back at him, noticing the way the brown of his eyes is flecked with slivers of gold and bronze. They’ve softened but still have a growing intensity to them that leaves me breathless.

Is this the moment? Is this when the thing between us that’s been building and building since we met finally becomes...something?

“I want us to be more than just friends,” he murmurs.

I swallow once more, my heart beating like a drum machine set to fast. “I do, too.”

He reaches out and cups the back of my head, tangling his fingers up in my hair. The sudden brush of his fingers against my neck sends shivers through my body, making my breath hitch.

“Marlowe,” he murmurs, his voice deep and full of longing.

I breathe in his scent, feel his firm thigh nudge up against mine as his other hand gently cups my jaw, tilting my face upward to meet his.

A soft, long-held moan escapes my lips which only proves to spur him on as he gently draws me closer to him. And then he presses his lips softly against mine in what has got to be the most anticipated kiss of my life.

But we’ve come close to this moment before, and I’m impatient for more.

I respond by running my fingers through his short hair and kissing him back, tentatively at first, as though neither of us can quite believe what we’re doing. As I deepen the kiss, he pulls me even closer to him, sweeping us away in this blissful, long-awaited moment.

And oh, my, does this man kiss me like he means it.

All the anger and hurt I’ve felt in the last few days wash away, replaced with a searing need to remain like this, clasped together, our long-held desire

finally finding its voice.

And what a voice.

His kiss is both soft and demanding, expert and impassioned. I lose myself in it. It's been building between us, and it's everything, *everything* I dreamed it could be.

His fingers tickle my neck and I run my hands down his taut back, feeling the sinew of his muscles, loving the way he feels against my fingers. His touch, his scent, his softly spoken murmurs telling me how beautiful I am, how much he wants me, only serves to make this moment all the more incredible.

I've kissed men before. Plenty of times. Starting with Jamie Camden in Junior High, stretching through my adult years all the way to Mike. But kissing Oliver is something entirely new. New and wonderful and at the top of my list of new favorite things to do.

When we finally pull away from each other, we gaze deeply into one another's eyes, both of us catching our breath. My entire body is on alert and I finally understand how one kiss could change your entire life.

One kiss with Oliver Langdon.

"That was—" I murmur, not quite wanting to put how extraordinary our kiss was into words.

"It was," he confirms, his features lifted into a smile that melts my heart. "I definitely prefer doing that to arguing."

"But we're so good at arguing," I reply, echoing his grin.

"I think with practice, we'll be even better at the kissing."

"Practice, huh?"

"Oh, yeah. A lot of practice." He cups my face in his hands and runs a thumb across my cheek.

"I didn't see this coming," I say, my voice in tremors.

"All that built up anger between us was always set to sizzle."

"You think?"

He brushes a gentle kiss against my lips and the intensity of emotion leaves me trembling. "I know."

"I thought we hated each other."

"I never hated you."

"Not even a little?" I tease.

He runs his fingers down the bare skin of my arm, sending tingles right through me. "Let me think. I spotted this goddess in a bikini at the edge of

the pond and made a beeline for her because I knew I needed to meet her.”

“You did, huh?” I ask with a giddy laugh. Because that's exactly how I feel. Giddy. Giddy and light and happy and all the good things. I've finally allowed myself to be pulled right into Oliver's magnetism, a magnetism I'd tried so hard to fight. But I don't want to fight it anymore.

“You've got to admit, you flirted with me that day,” he says.

“No, I didn't.”

“Yeah, you did.”

“I'm pleading the 5th.”

He lets out a low laugh that rumbles through me and tickles my belly. “Plead whatever number you like, but I know flirting when I see it and you, Marlowe Cole, flirted with me that day by the pond. And when I came to see you at your coffeehouse, too.”

“That was before I knew who you were. Chiseled jawlines aren't my kryptonite, you know.”

He drags his fingers down his stubbled jaw, making me smile. “Are you sure about that?”

I reach up and brush a line of kisses down his jaw, coming to a stop only when I meet his lips. He waits for me to kiss him, and when I don't, he pulls me closer and kisses me himself.

I tell you what, I could definitely get used to this.

“I think this particular chiseled jawline *is* your kryptonite, and I for one am more than happy about that.”

“The fake becomes real,” I say on a laugh.

“Your ex won't be pleased, but I know who will be.”

“Who?”

“The Empress Collective.”

“The what?”

“That's what I call them, the Empress Collective. Those busybody ladies in town who like to meddle in people's lives, yours and mine in particular.”

“Oh, you mean the Hunter's Creek Ladies' Committee. Mrs. Jacobson and her cronies.”

“As we've already established, I get to call her Tanya on account of being so very special in her eyes.”

I nudge his shoulder. “So you tell me, every time I see you.”

“Sure I do. What can I say? I've got the older lady demographic nailed down in this town.”

I let out a giggle. “They already think we’re a couple. From the fake date at the Summer Festival, remember?”

“How could I forget? Did you know I've wanted to kiss you since the moment I met you?” he murmurs.

My heart rate kicks up in response. “I'm glad we got there.”

“Me, too.”

We share a goofy grin.

“So, what happens next?” I ask. “We run competing coffeehouses. You've got this competition going on that could very well mean the end of my aunt’s business, and if I can't stop it, the rally is going to go ahead right outside your business tomorrow morning.”

“That sounds like a classic love story to me. Two people pitted against one another who cannot deny their mutual feelings. It's like that old movie, *You've Got Mail*.”

“I hope it's not.”

“Why? You'd make a cute Meg Ryan.”

I sit up straighter. “In that movie, Tom Hanks’s big chain bookstore beats Meg Ryan's little independent one—that was so full of character and whimsy and all things wonderful—right out of business. She had to shut it down.”

“How about we rewrite the ending? Both of our businesses survive and we’re together. Way more Hollywood than actual Hollywood.”

I grin at him. “I think I like that idea.”

“Good. It's settled then.”

We share a smile.

“If only life could work out that easily. Past experience tells me it doesn't.”

His smile drops. “Past experience with Mike?”

I lift my eyes to his. “Things don't work out the way they do in the movies.”

“Which we’ve established is a good thing in this case, right?”

“Right.”

“Want to tell me about it?”

I chew on my lip. I've made a point of not talking about Mike since I moved back to Hunter’s Creek. It reminds me of the life I left behind, living in Seattle and working at a job I loved. But it also reminds me of the farce my life truly was, how Mike had treated me with disrespect and a deep absence of honesty.

But this week, my past came barreling into town, and there's been no avoiding it.

"I was dating Mike in Seattle before I moved back here. He was my boss."

He sucks in air. "Never a good move."

"Oh, it's worse than just that."

"Was he cheating on you?"

Unpleasant feelings trickle down my spine. "In a manner of speaking, yes."

Oliver pulls me in and I nestle beside him, the reassurance in his touch making me feel safe.

How quickly things can change between two people.

"Look, you don't have to talk about what happened if you don't want to. I know how hard it can be when a relationship doesn't work out."

"That sounds like the voice of experience."

"It is. I was in a serious relationship with a woman."

Anxiety begins to bounce around me like a ping pong ball. Does that make this a rebound situation? A fling?

"Okaaaaay."

"We broke up a while ago now."

"How long?"

"Two years."

Relief pushes my anxiety away.

"I'm over her and what she did, but it was tough at the time. Really tough."

"That doesn't sound like a good story."

"Breakups usually aren't. But when your girlfriend of three years cheats on you with your brother, you don't exactly hang around for the sequel."

"With your *brother*?" I gasp. "Oliver, that's horrible! I'm so sorry you had to go through that." My heart aches for him and I squeeze his hand before I lift it to my lips to kiss.

He shrugs, although I can tell the pain still lingers for him. "It's all in the past now."

"But it was with your brother. That has lasting consequences."

"Yes and no."

I shoot him a sideways glance. "What does that mean?"

His shoulders drop. "Robert and I were working on opening a new store

in Jacksonville, Florida, which was where my ex grew up. I was called to another project and she decided to stay behind to spend time with family. That turned out to be a euphemism for sleeping with my brother.”

“I bet you had a few things to say to the both of them.”

“I couldn’t. Not to my brother, anyway.”

“Why not? Blood may be thicker than water and all that, but what he did to you was just as horrible as what she did. They’re both culpable.”

He hangs his head. “He...died in a car accident before I had the chance. She wasn’t in the vehicle.”

I clamp my mouth shut in shock. This is beyond my sorry story. Way beyond. This is a tragedy for all involved.

“Oliver, I’m so sorry.”

“I was, too. My mom was...well she was pretty torn up.”

“I bet she was devastated.”

“Yeah. Her first-born son, gone. It changed her, and not for the better.”

I think of the prickly woman I served at the café. “I bet she’s grateful she’s still got you. Such a trauma must have brought you closer.”

“Robert was her Golden Boy, the son who could do no wrong. Star athlete, scholar, super successful at his job. He was taller than me, better looking than me, all of it. She made sure I knew it.”

I blink at him in disbelief, my heart hurting. “Oliver. I-I don’t know what to say.”

“Of course you don’t. You come from a loving family. I’ve seen you together, you with your sisters and your parents. You care for one another. You love one another. It’s obvious. It’s different for me. I love my family, but we were never close. I was Robert’s competition, the kid he used to show everyone that he was the best. Which he was. The best at everything, including stealing my girlfriend, as it turns out.”

“Do you think he felt threatened by you?”

“No. He was Robert Langdon. I was just his little brother.”

I can feel the hurt in his words and I know this wound is deep for him. Feeling inadequate, particularly in the eyes of your mom? That’s a lot to deal with.

“Do you miss Robert?”

“In a way. Although he was a jerk to me most of my life, there were times when he was a decent brother.”

“Running off with your girlfriend wouldn’t have exactly helped brotherly

relations.”

“You got that right.”

“Maybe your mom just needs some more time to come to terms with his loss?”

“My mother will never get over his loss and I will always pale in comparison, trying my hardest to prove myself to her.”

There’s such bitterness in his words, it takes my breath away.

“Is that what you’re trying to do here? Prove yourself to your mom?”

His jaw muscles flex. “Is that totally lame of me?”

“Of course it’s not,” I reassure. “But you know something? I don’t think you need to prove yourself to anyone. You’re good enough—more than good enough—just the way you are.”

He lifts his head and studies my face for a beat before his lips lift in a smile. “I think that might be the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me. What is about you that makes me open up like this?”

I shrug. “Don’t you usually tell people about your life?”

“Some things, but not this. I keep a lot close to my chest, but you...with you it’s different.”

I put into words precisely how he makes me feel.

“You feel safe.”

His eyes flash to mine. “Safe. Yes. How did you know?”

“Because I feel that way with you, too.”

We share another smile.

“Man, we’re in deep,” he says as he huffs out a laugh.

“You might be right.”

“Okay, Psychologist Cole, you’ve heard my sob story, tell me about you and Mike.”

It’s clear he doesn’t want to talk about himself anymore, and I can’t begrudge him that. He’s been through a lot: his ex cheating on him, the loss of his brother. The way he thinks his mother sees him.

“If you want to,” he adds.

I chew my lip, memories filling my mind. “Mike and I were together for months. Although he was my boss, it was never a problem for me. We kept our relationship quiet at work, of course, but otherwise it felt totally normal. He’d been married and was separated. Everyone at work knew that. The problem was, he never told me that he and his wife had reconciled *during* our relationship.” I lift my eyes to watch for his reaction, expecting judgement.

Instead, I get understanding and kindness.

“What a total rat,” he says vehemently. “I mean, I could use much stronger language to describe someone like him, but I don't want to offend you.”

“Believe me, I've used every single curse word known to humanity to describe that mistake.”

“Your mistake. I like that. That is all he was and that is all he will ever be to you.”

“Absolutely.”

“So, do you think he's left her and that's why he came to see you?”

Realization dawns. “I bet you're right. But you know what? I wouldn't take him back, not after what he did to me.”

“He made you the other woman.”

He gets it.

“That's exactly right.”

“You're so much better off being with me.” His lips lift into a smile and I find myself returning it, despite my unpleasant walk down Mike-related memory lane.

“If I had a drink, I would cheers to that.”

He springs to his feet in one swift move, giving me a surprise. “That I can manage. Can I make you a coffee? Hot chocolate? A chocolate shake?”

“Ooh, a chocolate shake sounds great. As long as there's lots of ice cream. You see, someone got us locked in here and I'm starving.”

He grins at me, offering me his hand to pull me to my feet. “A chocolate shake with extra ice cream coming right up. How about you make yourself comfortable on the sofa. It's a lot softer than the floor.”

Five minutes later, we're sitting side by side on the admittedly very comfortable sofa, holding delicious chocolate shakes in our hands.

“I know this is a crazy busy time right now, but I want to take you somewhere tomorrow morning before it all begins,” I say.

“Before 7:00 in the morning?”

“I figured I'd get Ryn to open for me so we can have until 8:00. Then I can check in on the coffeeshop before I go see the mayor.”

A smile creeps across his face. “I'll get Naomi to open for me.”

“It's a date then?”

“It's a date.”

“Good. Oh, and bring your swim trunks.”

“The pond, huh? Where it all began.”

All I do is smile at him.

We clink glasses and Oliver says in a funny voice, “Here’s looking at you, kid.”

I giggle. “Is that your Humphrey Bogart impersonation?”

“It was pretty good I thought,” he replies with a grin.

“I wouldn’t give up the day job if I were you.”

“Give me yours.”

“My what?”

“Your Bogey impression.”

I clear my throat. “Louis, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”

A laugh rumbles out of him and it’s like it reaches inside of me and washes all the hurt away. Mike, the truck, the rivalry, the uncertainty. Gone.

“You know, I think *this* is the beginning of a beautiful friendship, only with some pretty great added benefits, if our activities of earlier are anything to go by,” he says, and as I look into his eyes, I’m overcome with the feeling that despite it all, he’s right.

“I do, too,” I reply with a grin that reaches from ear to ear.

Oliver leans in and presses his soft lips against mine. “Good,” he whispers and the sincerity in his eyes makes my heart squeeze. “Now eat up before it melts.”

I scoop the thickest chocolate shake I’ve had in my life into my mouth with a long, old-fashioned spoon and let out a contented sigh.

Together we sit, cuddled up with one another, both eating our delicious treats, sharing stories and learning about one another in the dim light of the streetlamps outside.

It’s romantic and intimate, and it really does feel like the start of something between us. Something utterly wonderful.

Chapter 26

Marlowe



I'm awake before my alarm the following morning, my head full of Oliver, but unlike other mornings since he moved to town, my thoughts are crystal clear. Gone is the confusion over being attracted to him and wanting to spend time with him while also wanting him to pack up and leave town so I can save the Second Chance. Gone is my anger. Gone is my fear. All of it is replaced with only good thoughts. Thoughts like how much I feel for him, how good he makes me feel, how opening up to one another felt so natural and right.

What it feels like to touch him, to kiss him, to know he wants me as much as I want him.

But more than that, I know beyond any doubt that he's a good man. Decent. Kind. In a short space of time, he has shown me his true colors, and I'm ashamed I judged him so easily.

He helped me out with the coffee machine and then when Mike turned up out of the blue. In fact, he hung around after we'd said good bye because he thought I might need him. And need him I did, but in more ways than we'd both expected.

Sure, I had a moment there when I thought he was a double crosser with that whole "win a pickup truck" promotion. But what did Elizabeth Bennet

say? Something about a good memory being unpardonable in these situations? Yes. *That*. I'm not going to focus on our rivalry or our history.

Today I'm focusing on the good things. The *real* things.

I throw off the covers and busy myself with getting ready. It's early and the rest of the house is still asleep, so as the birds tweet their morning stories, I collect everything I need. I drive to meet Oliver at his coffeehouse after a short stop at the Second Chance, where he's already waiting by the front door.

"Good morning," I say as he climbs into my passenger seat. Although we spent yesterday evening locked in together, I feel instantly shy as his manly bulk fills the space.

"Morning," he responds, his voice deep and soft, doing delicious things to my belly. "Long time, no see."

"It has to have been at least six or seven hours. I figured you'd be missing me by now."

He lets out a laugh. "Are we going to the pond?"

"You'll just have to wait and see," I tell him as I put the car in drive and we pull away from the curb.

"A woman of mystery. I like it."

I drive us out of town toward the forest and we chat about our evening and how Naomi had found us on the sofa together.

"I could not believe we had chocolate ice cream smeared across our faces," I say, reliving the embarrassment of when Naomi burst into Steamy Coffee in a panic, her face morphing into a smile when she realized that not only were we not thieves, but that it was her boss and me, looking cozy on the couch, and evidently covered in chocolate ice cream.

"I can," he replies, and instantly my body vibrates with the memory of our shared kisses. "I hope we get to do it again soon."

"Play your cards right..." I glance his way to see his gaze intent on me, his eyes dark. My heart rate picks up and I beam at him.

The start of something new is the best feeling on the planet. All those shared looks, the butterflies, the sense of possibility.

One hundred percent. The. Best. *Ever*.

And this new thing with Oliver feels especially sweet because of everything between us that's come before. In a weird way, all the bickering, one-upmanship, and the competition, has only acted as a catalyst to lead us to this moment.

And what a sweet, anticipated moment it is.

Once we're a few miles deep into the forest, I pull the car off the road.

Oliver peers out at the trees on either side of us, the only thing we can see for miles. "This isn't the pond."

"You got that right."

"Be straight with me, okay? Did you bring me here to murder me?"

"I usually do my murdering after lunch, so you're okay at this early hour."

"Good to know."

I pop the trunk and pull out the picnic basket that's been in my family since before I was born.

"A picnic? Mike will be jealous," he says as he holds out his hand to take the basket from me.

"Let him. He's old news."

Oliver huffs out a laugh. "That, I like to hear. Now, where are you *not* murdering me?"

"This way."

I lead him away from the road along a narrow path that's only barely visible with the summer plant growth. We walk single file until we reach the destination for this morning's date. I can hear it before I see it, the burble of water as it cascades over rocks, settling in the deep blue pool below.

"A waterfall!" Oliver exclaims as he looks around, his eyes wide.

"Ten points for observation, Mr. Langdon."

"It's stunning! How did I not know this place existed?"

"Because you were too busy being locked in battle with the cute girl next door," I tell him with a cheeky grin.

He takes my hand in his. "She's across the street, actually, and I would call her beautiful, more than cute."

And there goes my heart again, doing weird things in my chest. Weird things that tell me how much I feel for this man who was once so confusing and is now so...as I look into his eyes, the only word I can think of is *wonderful*.

"I used to come here with my family when I was a kid. It's just as I remembered it," I tell him.

He squeezes my hand. "It's perfect. Where do you want the picnic basket?"

I indicate a clearing by the shore. "Over there."

Hand-in-hand we walk over to the spot and together we lay out the blanket and the food I'd collected from the Second Chance. We've got ham and cheese stuffed croissants and fruit and slices of two flavors of pie, as well as a thermos of hastily made coffee.

We sit down on the picnic blanket in the early morning light with a view of the waterfall, the air around us filled with the babbling water and the distant sound of birdsong.

It's totally picturesque, and just how I'd imagined it.

"Is that your award-winning apple pie?" he asks.

"Actually, we were out of apple, on account of the fact it's award-winning and hence super popular," I tease. "So, this one is blueberry and this one is pecan." I point to the two different types. "Want some?"

"Blueberry for me, thanks."

I place a slice of blueberry pie and a stuffed croissant on each of our plastic plates and pass one to Oliver while he pours the coffee into some mugs.

He raises his mug and smiles at me. "To new beginnings."

"To new beginnings," I echo.

He swallows his coffee. "Did you come here with Mike?"

I shake my head no. "I never did."

His tight features relax. "That's good, and I'll try to stop mentioning him now."

"Twice in a few minutes is a lot when you're on a date with a new guy," I reply with a laugh.

"I always think it's important to mention an ex at least five times on a date, particularly in sentences like 'I bet Mike couldn't do this' before I do something heroic like save a kitten from a tree or fix your broken coffee machine for you."

I let out a laugh. "Mike never saved a kitten from a tree, and he never fixed my coffee machine for me."

"See? I'm already one step ahead of him." He reaches for my hand and we interlace fingers.

"As long as you don't have a wife lurking around, you're *ten* steps ahead."

"No wives, past or current. What you see is what you get."

"I like what I see."

"Me, too," he replies.

Our gazes lock, his eyes dark. How I misjudged this man! He's nothing like I thought he would be. And I'm so, so grateful for that.

"Eat up," I tell him. "We've got a big day ahead of us and we need our strength."

"Yes, ma'am."

We begin to eat and chat about the days' events as the water falls gently beside us and the morning sun climbs the sky.

"You know, I did think you were pretty cute that time we met at the pond," I say.

"You're admitting to that now, huh?"

"You looked pretty good in your swim trunks, as though you didn't already know that." I nudge him.

"And you looked pretty good in your bikini."

My eyes widen. "You didn't even see me in my bikini. I threw my dress on before we met."

"You forget I saw you from the other side of the pond, standing at the water's edge, drumming up the courage to dive into the cool water."

"I could call you a peeping Tom, perving at me like that."

He chuckles. "Because there was no way you were checking me out, right?"

I lift my lips into a smile. "Call it even?"

"Even. Now, tell me about your life in Seattle before you moved back here, leaving out everything about Mike, of course."

"More than happy to do that. Well, I was a marketing exec for a tech company there. I have a marketing degree and it was my first job, which turned into my second job, and then third, when I was promoted."

"A career woman."

"That was me. Climbing that big old ladder."

"Did you like it there? I mean, it's my hometown, so I'm probably a little biased about the place."

"Go Seahawks?"

"You betcha!"

"I did like it."

"It sounds like there's a 'but' coming."

"But," I say and he rolls his eyes. "I always thought I needed to be in a city to pursue my career, to climb that ladder I mentioned. Although I liked living in Seattle, I missed home."

“There are a lot more opportunities in cities. Sounds to me like you’re driven.”

“I guess as the oldest daughter, I always thought I needed to pave the way, you know? Show my sisters what was possible. Show my parents what I was capable of.”

“That sure sounds like classic oldest sibling behavior.”

“Like Robert?”

“We’re not talking about me,” he replies and I smile, thinking how rare it is to go on a date with someone who doesn’t want to talk about themselves the whole time.

“Anyway, I guess I got caught up in the whole idea of achieving and achieving and achieving, always taking that next step, climbing that next mountain. It becomes its own thing. You forget yourself in it, always wanting the next thing and the next. In a way, I think what Mike did acted as the circuit breaker for me to sit back and figure out what I really wanted to do with my life.”

“And it wasn’t working in marketing for a tech company in Seattle?”

I shake my head. “I guess I’m just a small-town girl. I’m happiest when I’m here.”

“I like that about you.”

“It’s funny. It took me until I was 28 to decide what I wanted to do with my life, and it was right here in Hunter’s Creek all along.”

“Is what you want to do with your life running the Second Chance?”

“I do love it. But at some point, my aunt is going to want the place back and I’ll need to find another mountain to climb. I’ve always known there’s going to be an end date to my current job. Which is a good thing, really, because it will mean that Uncle Johnny is well enough for my aunt to return.”

“But if you love it?” he leads.

I chew on my lip. I’ve been so busy trying to make the Second Chance a success for Aunt Sheila that I’ve barely had time to consider my next move once she’s back. Would I want to stay on, working for my aunt? Or is there something else in my future, something that isn’t clear to me yet?

“I guess I need to be open to possibilities.”

“I think that’s wise. None of us know what’s around the corner. Maybe your aunt will be so impressed with you that she’ll give you the place?”

“The problem with that is things haven’t exactly been smooth sailing since I took over, thanks to a certain big coffee chain.”

“Enough about that,” he replies with a laugh, and I agree.

“Tell me, what was it like growing up in a town like Hunter’s Creek?” he asks me as he puts a grape in his mouth.

“Life was easy. Good. Simple. It’s a great place for kids. So many adventures. It’s small enough that you can know everyone, which I guess can be a double-edged sword, of course, but I always liked that about the town.”

“You like everyone knowing your business? The Empress Collective must love you.”

“I guess it's the familiarity. I feel at home here.”

“I get that.”

“Do you like living in a small town, too?”

“My job has taken me to a bunch of towns and cities, big and small. Every place I've been has something unique about it, something to like. Hunter’s Creek is no different. Sure, it's pretty and full of character, but I’ve found it's the people that matter the most. That's what makes a place.”

“I agree.” I chew on my lip, nervous to ask the question that's been playing on my mind. “How long will you be in Hunter’s Creek?”

“Until the branch is humming, I guess.”

It's not a permanent move. I should have guessed.

“Right. Of course.” I paste on a smile, pretending that I'm okay that whatever this thing is between us, it will only be short-lived. That Oliver and I can be nothing more than a fling, a brief encounter before he moves on to the next challenge. And me? Well, the future is uncertain on that front, too.

The thought has my belly twisting in a painful knot.

But we're both adults. We can spend time together, enjoying each other, knowing what this is.

So why do I suddenly feel like crying?

“I know we're not supposed to swim right after a meal, but that waterfall is just too tempting and you did tell me to bring my trunks. Want to come in with me?” Oliver asks.

“We probably have time for a short swim.”

“We definitely do.” He rises to his feet and offers me his hand, pulling me up.

We strip down to our swimsuits, and I scoop my hair up into a top knot.

“No getting my hair wet, okay,” I say.

“Sure,” he replies with a wicked grin before he taps my arm and says, “Last one in’s a rotten egg,” and dashes down toward the water.

“Oliver Langdon, how old are you?” I ask as I dash after him.

We both crash into the cool water with splashes and any hope of my hair staying dry gets washed right away. Literally.

“I’m 31,” he tells me, still grinning at me as he pushes the hair from his face while he bobs in the water. “Why do you ask?”

“Because you’re acting more like seven,” I retort on a giggle.

“You’re still it. Catch me if you can.” He swims toward the waterfall, and I chase after him.

We dive under it and pop out on the other side, the water bouncing up against our faces as it slaps into the pool.

“Thank you for this. For all of it,” he says over the noise of the falling water.

“I’m the one who should be thanking you.”

“Can you believe we’re arguing over who should be more thankful?”

“I’m not sure I can believe any of this.”

He pulls me up against him, and instinctively I wrap my arms around him, feeling his firm body pressed against mine as he clutches onto me. My heart is banging so hard I half expect him to feel it through my ribcage.

“Me neither,” he says against my lips. “But I’m so incredibly happy about it.” He collects me in a kiss that leaves my head reeling.

As I kiss him back, I can’t imagine a more perfect date. A beautiful setting, an amazing man, and the best water-based make out session I could imagine.

Our future may be uncertain, many things may be up in the air, but I know one thing for sure. Whatever this thing is with Oliver, I don’t want it to end.

Chapter 27

Oliver



“You’re smiling over your new girlfriend, aren’t you, boss?” Naomi says as she leans up against the door to my office.

I look up from my computer screen and offer her an impassive smile. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I’m a bald-faced liar. I’ve been thinking about Marlowe since I moved to town, and this morning’s magical date at the waterfall only amplified those thoughts.

I have got it bad for this woman, and I am totally amped about it.

“Sure, you do. Last night when I caught you two on the sofa you looked totally loved up, like you didn’t care that you were locked in.”

“We didn’t. In the end.”

In all my wildest dreams I wouldn’t have imagined Marlowe and I would get locked in here together and have the chance to not only put our arguments to bed, but finally act on what we’ve both been feeling for each other.

I know that what I feel for her goes way beyond attraction to a beautiful woman. What I feel for her is big. Bigger than I’ve felt for anyone since... well, probably ever.

That’s what makes my belly flip when I see her. That’s what makes my lips curve into a smile when I think of her. That’s what drives me to make our

businesses co-existing work, because I don't want to leave Hunter's Creek, and I definitely don't want to leave Marlowe.

And kissing her? Let's just say I never want another day to go by in which I don't get to kiss Marlowe Cole.

I know. It's a lot. Way more than I was ever expecting when I took on this Gaulish village that repels the Roman invasion.

Getting big feelings for someone was the last thing on my mind.

I was here to do a job, to prove to my mother that I have what it takes to crack this market. To show her that I can fill Robert's shoes.

That I *am* good enough, for her and for this business.

And so far, it looks as though not only am I on track to get all that, but I got the girl, too.

Life sure is turning up roses.

"You know the whole town is talking about you two," Naomi says.

I STACK some paperwork on my desk and rise to my feet. "You didn't mention the smeared chocolate to anyone, did you? Because that's kind of embarrassing."

"Your secret's safe with me, boss."

"Thanks. How's it looking out there?"

"It's steady. Mainly out-of-towners, but I know it's gonna get crazier before the day is done."

"A worldwide movie premiere at the end of the street will do that. Has it started raining out?"

Although this morning's waterfall date was bathed in the glow of the sun, the forecast had a twenty percent chance of rain.

"It's clearing. Perfect weather for a Leonardo Finch and Charlene Kemp movie premiere."

"We wouldn't want Hollywood stars getting their hair wet on the red carpet, now would we? That reminds me."

"What?"

"I'd called Leo back before we opened the store here and asked him if he'd make an appearance."

Naomi raises her brows at me. "Leo?"

"We were roommates in college. He said he'd come, but I haven't heard anything since, and to be honest, I'd totally forgotten about it. I know it's

extremely unlikely, but he may turn up.”

“Really?” she asks, her eyes bright. “How totally cool.”

“Don’t hold your breath.”

“I’ll keep an eye out for him and let you know. Oh, hey there, Olena. Hi, Zander.”

My sister beams at us as she and Zander walk into the small room. I greet her with a hug and take Zander in my arms, spinning him around to peals of laughter.

“I’d be careful, Uncle Ollie. He had oatmeal for breakfast and I’d hate to see that all over your shirt,” Olena says.

I lower my nephew and give his belly a tickle. “Zander. You’ve gotten so big! How did that happen? I just barely saw you.”

“I ate my carrots,” he tells me in a solemn tone.

“Did you?”

“You gotta eat your carrots, Uncie Orrie.”

I always smile whenever he calls me “Uncie Orrie”.

“That’s right, honey. Vegetables are good for growing big, strong, and healthy,” Olena says.

“I’m gonna leave you guys with Uncie Orrie here and go serve some customers,” Naomi tells us before she leaves the room.

“Thanks for being here, sis,” I tell her.

“Of course. I get to hang with you in this totally cute town and celebrity hotspot. They’ve got the red carpet rolled out outside the movie theatre already and the town is buzzing.”

“It’s a big day for a small place like this.”

“You know Mom’s attending the premiere? She’s walking the red carpet and everything.”

“Lucky Mom. Is she already here?”

“She’s busy bossing the staff around. You know how she is.”

I roll my eyes. “First-hand experience.”

“That is something I do not miss about working for this company. Right now, I’m gonna go grab something to eat and take this one to the playground.”

“Playground?” Zander asks hopefully.

“That’s right, honey. It’s playground time once Mommy gets her coffee fix.”

“I want a coffee fix,” he replies.

“In about 16 years,” she tells him.

“I’ll see you out.”

I find Mom behind the counter, instructing Naomi and the other staff to rearrange the workstation to improve flow. When I catch her eye, she raises her brows at me in greeting. I say goodbye to my sister and nephew, and the two of us return to my office.

“I’ve been looking at the figures and business seems to be picking up,” she says without preamble.

This is about as close to a compliment as I think I could ever get from my mom.

“We’ve been working hard.”

“Do you have Leonardo Finch coming by today, as you promised?”

“Locked and loaded,” I reply, although there’s nothing locked nor loaded about it.

Mom’s face lifts into a smile, a sight so rare I feel like I should photograph it to preserve its memory. “I would very much like to meet him.”

“You might meet him on the red carpet.”

“I can’t imagine I will, so I’ll rely on you.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“You know, Oliver, I think you may have the seeds here of actually proving me wrong for the first time in your life.”

I pull my brows together and blink at her. “That’s good. I think.”

“Oh, don’t look so worried. If the figures continue to grow the way they have been at this branch, I don’t see any reason why you can’t be a part of the international move next year.”

A sense of happiness washes over me. Happiness and something else. If I had to name it, I’d call it *relief*. Relief that my mom is finally seeing my worth, seeing that I can do just as good a job as Robert did.

Perhaps I am going to get it all.

“I appreciate your faith in me.”

“Don’t let me down,” she warns.

“I won’t.”

There’s a flurry of excitement out in the coffeeshop and we walk out to see none other than my old roommate, and now Hollywood’s hottest property, Leonardo Finch, striding toward me, the crowd separating like the Red Sea in awe of him with each step he takes.

“Goodness,” Mom says.

“Langdon. It’s been a while,” he says as he shakes my hand enthusiastically.

I’m in shock. “Leo. You’re here.”

“Of course I’m here. I said I would be. You haven’t changed. Still the same suave Langdon that I knew back in the day.”

I throw my gaze over him. Probably because he’s due on the red carpet shortly, he’s dressed in a tux that makes him look like royalty, the crisp whiteness of his shirt showing off his tan skin and his square jaw.

“You’ve definitely changed,” I tell him.

“Of course I have,” he says matter-of-factly. “I’m big news now. Back then, I was just a kid with a dream.” He slaps me on the back. “I remember you were gonna go work for your mom.”

“And you were gonna take on the world, one TV commercial at a time.”

He laughs. “That I did, my friend.”

My mom clears her throat at my side. “Please excuse me. Leonardo Finch, meet my mother, Melody Langdon. She’s a big fan.”

“Mr. Finch, such a pleasure,” Mom coos in a tone of voice I rarely hear her use as she offers him her hand.

“Mrs. Langdon. The pleasure is mine,” he replies as he lifts my mom’s hand and kisses it.

I roll my eyes. She’s going to love this.

Some of the patrons form a group around Leo and ask him for selfies. He snaps a few with them before he asks, “Can we go somewhere and talk in private, Langdon?”

“Of course. My office is this way.” I gesture at the back of the coffeehouse.

“I hope to see you again, Mrs. Langdon,” Leo says and she blushes. Actually blushes. If I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn’t have believed it.

“I hope so, too,” she replies.

He places a hand on my shoulder as we make our way through the back door to my office. “I’ve got a favor to ask of you.”

“That’s only fair. After all, you’re doing me a favor by being here.”

“I’m glad you see it that way, my friend.”

Chapter 28

Marlowe



“Why the sudden change of heart?” Mayor Garcia asks from behind his big oak desk in his office.

“I don't want to run my aunt's business that way,” I reply, hoping he'll call off the rally that's due to start soon.

“But Ms. Cole, it's not just about the Second Chance Café or any of the businesses on Main Street. It's about preservation. It's about our integrity as a town. It's about who we are.” He slaps his hands down on the desk as though giving a rousing speech to an audience larger than just, well, me.

It must hurt because he immediately lifts his hand and rubs it.

“Mr. Mayor. You're the boss in this town. The one we all look up to. Can't you use your influence in another way that doesn't involve a rally?”

“I've tried. I've sent letters to the people who run the Steamy Coffee chain, telling them we don't want them in our town. Have they replied?”

Of course I have no idea if they've replied. How could I? I look around in case there's someone else in the room that he's directing his question to. There's no one but us.

“I don't know. Have they?”

“They have not,” he says with another slap of his hand to the desk, although this time he does it with less gusto, out of an interest in hand

preservation. “I even asked Christopher Young to send a letter as the only lawyer in town.”

I can't imagine Christopher would do such a thing.

“He said he could write one as a private citizen but not as a lawyer, which was rather annoying because I wanted him to send it as a lawyer and not as a private citizen. It holds more weight, you see.”

“Sure. Of course. My point is, Mr. Mayor, that I really don't think we should protest today.”

“It's the perfect day to do it. The town is crawling with media, the premiere starts in only a couple of hours, and the town is heaving with visitors.”

“But—”

I'm interrupted when there's a rap on the door and Mr. Garcia calls out, “Come in!”

The door flies open and in bustles a group of townsfolk, noisily chatting among themselves. They're holding banners with excited gleams in their eyes, ready for the big rally.

“Marlowe! I'm so glad you're here,” Miss Thompson says. “Although I am surprised. Aren't you dating the proprietor of that big corporate chain coffeehouse we dislike so much?”

“You are?” The mayor's bushy eyebrows pop up to meet his hairline, which is a big ask, considering it's receded halfway across his head.

“That's not why I'm here,” I begin, but he's not listening.

“That's why you're here trying to stop us. It all makes sense now. You've let your feelings get in the way, young lady. Never a good idea.” He wags his finger at me as though I'm a naughty child.

I can't say anything to defend myself. Yesterday when I thought Oliver had double crossed me, I was all for the rally. Today, now that we've gotten closer and cleared our misunderstanding up, I feel different. I'm no longer fueled by anger and the sense Oliver had duped me.

“It looks like we're ready to go early,” the mayor says. “Great enthusiasm, troops! I love it!”

“We're ready when you are,” Mr. Hill says. “Ready and eager and completely riled up to rid this town of big corporate chains.”

“Marlowe, honey, here's a sign,” Miss Thompson hands me one of her placards. “I made a bunch more last night. I thought I was quite clever with some of them. I even used the Internet,” she says proudly.

I'm not sure that's the good thing she thinks it is.

I take the placard and read the words, written in black paint, *No more Steamy sell out: embrace local coffee at the Second Chance!*

Wowzers. Labeling Oliver as a sell-out isn't exactly friendly.

I glance at the other signs. Some are more poetic than others.

Give the cold shoulder to Steamy – Get a warm welcome at Second Chance with the words in brackets (*which is the coffeehouse on Main Street, or you could go to Mary's around the corner, if you like, too*) in case people don't know what they're referring to, I guess. Whoever wrote that one needs a lesson in brevity.

Then there's the more direct slogans, such as *No More Steamy Steam!!!* and *Steamy Coffee is a Disgrace!* with their photos of the half-naked lumberjack and his lady friend with a big red X across them.

"Listen up, troops," the mayor says and a hush falls over the group. "Many people in this town will support our cause today. And that is what we want. It's what we expect."

My phone chimes in my purse, but whoever it is needs to wait.

Applause ripples around the room. He raises his hands to quiet everyone once more. "But we could encounter some negative feedback from those brainwashed by this new promotion the people of Steamy Coffee are running. None of us want that truck. None of us want to walk on their red carpet. We want the good, honest, wholesome family values represented by Marlowe here and her aunt's Second Chance café."

My phone chimes once more in my purse.

"The truck does look pretty good," someone says.

"I could do with the new truck, although I'm not in love with the color," someone else adds.

"You could get that spray painted in a jiffy. My son could do it for you over in Cotown."

"Could he? That would be great."

"Remember why we're here, people. We're here for what's right. We're here to preserve our town. We're here for Hunter's Creek," the mayor states and everyone applauds and cheers. "Let's roll out!" He swills his finger in a circular motion and points to the sky like he's in some kind of special military forces movie and he needs to fight the bad guys to save the Earth.

I wave my hand in the air to get everyone's attention. "Excuse me," I call out. "Can everyone hold up for a second?" My voice sounds thin and reedy in

the excitability of the people in the room.

“What is it, dear?” asks Miss Thompson.

“I’ve got something I need to say.”

“Can’t it wait, dear? We’ve got something to do, and it looks like everyone’s going off to do it already,” she replies as people file past us and out the door.

I dance about in agitation, trying to get everyone’s attention. “Can everyone stop? I need to say something,” I say in a loud voice.

No one is listening to me. They’re also hyped up and raring to go.

A loud screech sounds in my ears and I turn in shock to see Miss Thompson, who has two fingers stuck in her mouth, having just whistled like a farmer.

It works. Everyone stops and stares at her.

“Marlowe has something she wants to say,” Miss Thompson announces. “Why don’t you go ahead and say it, Marlowe. Everyone’s listening now.”

Every face in the room and out in the hallway is watching me. I clear my throat. “I just want to say that I know you’re doing this for the fabric of the town and all of that, which is great, but you don’t need to do it for the Second Chance Café. We’ve got the dinner menu now and last night’s earnings were totally great, so I’m not worried about Steamy Coffee being here anymore.”

My announcement is met with silence.

“But you don’t like Steamy Coffee or its proprietor. You told us yourself only yesterday,” Miss Thompson says with a puzzled expression on her face.

“Gertie’s right. You said he was a double crossing... what was the word?” Mr. Hill asks.

“It had city slicker in it, I know that for sure.”

“But maybe that’s all changed now? They are a couple, now, after all.”

“Sounds like a conflict of interest to me.”

Every eye in the room is trained on me.

“Look. I know I said some things about Oliver yesterday, but please believe me when I tell you I was misinformed,” I tell them.

“What were you misinformed about?” Miss Thompson asks with her eyebrows raised.

“That Oliver Langdon is one of those flashy people who thinks it’s okay to give away a truck while he swans around town in his fancy Italian suit,” Mr. Hill sniffs.

I have never seen Oliver in a suit.

“I heard he lives in a penthouse apartment with a butler in New York City, like the mafia bosses do,” someone else chimes in.

That is wrong on so many counts.

“I heard he—”

“People!” Mayor Garcia says in his booming voice, halting the wildly inaccurate chit chat about Oliver. “We have gathered here today with a common goal: to protect the cultural inheritance of our town. Whatever Marlowe's or anyone else's personal feelings are about the proprietor of Steamy Coffee, is irrelevant. We need to do whatever we can to reach our goal of pushing big chain businesses from our town.”

People applaud and I know I've lost them when someone begins to chant “Down with Steamy Coffee! Down with Steamy Coffee!” Soon people are joining in and they begin to file out of the room and down the hallway.

Good grief! Talk about an impenetrable wall.

I need to get to Oliver to warn him.

There's one good thing about the protesters. The youngest among them is Miss Thompson who's got to be at least 70 years old. Sliding past them and dashing down the street to Steamy Coffee is a cinch.

I round the corner onto Main Street and am shocked to see a huge commotion outside Steamy Coffee. People are crowded around the entrance, there are vans parked haphazardly along the street, and I'm pretty sure I saw someone with a TV camera on his shoulder.

The rally isn't even there yet. What the heck is going on?

“Pardon me. Pardon me. Can I get past?” I elbow my way as gently as I can through the crowd, slinking past people, my smile belying the growing anxiety I feel inside.

Why is everyone here? It makes no sense. Their coffee is not *that* good and their food sure leaves a lot to be desired.

I can hear a smooth voice speaking as I reach the front of the throng. There's a hushed silence, everyone hanging on this man's every word.

Is that...? It can't be. Why would he be here?

I blink at the man speaking.

I'd hoped Leonardo Finch would visit my café to relive his iced coffee memories from filming. Did he get lost and end up here, instead? And why is he in front of a row of photographers, lit up like the movie star he is, telling everyone that he's... did he say he just got engaged? To his co-star?

“And I wanted to use today at my good friend Oliver Langdon's Steamy

Coffee here in Hunter's Creek, where it all began for me and my beautiful fiancée, to make the announcement to you all."

Wait. Oliver's *friends* with Leonardo Finch?

Why didn't he tell me? We said no more surprises. We promised.

This is one big, horrible surprise.

Applause erupts as people call out their congratulations, the journalists asking questions and the photographers getting their shots. Leonardo indicates for Charlene Kemp to join him, which she does with an eager smile, wrapping her arms around her fiancé and beaming out at everyone.

But I'm not looking at Charlene Kemp or Leonardo Finch. I'm looking at the man standing behind them.

Oliver.

He's smiling impassively at the crowd as bulbs flash. When his gaze lands on mine, his smile drops.

My heart is thrashing in my chest, and suddenly I feel like I might vomit.

I need to get out of here. And fast.

After what feels like battling an assault course, I reach Main Street, where I stop and take a few deep breaths, my stomach churning.

What the heck is Oliver playing at?

Once again, he tells me one thing and does another.

I can't stop it. My mind goes straight there, thinking *it's Mike all over again*.

After everything I've been through, after all the promises I made to myself, I've gone and done it again. I've fallen for the wrong guy.

I'm *such* a fool.

I feel a hand on my arm and look up to see Oliver.

"Marlowe," he begins.

"So much for no more surprises. What *was* that?"

"I'd forgotten about Leo visiting today. Truly."

"You'd forgotten that the hottest celebrity around is holding a press conference at your coffeeshop?"

"Well, I didn't know he was going to *announce* anything," is his weak as dishwater reply.

I glare at him in disbelief. "So, you're telling me that you knew he was visiting your coffeeshop today?"

"I'd forgotten. Marlowe, it's an honest mistake."

"I know we're not from the same worlds, Oliver, but mere mortals like

me don't just *forget* that a major Hollywood star is dropping by to announce to the world that he's marrying his co-star.”

He shifts his weight. “Look, Leo was my roommate in college. He didn't mention to me that he was going to make any big announcement, and anyway, I set this thing up with him before I even moved to Hunter's Creek.”

I worry my lip, my heart screaming at me to believe what he's saying as my head tells me *don't you dare!*

But even if it's true and he did forget, what other weapons does he have in his arsenal? What other connections does he have? The freebies on opening day were followed by specials, then the crazy competition with the truck, and now Hollywood royalty.

I can't compete, not with any of it.

Suddenly it's as clear as a crisp Washington state winter's day. I've been here before, dealing with a man I'm mixed up with in both my work life and my personal life. A man with more power than me. In the end, the only person who gets burned, the only person who has to limp away to lick her wounds, is me.

Do I want to go through this all over again?

My heart thrashes in my chest like a fish out of water. “I've gotta go,” I mumble.

“Marlowe, wait,” Oliver says, his hand on my arm.

It's at this moment the mayor and his horde of protestors decide to turn up, surrounding us as they chant “Out with big chain coffee, support your local coffeehouse now!”

Oliver looks in wonderment from the approaching crowd, brandishing their banners, back to me. His features harden as he drops his hand. “No more surprises, huh?”

“I told you about the rally and I tried to stop it. They were persistent.”

“And I told you about Leonardo Finch.”

“No, you didn't.” I have to raise my voice over the noise.

He says something I can't hear.

“What?”

“I said, check your phone,” he shouts.

“Why?” I ask, incredulous.

It's clear he can't hear me as he takes me by the elbow and leads me away from the ruckus.

“Can we talk about this later?” he asks. “I need to try and stop this rally

before I can deal with anything else.”

“You mean me?”

“No. I mean... look, my mom is here and this town is the little Gaulish village in the *Asterix* comics. I can't let this spiral out of control, which it's clearly already doing.”

“The what?”

What the heck is he talking about? Some village that has something to do with grammar?

“It doesn't matter. My point is, I need to fix this.”

I glare at him. “You said we were going to try to co-exist, but this feels like you're walking all over us.”

“I'm not trying to do that.”

“Are you sure?”

“If I'd wanted to destroy your business, I could have.”

I place my balled-up fist on my hip.

Red flag, meet bull.

“Is that so?” I quip.

“Of course it is. Marlowe, I've got this entire company behind me and you've got... apple pies.”

I widen my eyes at him. “Apple pies?”

“You know what I mean. You're the locals' hangout, you do good food, but you don't have the capability to keep a place like Steamy Coffee out.”

“I think the people of Hunter's Creek think otherwise.” I gesture at the crowd now walking in a circle outside Steamy Coffee, brandishing their banners and chanting, “What do we want?” “Coffee!” “Where do we want it?” “At the Second Chance Café!”

“I've gotta go,” I tell him and turn to leave.

“Marlowe,” he calls out, but I'm not listening anymore.

I've got these feelings for him, feelings that are growing with each passing day. Although I haven't even fully admitted it to myself, I know I'm falling for him, and the last time that happened...well, it ended with me, a Zorb, and a soon-to-be ex.

Perhaps it's time to listen to the forces driving us apart? Perhaps it's time to leave it all to fate.

Chapter 29

Oliver



Although I have to fight the almost overwhelming instinct to chase after Marlowe and make this thing right, I know I can't. Not when I've got a crazy circus outside my shop—a crazy circus involving not only a bunch of media and a couple of Hollywood celebs, but a freaking anti-Steamy Coffee rally marching around on the sidewalk, led by none other than Hunter's Creek's mayor.

It's insane.

In my defense, how could I have known Leo was going to actually follow through and turn up at my coffeeshop today, let alone announce that he's marrying his co-star? All he was supposed to do was drop by for a photo op, if he was coming at all, as we agreed before I moved here. End of story. No big announcements involving co-stars, and only a couple photographers—not the state of Washington's entire media circuit.

To my credit, I tried to tell Marlowe that I had an unexpected visitor. Once he turned up, I messaged her several times. *Several*. We'd promised no more surprises and I was doing my best to stand by that promise.

Of course, I get that Leonardo Finch is one big surprise, particularly when he pulled me aside to ask me for a favor. Obviously I said yes, not knowing that favor would include a fully-fledged press conference and the

announcement of Leo's upcoming nuptials to his co-star from the very movie everyone is in town to see today.

I mean seriously, how could I see that coming?

And what's more, I was being totally honest with Marlowe when I told her I'd forgotten he was visiting today. There's been so much going on, I'm surprised I even remember my own name half the time right now. We've been locked in a war; we pretended to date for the benefit of her ex, we got literally locked in together, where we finally admitted our feelings for one another.

That's a lot in anyone's books.

Surely, she could find it in her heart to be reasonable?

And speaking of being reasonable, Marlowe's no angel in all this, either. She didn't follow through with what she said she was going to do, evidenced by the fact that I've got this circling mob of angry locals, attracting attention from other locals, visitors, and the media alike.

So, the way I see it, we both messed up. Even if I know I had the best of intentions.

Surely she will understand that?

I heave out a breath. The protesters have changed their chant, and now they're all yelling, "Take a stand and say NO to Steamy Coffee!"

Right.

I've got to fix this before things get even more out of hand.

Quickly, I formulate a plan. If I can get Leo and his new fiancée to leave the shop, the media will likely go with them. Two birds, one stone. Which will leave me to deal with the rally.

Olena catches my eye. "This sure is a pretty big mess." She's holding Zander on her hip, who's gazing, wide-eyed at the protestors.

I don't blame you, kid.

"Good thing Mom's inside."

"Mom." I scrunch my eyes shut. Of course, she had to be here to witness this. "Where is she?"

"She's in your office. She was talking with your buddy, Leo and his new fiancée. Did you know they were going to make that announcement?"

"Of course I didn't. Any chance Mom hasn't seen this?" I gesture at the rally.

Olena makes a face as Zander pulls on her hair. "What do you think?"

My heart sinks.

I make my way back into coffeeshop, still filled with patrons, fans, and the media, and past Leo and Charlene, who are posing for photos.

“Naomi!” I call out over the racket of people yelling Leo and Charlene’s names, and the general excitement in the shop. “Have you seen my mom?”

“She went out back. Any chance you can help out, boss? We’re slammed.”

“Of course. I just need to get a handle on all of this first.”

She gives me a knowing smile. “Gotcha.”

Olena’s right, my mother is in my office, calmly checking her perfect makeup in a compact, like she’s completely oblivious to the pandemonium around her.

“You look great, Mom. Ready for the red carpet.”

She snaps the compact closed and turns to me. “Which is more than I can say for you.”

I try out a smile. “Isn’t the rule only one Langdon at a time per red carpet?”

“Don’t be obtuse. I’m referring to the mess outside.”

“I’m handling it. I’m gonna have a word with Leo and ask him to move on, which will mean the media will leave, and then I’ll talk to the mayor.”

“What’s the mayor got to do with this?”

“He’s...err...leading the rally.”

She blinks at me but her features don’t change. She doesn’t say word. Instead, she slides her compact into her purse, hooks its gold chain strap over her shoulder, and scowls at me.

I’m the one to fill the silence. “I know what you’re thinking. Somehow I’ve managed to turn the town against us and now it’s all blowing up in my face.”

“In front of the media.”

“That, too. The thing is Marlowe tried to—”

“Marlowe? What does she have to do with any of this?”

“She was trying to stop the rally, but she told me she couldn’t.”

She arcs a brow. “Couldn’t or wouldn’t?”

“Couldn’t,” I confirm.

“I see. You’re involved with her.”

“We’re just... seeing where things go.”

I’m downplaying my feelings, but I know my mom. She won’t like it.

“Let me get this straight, Oliver. You’re romantically involved with a

woman who is actively trying to destroy our business?”

“As I said, she was trying to stop the rally.”

“How good of her.”

I take a step closer to her. “Mom. I’ve said all along that our two coffeehouses can co-exist. We don’t have to steal all her customers to win. We’re doing well enough without destroying anyone.”

“You know, Oliver, you were sent here to do a job, a job that you yourself volunteered for. That woman has been nothing but a distraction to you.”

I can’t argue the point. Marlowe has been distracting—but in the best of ways, and definitely not the way my mother sees.

“I’m still doing my job. I’m still working hard to make this site a success. The fact that I’m falling for Marlowe has zero impact on that. I promise you.”

Her jaw drops open. “You’re falling in love with this woman?”

That was one untimely slip.

“I—” I straighten my back. I need to own my feelings. For so long, my mom has regarded me as simply someone to do her bidding, her least favorite offspring, the one foolish enough to want to work for her. I’ve jumped through her hoops. I’ve done whatever I could to make her see me as the son I know I am. I’m not some weak carbon copy of my brother. I’m my own person, and I’m good at what I do.

“Well?”

I lift my chin. “I am. I’m falling in love with her.”

She glowers at me. “Didn’t you learn anything from your brother’s mistake? He let a woman get in the way and look how it turned out for him,” she spits, the anger that was bubbling under the surface now erupting with venom. “He threw everything away for her. Everything!”

“She wasn’t just some woman. She was my girlfriend.”

She waves my words away with a flick of her wrist. “She lured Robert away from his true purpose, and he...he...”

“He died,” I finish for her.

The words hang heavy in the air.

“Mom, Robert wasn’t lured anywhere. He had an affair with my girlfriend and he died in a freak car accident.”

Her lips are tight, her posture tense, like she could ignite with the strike of a match.

I reach out and place my hand on her stiff arm. She flinches.

“What happened to Robert is tragic. But it wasn’t Evelyn’s fault. It was an accident.”

“Don’t you see that if Robert had kept his mind on the job, he would still be alive?”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do know that,” she grinds out. “And I should have known you would mess this opportunity up.”

“I haven’t messed it up.”

“What do you call that ridiculous rally outside? If that’s not messing up, Oliver, I don’t know what is. Robert wouldn’t have let this happen,” she sniffs. “He was a safe pair of hands. I knew I could rely on him. He would never let something like this happen.”

I pause for a beat, taking in some air to calm myself. “I know the rally isn’t ideal, but the media coverage we’ve had here today with Leo has to be good for us. Besides, business has been solid, particularly for a market others haven’t been able to crack.”

“My dear boy, who do you think the cameras are trained on now that they’ve got their scoop on Mr. Finch and his fiancée?”

Obviously I know it’s the rally. I’d be a fool not to.

“Now, I have a movie premiere to prepare for. I’ll take the back entrance to avoid your disaster.”

“Mom—”

“Sort this mess out. I’ll speak to you tomorrow.”

I heave out a breath as she brushes past me.

That’s it. I’ve failed her once again. I set out to do a job, to make a success of this place, and she still sees me as a total screw up.

Marlowe’s words ring in my ears. *You’re good enough just the way you are.*

It’s like the steam has been wiped from the mirror and I can finally see my reflection in the clear light of day.

Marlowe’s right. I don’t need to prove myself to my mom, or to anyone, for that matter. I might not have my brother’s track record of success, but I would never have an affair with my brother’s girlfriend.

I’m a good person, doing my best in life. If she can’t see that? Well, I’m not sure that’s my problem.

“Mom, wait,” I say in a gravelly voice.

It’s all clear to me now. I know exactly what I need to do to fix it. And I

need to fix it, even if it's the last thing I do in this town.

Chapter 30

Marlowe



I reach the door to the Second Chance and lean up against the glass, taking some gulping breaths. My stomach is churning, my head in a spin.

I wait until my breathing settles before I push through the door. The place is almost empty, but for the members of my family. Really, even if you tried, you couldn't get more of a juxtaposition with Steamy Coffee today.

"You look like you've been caught up in a battle with a bear," Dad says as I trudge toward the counter.

"Is everything okay, honey?" Mom asks, her brow furrowed in concern.

"Not exactly," I reply.

All the reasons I knew not to get involved, not to feel what I feel for him, are screaming in my ear.

I told you so.

I knew this would happen.

He's just like Mike.

But even as I think the words, I question them. Is Oliver really like Mike? Things have never been straightforward between us, but has he behaved the way Mike did? Has he lied to me and humiliated me?

A voice at the back of my head tells me *no*.

Has my fear gotten the better of me?

Quickly, I pull my phone from my purse. Three missed messages.

You're not going to believe this but Leonardo Finch has shown up at my coffeehouse. I set it up weeks ago and had totally forgotten. I hope you understand xoxo

Did you get my message? Are you okay? Xoxo

Marlowe, call me when you can xoxo

I chew on my lip.

He tried to warn me. He was honest.

“Who died?” Ryn asks as she takes in my expression.

“You can’t say that, Ryn-Ryn,” Gabe complains from where he’s leaning his elbow on the counter, a coffee cup in hand. “What if someone had actually died?”

“Then I would be accurate,” she retorts. “So? Why do you look like... that.” She gestures at me.

“What’s going on, pumpkin?” Dad asks.

I take a breath and look at the people around me. There’s Ryn and Gabe, Mom and Dad, as well as Harper and Christopher and my Aunt Lisa.

I swallow and say, “I’m not sure the Second Chance is going to survive after today.”

There’s a collective gasp.

Ryn scoffs. “Dramatic much, sis?”

“Why? What’s happened now?” Aunt Lisa asks.

“Because of the rally? That makes no sense,” Christopher says.

I shrug. “Have you seen how crazy things are across the street today? We’ve been fighting and fighting and trying our best, but we just can’t compete with huge contests in which people can win trucks, and Hollywood stars popping in to hold press conferences.”

“Hollywood stars popping in to hold press conferences?” Mom asks.

“That sounds a little farfetched,” Harper says.

“Wait. Who’s the Hollywood star who’s holding a press conference at Steamy Coffee?” Ryn asks.

I lift my gaze to hers. “Does it matter?”

“It does if it’s Leonardo Finch,” she replies.

Gabe points at Ryn. “Teenage crush, remember?”

How could I forget? Ryn had posters of Leonardo Finch all over her walls growing up.

“He announced his engagement to Charlene Kemp at Steamy Coffee with

the media broadcasting it all,” I say.

Ryn’s eyes grow to the size of dinner plates. “What?!”

“You can go if you want,” I reply with a resigned sigh. “Most of the town is there already.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Ryn replies, and I muster a small smile.

“None of us are going anywhere,” Harper says. “We’re here for you, Marlowe, and we’ll do whatever we can to help you keep this place afloat.”

Dad pats me on the back. “Your sister’s right, pumpkin. We’re your family. We love you and we’re here for you.”

“What about you and Oliver?” Mom asks.

An unpleasant feeling clutches my chest. “I don’t know. I think I just said some things in the heat of the moment.”

“Oh, honey,” Mom soothes.

“Do you need me to have a word with that Oliver guy?” Gabe offers, straightening his shoulders and puffing out his chest. “Christopher will come with me, too. Won’t you, Christopher?”

“I’m not sure ‘having a word’ with a guy is really my style,” Christopher replies. “But I’m absolutely up for the task to help in whatever other way I can.”

“I guess I’m on my own then,” Gabe replies as he pushes up his sleeves and begins to make his way toward the door.

“Gabe,” I call and he turns back. Thank you, but he’s done nothing wrong. Not really.”

“I don’t think he’s going to beat him up or anything,” Ryn says. “Right, Gabe?”

Gabe holds his hands up. “Oh, I wasn’t going to do anything like that. I was just gonna stand over him and look all threatening. I’m taller than him by at least an inch, I’m sure.”

“I think it’s going to take more than the Cole family and our respective partners to keep Aunt Sheila’s coffeeshop from the inevitable,” I say.

My parents share a look.

“Why the sudden change of heart?” Mom asks softly.

“Because I know when I’m beat. You should see what’s going on over there.”

“Well, I can see Oliver talking to the mayor right now,” Harper says from the window. “People are putting their placards down and it looks like Oliver and the mayor are... Wait.”

“What?” several people demand.

Harper turns to us. “They’re smiling and shaking hands.”

Everyone rushes over to the window to see for themselves. Everyone but me, that is. I press the button on the coffee machine to grind some beans, then I tamp them down, insert the wand into the machine, and start the hot water to push its way through and into a cup.

“You’re making yourself a coffee?” Ryn asks.

“I may as well enjoy one of the last coffees we’ll be making here,” I reply glumly as I froth some milk in a jug.

I’m so busy concentrating on the art of coffee making that I look up with a start when the front door bangs open, the sound from the street filling the space.

Standing in the doorway, with every single set of eyes in the place on him in utter shock, is the man himself.

Oliver.

My traitorous heart squeezes at the sight of him, telling me in clear terms that he’s the man I want, the man I’m falling for—while my brain screams at me that he’s the man destroying my aunt’s coffeehouse.

Talk about a writhing internal conflict.

He nods briefly at my family, who all gawk at him like he was an alien from another planet, before he moves swiftly across the room to me.

I steel myself with a deep breath. Is he here for round two? Does he have more blows to deliver? More Hollywood friends popping in to announce life changing events?

Or is he here to tell me that I’ve overreacted and he wants nothing to do with me.

I say a silent prayer. *Please, God, don’t let it be the last one.*

“What are you doing here?” I ask in a small voice.

His eyes are so intense, so full of determination and fire, that lifting my own gaze to his makes my heart clench.

“I came to see you,” he says simply.

I lift my chin as tears of regret and sorrow and fear and all the pent-up feelings I’ve been holding back since the day we met threaten to spill right out of me, onto the counter. “What did you want to say?”

“I want to tell you how I feel about you. About this. But mostly about you,” he replies, and oh, my, does my heart want this man. So, so much.

I open my mouth to speak, but no words come out. Instead, I make the

weirdest little whimpering sound, like a puppy.

Dad's voice speaks as though from far away. "We're gonna leave, pumpkin," he says.

"You two have a good long talk. Straighten things out. Okay, honey?" Mom adds.

I drag my gaze from Oliver to my family. They're shuffling sideways toward the door like a bunch of Minions.

"Don't leave," I tell them urgently, suddenly afraid to be alone with Oliver. What if he's not going to say what I hope he's going to say? What if I've blown it and he's here to end things with me and I've lost the Second Chance *and* him?

"Stay. I'm sure whatever Oliver has to say concerns the coffeehouse," I say.

"We...errr...need to go do a thing," Dad says unconvincingly. "Right, honey?"

"That's right," Mom confirms. "We've got a thing. It's super urgent and we all have to do it. Not you, though. You stay right where you are."

"What thing?" Ryn asks.

Mom gives her a pointed look. "The *thing*."

"Well, I'm not going anywhere," Aunt Lisa declares with her hands on her hips as she glares at Oliver.

"Yes, you are, Lisa." Mom takes her by the arm and tugs her out onto the street.

The door swings closed behind them, and we're thrown into silence in the now empty coffeeshop.

"I'm really sorry about Leonardo Finch and the whole press conference thing," Oliver says.

"No, I'm sorry for overreacting out there. You did try to warn me, and I didn't get the messages."

"And I'm sure you did try to stop the protest."

"I did! Really, I did."

We stare at one another across the counter, my heart beating out of my chest.

"Marlowe—" he begins but I shake my head.

"You've won. I can't see how we're going to keep this place going now."

"But it's not about winning. In fact, it's not about the coffeeshops at all."

He means he's here for me. For *me*.

I suck in a breath, barely allowing myself to hope.

“I’ve told my mom to close the branch here in Hunter’s Creek.”

I blink at him a few times. “You did *what?*”

Am I imagining hearing the words I’ve been fantasizing about since the moment Steamy Coffee opened its doors?

“We’re closing the branch here in town. Steamy Coffee, Hunter’s Creek will no longer exist as of close of business today.”

“But—” I try to wrap my brain around what he’s telling me. He’s closing Steamy Coffee? Things will go back to the way they were before he got here?

The Second Chance Café is safe?

Only I don’t want things to go back to the way they were before he got here. I want him here, with me, not in some other town, opening some other branch.

I pull my brows together. “But it doesn’t make any sense to quit while you’re this far ahead.”

“It makes sense when you’re in love with the one person you’re hurting the most.”

It’s like the very air has been sucked from my lungs.

“Oliver—” I begin, but really, I have no idea what I’m going to say.

He loves me? Oliver *loves* me?

So many thoughts and feelings slam into me and I’m forced to steady myself by clutching the counter.

He moves around to my side. He’s standing close enough for me to reach out and touch him, but I’m too dumbfounded to move.

Heck, I’m too dumbfounded to *think*.

“You know the saying *everything happens for a reason?*” he asks, and I nod dumbly. “I’ve always thought it’s a load of crap. But I can sincerely say moving here and meeting you happened for a reason, and I’ve figured out what that reason is.”

“What?” I ask, my voice quivering.

“Love.”

My throat constricts as my breath comes in short, sharp puffs. “Love.” I gaze up into the dark pools of his eyes.

He reaches out and takes my hands in his and his sudden touch sends electricity coursing through me.

“Marlowe, you have to know that I love you with all my heart. I thank my lucky stars I chose to move here because I got to meet you.”

“You love me,” I say, everything blurring but him. *Him.*

Oliver’s lips curve into that heart-stopping smile of his that causes my belly-dwelling birds to flap their wings in elation. I swallow a lump in my throat as tears threaten my eyes for the second time today, only this time it’s for the very best of reasons.

“So? What do you say?” he asks.

“You chose me over your coffeehouse.”

“I chose you over my own self-imposed expectations. I came here to try to prove myself to my mom, to show her that I’m worthy, that I’m just as good as my brother. What I found is that through your eyes I *am* worthy, and I don’t need to prove anything.”

“Oliver, you don’t have to prove yourself to me or to anyone else. I told you that. You’re a good man. The best.”

“Thank you,” he breathes.

“And something else.”

“Yes?” I can see the hope in his eyes.

“I’m head over heels in love with you, too.” I blurt it out in a rush and he instantly covers the distance between us in one step. He lifts me up off my feet and whirls me around as he lets out a laugh, and it makes me grin from ear to ear, happiness bursting out of me. I take a hold of his face and press my lips urgently against his, wrapping us up in the most emotional, loving, and deeply passionate kiss of my life.

This man, this frustrating man who I could never get out of my head, no matter what, loves me. And I love him right back.

We hear the sounds of cheering and yelling, and together we look up in surprise at a sea of faces peering in at us through the window.

“That’s my family,” I say with a shaky laugh.

“They look happy.”

I look at their beaming faces. “They are.”

He lowers me to the ground, but he doesn’t let go. Instead, he presses another kiss to my lips. It’s softer, more tender, but just as full of love.

I glance over at the sea of faces and decide that as much as I love my family, I don’t need an audience for this anymore. I take him by the hand. “Come with me.”

I lead him to the empty kitchen, where I hold his hands in mine and gaze up into his beautiful eyes. “You don’t need to close Steamy Coffee. You were right. Our two coffeehouses can co-exist, especially if you stop doing things

like offering people trucks and inviting your Hollywood friends over to hold their press conferences.”

He smiles. “I know that.”

“So you’ll stay open?”

“I’m taking a stand. For a long time, I tried to live up to not only my mom’s expectations of me, but my brother’s example. They’re intertwined in my mind. Mixed up. Both are impossible heights I could never reach, because they aren’t real.”

“What do you mean?”

“Mom wants me to be Robert,” he says simply.

“But you’re you. You’re good enough, and you’re amazing.”

He lets out a small laugh. “I didn’t truly believe that until today. I felt like I was a poor copy of my brother, a message my mom reinforced whenever she could. That’s why I took on the challenge of opening the branch here in Hunter’s Creek in the first place.”

“Because Hunter’s Creek is such a tough market to crack?” I ask with a laugh. “We’re just a small country town in the middle of Washington state. We’re nothing special.”

“Yes see, that’s where you’re wrong. You are special. Very special.” His eyes shine with love as he places a kiss on my cheek. It sends tingles down my neck. “Hunter’s Creek is like a bunch of other small towns with independent coffeehouses people love. The townsfolk want places like the Second Chance Café, where they can get a cup of coffee and a great meal made by someone they know. A friendly place, unique to the town its from. Steamy Coffee doesn’t need to be here. In fact, I’d say this place is better off without us. That’s what I told my mom, and that’s what I told the mayor.”

“Wait. You told the mayor that you’re closing?”

“How else do you think I stopped the rally? It wasn’t by sweeping them off their feet. I reserved that for you.” His eyes are dancing.

“This is all just some ruse to win me over, huh?” I tease.

“It worked, didn’t it?”

I laugh as I shake my head at him. “So, what happens next?”

“You know what? I have no idea, but I know one thing for sure.”

I wrap my arms around his neck and smile up at him. “What’s that?”

He leans down and kisses me, his arms pulling me close, and I breathe in his delicious Oliver scent, my heart full of love for him. “I will never let you go.”

Epilogue

Oliver



“You do realize I’m in the world’s least practical shoes for this,” Marlowe says as I hold the car door open for her in the pond’s parking lot.

She’s wearing a pair of pale-yellow high heels, matching her dress, with straps and little diamantes that catch the light as she moves. Although my girlfriend of just over 6 months is not exactly known for her practical shoe collection—she still dresses for work like she’s on Wall Street—these shoes are a step deeper into the impractical, even for her.

When I first laid eyes on her here, at this very pond, I’d thought she looked like the actress Jessica Chastain. Now that I look at her in her pale-yellow sleeveless dress, her auburn hair falling in soft waves around her shoulders, she looks like Marlowe. My Marlowe. And she takes my breath away.

“Slip them off. You can walk barefoot.”

“I’m not sure my sister would love me turning up to her wedding barefoot. I’m the joint maid of honor with Ryn, remember?”

“How could I forget? But if you don’t want your shoes ruined, I do suggest you remove them.”

“It’s easy for guys. All you have to do is wear tuxes with comfortable shoes and everyone says how handsome you look.”

I quirk a brow. “Are you telling me you’d prefer to wear sensible shoes?” She pauses for a beat before she shakes her head.

“I didn’t think so.” I glance at the time on my phone. “We’ve haven’t got long until I need to get you to your sister.”

“Okay, honey.” She holds a finger up and adds, “As long as you don’t expect me to go swimming.”

“I won’t, I promise.”

“Are we here to see Freddy and his friends?” she asks, referring to the pond’s fish population. Learning that she’d named the pond creatures was one of the many surprising things about Marlowe, starting with not expecting to meet someone as wonderful as her during my time here in Hunter’s Creek, let alone fall head over heels in love with her.

Carefully, she slides off her shoes and places them in the car.

“Aren’t they gorgeous?” she asks, admiring them.

“Honey, they’re shoes.”

She rolls her eyes at me before she takes my hand, and together we make the short walk to the pond. It’s a beautiful spring day with a slight chill in the air, mist softening the pond as the birds chirp overhead.

The perfect day for a wedding.

Christopher proposed to Harper the evening of the Winter Festival a few months ago—once her students had performed all their *The Sound of Music* songs, of course. I tell you, this town and their showtunes is quite something to behold. Marlowe tells me it was incredibly romantic, set among the Christmas fairy lights, and today we are all meeting to celebrate their union at the picturesque little church in town.

Of course a bunch of things happened before then, too, especially for Marlowe and me. The day of the movie premiere proved to be a turning point in not only my relationship with the woman who I’m leading down the winding path right now, but in my entire life.

It sounds dramatic, but it’s the truth.

It started when I stood up to my mom that day, telling her we needed to close the Hunter’s Creek branch on the basis that the townsfolk didn’t want us here. Being my mom, she accused me of following my heart instead of my head. Of course she was right, at least partly, but getting her to talk with Mayor Garcia and his impassioned protestors showed her that they had no plans to back down anytime soon. That, combined with the world’s media in town broadcasting it all, got her to finally concede that perhaps bowing out of

the Hunter's Creek market gracefully was in fact the smart course to take.

Leo telling the press that the best iced coffees in town were from the Second Chance Café across the street, and not Steamy Coffee, sealed the deal.

I may have had a word with him about that, but I'm saying nothing.

I knew Mom would see the closing of the branch as my personal defeat, further evidence that I'm not Robert. But you know what? I'm good with that. I'm not Robert. I'm Oliver, and I'm happy to be me. Especially when I have a woman like Marlowe Cole loving me for the man I am.

The clincher came when I told her that not only did I think we should close the branch, but that I wanted to stay in Hunter's Creek to be with the woman I loved.

That went down super well, I can tell you.

I'm hoping her heart will soften one day, that she'll see I'm happy, and that perhaps it might even mean something to her.

I'm not holding my breath.

With Sheila Browning deciding to retire to spend more time with her husband, Marlowe and I took over the Second Chance, where we spend our days *not* in competition with one another—despite the fact that it was sometimes a lot of fun, and I'm looking at you, freshly-painted bandstand—and instead working in perfect harmony. I've gotta say, being on the other side of the coffeehouse equation has given me a newfound respect for the small, independently-owned places. We work hard, but we love it.

Right now, here at the pond, I've got an important question I need to ask Marlowe, a question I've been wanting to ask her since, well, pretty much since the day I met her, really. But that would have been crazy. Who meets someone and the first thing that comes out of their mouth is, "Will you marry me?"

Drunk people maybe? Not a Langdon, that's for sure.

Marlowe's eyes light up as she takes in the scene. The pond backdrop is both meaningful to us and beautiful, and I'm glad to see the arbor, with its entwined branches, decorated with a myriad of flowers I had Gabe and Ryn help me put in place earlier today, is still firmly in place.

What's more, it looks perfect. Just as I'd imagined it.

She looks at me with eyes the size of coffee cups. "Oliver? What's going on?"

"You'll find out soon enough."

I lead her to the arbor where I turn to her and take her by both hands. Although I've practiced what I'm about to say a bunch of times in my head, my nerves kick up, my heart beating out of my chest. Unlike the last time I tried to deliver her a speech though, I don't need my phone as a prompt.

This time everything I'm about to say comes right from the heart.

"Marlowe," I begin, and am surprised when my voice comes out as thin as the reeds around the pond.

I clear my throat.

"Marlowe," I repeat, this time in a much more familiar, Oliver-sounding voice. "From the moment I laid eyes on you here at this pond last summer, I was drawn to your beauty, your intelligence, and your humor. I knew you were someone special, someone I'd like to get to know better."

Her face glows as she smiles up at me.

"Then we got locked in a battle that tried its best to pull us apart, and it looked like it might, too. A couple of times. But as Beyoncé says, who wants a perfect love story, anyway? And ours *is* a love story. The best love story."

"It so is." She chokes out a laugh, her deep blue eyes beginning to pool with tears.

"We may have hit a few bumps in the road, but it brought us here, and I wouldn't want to be anywhere else."

"Me neither."

I tighten my grip on her hands. "I love you, more than I could ever have imagined loving anyone. You brought me to life. You taught me that I'm enough."

"You *are* enough," she tells me as a single tear falls down her cheek.

"Now that we're here, where it all began, I want to ask you—" I take a knee and look up at her, my heart threatening to burst as I pull out the ring box from the inside pocket of my jacket, and flip it open.

Her eyes widen as she takes in the diamond ring, a surprising and completely unexpected gift from my mom. "Marlowe Cole, you are the love of my life. Will you marry me?"

Her face creases into a smile as tears flow freely down her cheeks. "Of course I'll marry you, Oliver. Of course!" She leans down and cups my face in her hands and presses her lips against mine. With our lips locked, I rise to my feet, wrapping my arms around her and pulling her into the most incredible kiss, full of love and acceptance and all the wonderful things we give one another, each and every day of our lives together.

“I love you, Oliver,” she gushes.

There’s a series of splashes in the center of the pond, and we break free from our kiss and together, turn to look.

Marlowe lets out a watery laugh. “Do you think Freddy Fish knows we’re engaged?”

“Wait. The ring,” I say. “I totally forgot to put it on your finger.”

“Let’s fix that right now, shall we?”

She offers me her left hand and I slide the ring on. It’s a perfect fit. She beams as she admires it.

“Oliver, it’s so beautiful,” she breathes.

“No, you’re beautiful,” I tell her. “It was my grandmother’s. My mom gave it to me. For you.”

Her jaw drops open. “Really?”

“Really.”

“Well, that’s a very nice thing for her to have done. Thank you, Melody.”

I chuckle. “You know she can’t hear you.”

“I sure hope she can’t.”

I laugh once more as I sweep her up in another kiss, lifting her bare feet off the sand and holding her close, never ever wanting to let her go.

Marlowe

“We’re engaged,” I say, not quite believing it as Oliver speeds back into town after we spent way too long celebrating at the pond’s edge. But I’m not complaining. Being with Oliver has been my all-time favorite thing to do, ever since that night we got locked in Steamy Coffee, and especially since that day we finally admitted the depth of our feelings to one another.

And now, here I am, engaged to the most incredible man I’ve met in my life. He loves me and I love him right back.

Today could not get any better.

Oliver places his hand on my knee. “Happy?”

“Beyond happy.”

His eyes flash to mine and we share a smile, my heart full to bursting with love for this man at my side.

He’s totally right. Our love story wasn’t perfect. Nowhere near it. I thought he was going to choose his coffeehouse over me on a number of occasions, right up to the day he stood up to his mom. In doing that, he showed me that he was a man with conviction, a man of his word, a man who knew his worth. A man I admired as well as respected and loved.

How could I *ever* have thought he was anything like Mike?

I cringe that I entertained that thought for even one second.

He’s the antithesis of Mike. The anti-Mike.

The absolute hero of our story.

Since the day of the movie premiere, there have been a few changes. Oliver agreed with Mayor Garcia to close his branch of Steamy Coffee, and the mayor and the Historical Society raced into the Second Chance to celebrate with cups of coffee and slices of pie, telling anyone who would listen how they’d taken on corporate America and won. Sure, it was a teeny bit overstated, but no one was going to point that out to them, least of all me.

Melody Langdon wanted to blame me for the demise of her latest branch, diverting Oliver’s focus and forcing him to make irrational decisions. Of course, she could have kept the branch open—she’s the boss, after all—but the fact that she did close it down showed me that perhaps she respected Oliver’s call.

That's the hope, anyway.

I admire my new ring. "What do you think your mom will say? Do you think her giving you this ring means she approves of me now?"

"She might even like you."

I let out a surprised laugh. "That's probably going too far. I'm Asteroid, remember?"

"Asterix," he corrects with a smile. "I'll give you the comics."

Oliver pulls the car into my parents' driveway. "See you at the wedding, future Mrs. Langdon."

"Mrs. Langdon? Wow, that makes me sound so old."

He brushes a kiss across my lips. "It makes you sound wonderful to me."

Nine minutes later and Ryn, Christopher's sister, Kelly, and I are helping Harper put the final touches to her wedding outfit. My sister has always preferred to dress herself in vintage clothing, favoring a Boho style over my classic look and Ryn's relaxed jeans and T-shirt vibe. Today is no different—for all of us.

Harper is in a lace dress with a deep V neckline and a light and floaty skirt, her hair in curls, a floral garland of daisies finishing the look.

The rule for us bridesmaids was to have whatever look we want, as long as it was yellow, hence my dress and heels. Ryn on the other hand is in a yellow crop top and white jeans, with a pair of yellow tennis shoes on her feet, her long hair in a loose ponytail, entwined with baby's breath. Kelly has opted for a simple, sleeveless A-line dress, and with her coloring, she looks gorgeous.

In fact, I would say each of us looks like the very best versions of ourselves.

"Okay, veil time," Harper announces.

I collect the veil from its hanger and clip it carefully to the back of Harper's head. She has opted not to have a veil over her face, because as she reasoned, Christopher already knows what she looks like, so it hangs down her back, reaching the floor in soft pleats.

I stand back and look at her, Harper Cole, a vision in her ivory dress, ready to marry her love in a small ceremony at St. Luke's Church.

My throat grows tight, my eyes prickled with tears.

"Don't cry or you'll set me off," Harper says.

"I'm not crying," I fib. "The sun's in my eyes, that's all."

"Same here," Ryn agrees with a sniff.

“Well, I’m crying,” Kelly says, her nose red.

“I know I’m biased, but I do have the prettiest daughters in all the county,” Mom says from the doorway to the bedroom. “And soon to be daughter-in-law.”

“I won’t actually be your daughter-in-law, you know,” Kelly says with a sniff.

“I know that, honey, but you’re part of the family now,” she replies and Kelly grins at her. With no mom or dad of her own, I know Harper and my parents have become an important part of Kelly’s life, and I’m glad for it. All the more people to love.

“Mom, you look so beautiful,” Harper breathes as Mom takes her by the hand.

Like the bride, Mom is wearing lace, but hers has a round neck and cap sleeves, the sky blue making the red hair we all inherited from her positively glow.

“Not as beautiful as you,” she replies and instantly begins to dab at her eyes with a tissue.

“Mom, don’t cry. You’ll ruin the makeup I did for you,” Ryn protests, but her own eyes are filled with tears.

Mom offers us all a tissue. “Here.”

We are all in such a state!

“Ready to go?” Dad asks, appearing behind our mom. “Oh, Harper. You look—” He swallows, and I know our dad is fighting hard not to cry.

Mom pats him on the arm. “She does, honey.”

He clears his throat. “I came here to check if you’re ready to go, but it looks to me like you’re all too busy crying.”

“It’s an emotional day,” Mom says.

“I know. Now, Harper, are you ready to go marry your man?” Dad asks.

Harper gives us an excited smile. “Oh, yes,” she says.

A short drive later—the bridal party and Mom in one car and Dad and Harper in the other—we arrive at the church. We’re greeted by my aunts, Lisa and Sheila, and Uncle Johnny, who, I’m so happy to report, has finished his treatment, and the doctors are positive about his future. Aunt Lisa finally accepted Oliver once she saw how happy he made me, which is just as well considering she’s still the cook at the Second Chance and we work together every day.

Of course, Aunt Sheila and the Ladies’ Committee claim they

orchestrated our entire relationship, but I don't mind.

Mom gives Harper a final hug before she and my aunts make their way into the church, and I do one last check of Harper's dress and veil.

"There. Perfect," I say with a smile. I adjust her floral headpiece that had slipped as she'd gotten out of the car.

She captures my hand in hers, takes a look at my ring, and whispers, "Don't think I didn't notice your newest piece of jewelry."

I couldn't stop the smile from spreading across my face for all the coffee in the county. "He only just asked. This morning, at the pond."

"And you only just said yes."

I nod, my heart filling with joy.

She collects me in a hug. "Oh, honey. I'm so, so happy for you. Oliver is a great guy."

"The best," I agree.

I feel a hand clasp mine and turn to see Ryn and Kelly gawking at my ring.

"Oh. My. Gosh. You're—" Ryn begins.

Urgently, I shush her. "I didn't want to tell anyone. Not today. Today's Harper's and Christopher's day. I don't want anything to detract from that."

"First thing tomorrow, then, I'm coming over for breakfast," Ryn tells me.

"Me, too," Kelly says.

I let out a laugh. "Okay."

"Ready?" Dad asks as he steps onto the path beside us. I immediately slip the ring off and shove it into my pocket. I don't want anyone else spotting it. Not today. I meant what I said. This is absolutely Harper's and Christopher's day. Our day will come.

"Ready," Harper confirms.

As joint maids of honor, Ryn and I are the first to step into the church, followed by Kelly and then, of course, Harper and Dad. The music plays, the air is filled with the scent of flowers, and we begin our walk down the aisle. As we reach the altar, we turn to watch the bride.

My eyes find Oliver in the congregation, and I catch my breath when I see the look on his face. His lips are lifted into that smile of his that always made me weak at the knees, even when I was in the very deepest of denials over my feelings for him, his eyes intense, full of love. Love for me.

He mouths "Us next," and I beam at him, my heart full to the very brim

with love. Love for Oliver. Love for my family. Love for this wonderful place we call home.

I might have crawled back here with my tail between my legs, hurt and determined to turn my life around. But it's here I got my second chance both with life and with the man I love, Oliver Langdon, my fiancé. The man I thought was my enemy, who turned out to be my great love.

THE END

Acknowledgments



Writing Marlowe’s story was something I was looking forward to for the longest time, ever since I started writing the Second Chance Café series back in 2022. Maybe it’s my evil streak, but I love taking a character who seems to have their life totally together and detonating a bomb. Poor Marlowe. She got quite the bomb, with her happy life in Seattle blowing right up in her face. Losing her boyfriend and job. But she got her HEA in the end with Mr. Oliver Langdon—who incidentally is one of my favourite book boyfriends in the last few years—so I’m hoping she’ll forgive me. All’s well that ends well, right?

As with every book I write, my wonderful writer friend, Jackie Rutherford, critiqued this book for me. She always comes up with incredibly useful feedback, and even when it’s things I don’t want to hear, it always strengthens the story and helps me make it as good as I can. Thanks for another great job, Jackie! Lunch is on me 😊

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Thanks to you, my lovely readers, for sticking with me and this crazy writing bug I just don't seem able to shake. I so hope you enjoyed Marlowe and Oliver's story, and I promise to keep on delivering the laughter, the swoon, and the HEAs.

Also by Kate O'Keeffe

Second Chance Café Series:

Faking It With the Grump

Faking It With My Best Friend

Faking It With the Guy Next Door

It's Complicated Series:

Never Fall for Your Back-Up Guy

Never Fall for Your Enemy

Never Fall for Your Fake Fiancé

Never Fall for Your One that Got Away

Love Manor Romantic Comedy Series:

Dating Mr. Darcy

Marrying Mr. Darcy

Falling for Another Darcy

Falling for Mr. Bingley (spin-off novella)

High Tea Series:

No More Bad Dates

No More Terrible Dates

No More Horrible Dates

Cozy Cottage Café Series:

One Last First Date

Two Last First Dates

Three Last First Dates

Four Last First Dates

Wellywood Romantic Comedy Series:

Styling Wellywood

Miss Perfect Meets Her Match

Falling for Grace

Standalone title:

One Way Ticket

Writing as Lacey Sinclair:

Manhattan Cinderella

The Right Guy