

USA Today Bestselling Author

CHARLOTTE BYRD

KONAN BYRD

KISSES

me

again



SOMERSET
HARBOR

MACMILLAN BROTHERS BOOK 1

KISS ME AGAIN

A Somerset Harbor Novel

CHARLOTTE BYRD

CHARLOTTE BYRD

dangerously addictive

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Praise for Charlotte Byrd

“Twisted, gripping story full of heat, tension and action. Once again we are caught up in this phenomenal , dark passionate love story that is full of mystery, secrets, suspense and intrigue that continues to keep you on edge!” (Goodreads) ☆☆☆☆☆

“Must read!” (Goodreads) ☆☆☆☆☆

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“Twisted love story full of power and control!” (Goodreads) ☆☆☆☆☆

“Just WOW...no one can weave a story quite like Charlotte. This series has me enthralled, with such great story lines and characters.” (Goodreads) ☆☆☆☆☆

“Charlotte Byrd is one of the best authors I have had the pleasure of reading, she spins her storylines around believable characters, and keeps you on the edge of your seat. Five star rating does not do this book/series justice.” (Goodreads) ☆☆☆☆☆

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“Amazing. Scintillating. Drama times 10. Love and heartbreak. They say what you don’t know can’t hurt you, but that’s not true in this book.” (Goodreads) ☆☆☆☆☆

“I loved this book, it is fast paced on the crime plot, and super-hot on the drama, I would say the perfect mix. This suspense will have your heart racing and your blood pumping. I am happy to recommend this thrilling and exciting

book, that I just could not stop reading once I started. This story will keep you glued to the pages and you will find yourself cheering this couple on to finding their happiness. This book is filled with energy, intensity and heat. I loved this book so much. It was super easy to get swept up into and once there, I was very happy to stay.” (Goodreads) ☆☆☆☆☆

“BEST AUTHOR YET! Charlotte has done it again! There is a reason she is an amazing author and she continues to prove it! I was definitely not disappointed in this series!!” (Goodreads) ☆☆☆☆☆

“LOVE!!! I loved this book and the whole series!!! I just wish it didn't have to end. I am definitely a fan for life!!! (Goodreads) ☆☆☆☆☆

“Extremely captivating, sexy, steamy, intriguing, and intense!” (Goodreads) ☆☆☆☆☆

“Addictive and impossible to put down.” (Goodreads) ☆☆☆☆☆

“What a magnificent story from the 1st book through book 6 it never slowed down always surprising the reader in one way or the other. Nicholas and Olive's paths crossed in a most unorthodox way and that's how their story begins it's exhilarating with that nail biting suspense that keeps you riding on the edge the whole series. You'll love it!” (Goodreads) ☆☆☆☆☆

“What is Love Worth. This is a great epic ending to this series. Nicholas and Olive have a deep connection and the mystery surrounding the deaths of the people he is accused of murdering is to be read. Olive is one strong woman with deep convictions. The twists, angst, confusion is all put together to make this worthwhile read.” (Goodreads) ☆☆☆☆☆

“Fast-paced romantic suspense filled with twists and turns, danger, betrayal, and so much more.” (Goodreads) ☆☆☆☆☆

“Decadent, delicious, & dangerously addictive!” (Goodreads) ☆☆☆☆☆

“Titillation so masterfully woven, no reader can resist its pull. A MUST-BUY!” (Goodreads) ☆☆☆☆☆

“Captivating!” (Goodreads) ☆☆☆☆☆

“Sexy, secretive, pulsating chemistry...” (Goodreads) ☆☆☆☆☆

“Charlotte Byrd is a brilliant writer. I've read loads and I've laughed and cried. She writes a balanced book with brilliant characters. Well done!” (Goodreads) ☆☆☆☆☆

“Hot, steamy, and a great storyline.” (Goodreads) ☆☆☆☆☆

“My oh my....Charlotte has made me a fan for life.” (Goodreads) ☆☆☆☆☆

“Wow. Just wow. Charlotte Byrd leaves me speechless and humble... It definitely kept me on the edge of my seat. Once you pick it up, you won't put it down.” (Goodreads) ☆☆☆☆☆

“ Intrigue, lust, and great characters...what more could you ask for?!” (Goodreads) ☆☆☆☆☆

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About Charlotte Byrd

Charlotte Byrd is the bestselling author of romantic suspense novels. She has sold over 1.5 Million books and has been translated into five languages.

She lives near Palm Springs, California with her husband, son, a toy Australian Shepherd and a Ragdoll cat. Charlotte is addicted to books and Netflix and she loves hot weather and crystal blue water.

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Also by Charlotte Byrd

**All books are available at ALL major retailers! If you can't find it,
please email me at charlotte@charlotte-byrd.com**

Somerset Harbor

[Hate Mate \(Cargill Brothers 1\)](#)

[Best Laid Plans \(Cargill Brothers 2\)](#)

[Picture Perfect \(Cargill Brothers 3\)](#)

[Always Never \(Cargill Brothers 4\)](#)

[Kiss Me Again \(Macmillan Brothers 1\)](#)

[Say You'll Stay \(Macmillan Brothers 2\)](#)

Tell me Series

[Tell Me to Stop](#)

[Tell Me to Go](#)

[Tell Me to Stay](#)

[Tell Me to Run](#)

[Tell Me to Fight](#)

[Tell Me to Lie](#)

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[Black Rules](#)
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[Black Contract](#)
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[Black Edge Box Set Books 1-5](#)

Dark Intentions Series

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[Dark Redemption](#)
[Dark Sins](#)
[Dark Temptations](#)
[Dark Inheritance](#)

Dark Intentions Box Set Books 1-5

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[Tangled up in Pain](#)
[Tangled up in Lace](#)
[Tangled up in Hate](#)
[Tangled up in Love](#)

[Tangled up in Ice Box Set Books 1-5](#)

The Perfect Stranger Series

[The Perfect Stranger](#)
[The Perfect Cover](#)
[The Perfect Lie](#)
[The Perfect Life](#)
[The Perfect Getaway](#)

[The Perfect Stranger Box Set Books 1-5](#)

Wedlocked Trilogy

Dangerous Engagement
Lethal Wedding
Fatal Wedding

Dangerous Engagement Box Set Books 1-3

Lavish Trilogy
Lavish Lies
Lavish Betrayal
Lavish Obsession

Lavish Lies Box Set Books 1-3

All the Lies Series
All the Lies
All the Secrets
All the Doubts

All the Lies Box Set Books 1-3

Not into you Duet
Not into you
Still not into you

Standalone Novels
Dressing Mr. Dalton
Debt
Offer
Unknown

About Kiss Me Again

Get ready to dive into a love story that's hotter than the summer sun! Meet Cormac, the smooth and successful CFO of the MacMillan empire. **He's not just a numbers guy; he's a single dad juggling the wild world of business and raising two adorable kids.** Oh, and did we mention he's about to launch a swanky luxury resort that'll have everyone talking in Somerset Harbor?

But wait, here comes **Lily, the fierce and talented chef straight out of the hustle and bustle of New York City.** Her restaurant dreams went up in smoke, but she's got the resilience of a superhero. When fate decides to play matchmaker, **Cormac finds himself in need of a nanny for his little rascals, and Lily jumps on the opportunity for a fresh start in the lap of luxury.**

Sparks fly like fireworks when these two meet! The chemistry between Cormac and Lily is off the charts, but they're playing it cool. Both have their fair share of baggage from the past and don't want to mess up their carefully crafted lives. But with each passing day, the walls they've built start to crumble, and that friendship of theirs is turning into something way juicier!

Just when things are heating up, drama knocks on the door. **Cormac's ex-wife catches wind of their sizzling romance, and Lily's got an offer she can't refuse – a chance to open a brand-new restaurant!** Will they give in to love's call or let fear hold them back?

- ✓ Single dad/nanny romance that'll melt your heart!
- ✓ Sunny vs grumpy – sparks are gonna fly!
- ✓ Billionaire romance – because nothing's hotter than wealth and power!

✔ Small exclusive wealthy town romance – where dreams are made and hearts are on the line!

Join Cormac and Lily in the rollercoaster ride of emotions and love in this small-town romance with a touch of luxury and a bit of angst. Don't miss out on the fun – grab this steamy page-turner now!

Lily

“Another, please,” I tell the bartender.

He’s good at his job—not even an eyebrow lift hinting at judging me for getting a little tipsy. He merely mixes another margarita and adds it to my tab. The bar isn’t too packed, so it’s not like he has much else to do but wait on the people at the bar, drowning their sorrows.

My people.

Looking down the bar, I wonder how many of them are regulars. The old guy at the end of the bar is clearly acquainted with the bartender, but the woman three seats from him seems like a stranger. Until he huffs and pours another cheap Chardonnay and says, “I’m cutting you off, Jessica.”

“Come on, Mike. Cut me a little slack. It’s been a rough day.”

“Oh?” the bartender asks. “Break up another marriage?”

“I’m a lawyer. It’s my job.”

He sneers as he slides the bill to her. “Like I said. You’ve had enough.”

“You always think I’ve had enough. I’m the one who decides—”

“Not in my house.”

“I thought things were going to be different once we got divorced, but how is this any different?”

“I can charge you now.”

She snorts a laugh and gets her credit card out, clearly not winning the argument, and not for the first time. But when she looks at her bill, she points out, “You only charged me for two.”

“I’m not a complete asshole. You get the ex-wife discount.”

She smiles and pays her bill. “Thanks, Mike.”

“An Uber is waiting outside for you.”

“You’re a better bartender than a husband.”

He chuckles. “That’s what I tried to tell you before we got married.”

“Yeah, well, I’m stubborn. Goodnight, Mike.” She leaves.

I’ve never understood people who get along after a break-up, and it seems I’m the only newbie at the bar. That is until a suit walks in.

He takes a seat just two away from me, and even Mike the Friendly Bartender acts like he’s on notice. His shoulders are back, head level, like he’s about to stand at attention. “What can I get for you?”

“What is your cheapest, shittiest beer?”

Mike smirks. “Bad day?”

“Something like that.”

“I suspect you’d prefer a nice scotch.”

“I need to get the taste of nice scotch out of my mouth, actually.”

“Something fruity, then?”

I pipe up, “He makes a mean margarita.”

The suit quirks a smile at me, then laughs. “God. I have not had a margarita since freshman year. I’d like one of those.”

Mike nods. “Coming right up.”

“Thanks for the suggestion.”

I smile, then go back to doom scrolling on my phone. Anything to avoid conversation. Or ogling the suit. I cannot deny he’s cute as hell, but I am not looking for so much as a pleasant smile from a man right now, so I pay him no mind.

I don’t even notice his piercing blue eyes. Or those broad shoulders. His strong nose or that granite jaw cannot bother me. The suit might be classically handsome in every conceivable way, but that is none of my concern.

My dead business is my concern.

I’m glad there’s no smoking in bars anymore. It’s been that way since I was a kid, but tonight, I am especially grateful for that law. I still flinch when I see fire. After watching my restaurant go up in flames, I cannot deal with anything heat-related.

Except maybe that suit.

I roll my eyes at myself for such a pointless thought. Not like someone like him even notices someone like me.

Abruptly, the suit says, “I don’t mean to bother you—

“But you’re about to, aren’t you?”

“Never mind.” He turns to the TV over the bar.

I huff at myself. “Sorry. That was rude. It’s not an excuse, but I’ve had a long string of bad luck recently, and I am not in a position to be good company. You look like a decent guy, so I didn’t want you to waste your time. The blonde in the corner hasn’t been able to keep her eyes off you since you walked in, if you’re looking for a conversation.”

He gives me the oddest smile and something about it makes my stomach flutter. “Are you...did you really just try to wing man for me?”

I laugh. “Wing woman, thank you very much.”

He laughs, too. “Well, wing woman, thanks, but no thanks. I’ve had my fill of blondes for a lifetime.”

Glancing around the bar, I ask, “What about redheads?” Then I dip my head subtly to a woman near the door.

“I don’t need you to fix me up.” He’s still smiling, so I didn’t annoy him with my effort. I can’t figure out why he’s talking to me. “I don’t want to bug you, but I find your brand of bracing honesty refreshing and would like to keep bugging you, if you don’t mind.”

“Bracing honesty?”

“I have never had a woman shut me down quite like you. And no one has ever tried to wing woman for me.”

I shrug. A conversation is probably better for my mental health than doom scrolling through another apology text from my business partner, Paxton. The texts keep getting longer with every excuse why he hadn’t renewed our insurance, and how sorry he is that I am utterly screwed.

Wouldn’t mind getting actually screwed.

So, I turn to the suit. “I’m Lily.”

“Cormac Ma—

“Just Cormac for now. No last names. Okay?”

He nods. “You got it. So, Lily, what are you in for?”

“Nope. Let’s not dive into our sob stories. Let’s just pretend to be two people with no problems in the world, enjoying some shockingly delicious margaritas.”

“Right?” he says with a laugh. “I’d forgotten how good these things are.”

“Know what else is good?”

“What’s that?”

“Sex. You in?”

He turns to Mike. “Can I get the check? I’ve got hers, too.”

Before I can really think through what I’m doing, I’m walking to Cormac’s shiny black BMW SUV. The thing probably costs more than my parents’ first house. I ignore the child safety seats in the back. I do not need to know his life story.

This feels odd, but needed. I haven’t had a one-night stand in Somerset Harbor, and I’m not sure how to go about it. In Manhattan, it was easy. Hotels everywhere. But Somerset Harbor is tiny compared to the city, and my parents run the B&B downtown, so that’s out. “Um, where—

“I know a place.”

“Yeah, I don’t normally get in cars with strangers, so if you could just tell me—

“Somerset Harbor Hotel. If that’s alright with you.”

I’d forgotten all about that place. I nod and nervously drum on my thigh to the beat of the pop music on his radio.

“Are you a musician?”

“We’re not trading life stories. Remember, Cormac?” *If that is your real name.*

“Right, right.” The drive is brief, and he parks near the front. I grab my seat belt, but he doesn’t move. He just stares out the windshield. “I don’t normally do things like this.”

“Are you backing out?” I’m not sure what I want his answer to be.

But he gets out of the car and comes to my door, opening it. “I never back out of anything.” He leans in and his lips brush over mine, and his mouth teases mine open. It’s been so long since anything was this good that I lose myself in his kiss. He murmurs, “Are you backing out?”

“No.”

“Then...” He holds his hand out for me.

I take it and try to stand, but thump back against the seat. The screwy look in his eyes makes me laugh at myself.

“Unbuckling the seatbelt usually helps.”

I snort my laugh and manage to get it on my second attempt to flee his car. Once on the ground, he kisses me again, only this time, he backs me against the door. Cormac’s mouth sends tingles down my spine to very neglected places. He takes my hand and confidently leads me inside. He gets a room while I tune out so I don’t catch his last name, and once the elevator door closes, I can’t stop myself. I pull him to my lips, greedy for more of his.

He reaches around, grabbing my ass. The elevator trip is brief, though. Somerset Harbor Hotel features only four floors, which was why the obnoxiously large MacMillan Hotel and Resort is going to make a killing when it finally opens. This hotel will close, and so will my parents' B&B.

Stay in the moment, Lily.

Inside the hotel room, there are no more words. No more obstacles. Cormac is on me fast and determined, stripping away my clothes, as I do the same to him. It's like a race to skin. Now our lips have new places to go.

The room is small, with just a bed, a sofa, a dresser with a large mirror, and a combination television and desk setup. Nothing fancy. Perfect.

He hoists me up by my ass, and I cling onto him with my limbs as he walks to the bed, all the while our mouths feast on each other. He lays me back, finally taking a moment to look me over. "You were hiding this under those baggy clothes? That's a crime."

"Punish me."

He smirks, then bends forward, kissing my stomach on his way up to my mouth. The kisses had lit me up, but now I'm burning for it. I need this. He gives my nipples a little bite before settling on top of me. That's what I've missed. The weight of a man. The strangely secure feeling it gives. Oh, and there's his cock. He whispers in my ear, "Are you sure?"

"Yes," I hiss.

He thrusts in, but only a little at first. Teasing me. I jut my hips up to take more of him, and soon, we're mauling each other, bites, licks, growls as he fills me up again and again. Cormac rolls onto his back, keeping me on top of him as he sits up. His fingers trace my jaw as he studies me. He looks mystified. "Don't know what I did to deserve this. Glad I did it."

I laugh and kiss him before riding him in earnest. It's not long before I'm shaking on him. My belly tenses and he pops his body up, sensing my orgasm. He grabs my ass, forcing me down harder. My orgasm rattles me, sending my head back before I clutch onto Cormac as I moan it out.

The moment I make eye contact again, he rolls me onto my back and flips me face down before diving back in. He grabs the headboard for leverage and drives himself into me, making me screech as I come again. Only this time, he pulls out and shoots on my back as he comes in a roar.

He crashes next to me, gasping. I am, too. We pass out that way, on top of the covers. In the morning, I creep from the bed and dress, hoping not to wake him.

“Good morning, Lily.”

I smile and turn around. “Oh good. You’re up.”

He laughs. “Once more with feeling.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m not good at the morning after part.”

“Me either.”

“I’m going to take an Uber home.”

“I can drop you off.”

But I shake my head. “Fewer questions this way. But thanks for the offer.
And for last night.”

“I’m the one who should thank you. Good luck out there, Lily.”

“Yeah, you too, Cormac.” I flee the scene with my shoes in my hand,
smiling and walking a little crooked.

-

Cormac

Why am I craving raspberries?

It's an odd question for a Monday morning, but it clouds my thoughts while I look over the vendor proposals on my laptop. Flicking through one after the other is not enough to distract me from the craving. I have been looking at the proposals for too long and my eyes are tired, which has to be why I keep thinking of distractions. There's no other explanation—

Lily. Her hair smells like raspberries.

My head tips back against my Italian leather office chair, sinking into the cushion. My office is nice enough that I should be able to focus on the task at hand. Solid mahogany desk—oversized, just the way I like it. The shelves host hundreds of books, law and otherwise. Seabirds squawk outside the window, while the dance in the breeze.

I should not be thinking about raspberries. There is too much to do.

But I can't help myself. Friday had been a rare night for me. I wasn't about to tell her I'd never had a one-night stand. When she offered it, I nearly choked on my margarita. Sure, I'd had hook-ups before. But there was always the promise of possibilities in the air. Never had I experienced a no-last-name, no-detail situation. And I had never been with a woman like Lily.

She was so uninhibited. So wild. Since there was no fear of judgment, I just did what I wanted to do. For once, in my proper, stiff life, I let all of that go and had fun without thoughts of consequences. That night was the freest I had ever felt, and I had Lily to thank for it. I want to thank her. Repeatedly until neither of us can walk straight.

I shake my head at the thought and get back to it, but I can't stare at

another proposal. Switching gears to donation requests for the MacMillan Foundation, I settle in for the ride. We support a lot of charities, but not all. We cannot afford to let our brand be tarnished by connecting with the wrong charity, so I must be selective.

Maybe I should have been more selective on Friday night. I've never had a woman refuse to give me her full name or her phone number.

Not that names or numbers are a guarantee of anything. Details like those hadn't done anything to maintain my marriage. Not that I hold that against my ex-wife. Abigail is great, but after a few years, we realized we were better co-parents than spouses, and neither one of us was interested in dragging our marriage out past that realization.

She deserves better than that, and so do I. Lucky for her, she found a new man right after our divorce, and Olivier is a great step-dad and husband. I wish them nothing but the best.

Also, sometimes I am so jealous of them that my teeth hurt.

I sigh. It would be nice to have someone to come home to. Someone warm and sweet. Maybe with a degree or two. I like smart women. Another lawyer would be good—

I laugh at myself. *That's Abigail. You're thinking of her again.*

Not that I want her back. Abigail was the woman who, by every measure, should have been perfect for me. Unfortunately, things fizzled out *because* of our similarities. There were no surprises. No spark. Everything was routine. Expected. Dull.

Maybe I need the opposite of Abigail. Lily is most certainly the opposite— Hang on. You don't know anything about her.

I huff at myself. The problem is, I haven't met anyone as interesting as Lily since the divorce. *I should have gotten her number. It's ridiculous that I didn't. Since when does a woman not give me her number?*

Thinking hard, I remember she seemed chummy with the bartender. She knew his specialty. That might be enough to go on. I dial up the bar. “Yes, hello. I was there Friday night. I believe the bartender's name was Mike—

“That's me.”

“Okay, great. I came in and asked for a shitty beer, and—

He laughs. “Oh, I remember you. Did you leave something behind?”

“No, nothing like that. The woman I left with—would you happen to know her last name?”

“No. I've never seen her in here before.”

“Damn. Alright. Thanks for your time.”

“No worries. If I see her around, do you want me to let her know you called, asking about her? Your number is on my called ID, so I could share it, if you like.”

I frown, thinking. “Yeah. If it’s not too much trouble—

“I’ll give her your number.”

“Thanks again.” I hang up and make a note to hire him out from that dive bar. A thoughtful bartender would make an excellent addition to the staff at the resort once we open. Still, hitting a brick wall on Lily annoys me to no end.

How did I let her leave without insisting on getting her digits?

Looking the bar up on social media, I search through the tags from Friday night. No luck. She’s practically a ghost, being this untraceable. Flicking through the bar’s posts, no one got her in a pic. Not even in the background. Makes sense, though. She wasn’t exactly dressed for going out. No reason for them to include her in the pictures.

It’s part of what I like about her.

Lily wasn’t there to show off or to meet people. She was there to drink while comfortable. I’d never seen a woman in such baggy clothes at a bar, and it made her stick out. They were odd, too. Not pajamas—too sturdy for that. But the pants had a bright pattern of vegetables on them and her black tech shirt had a zippered neckline. Even her shoes were for comfort—cushy black sneakers. There was nothing about her look that said, “*Please flirt with me.*”

Which is why I was interested. That and her messy brunette bun. It had been so much fun messing it up more. I hadn’t talked to a woman like her in ages. There was no guile. No games. She wanted what she wanted, and she went for it.

But maybe that’s the nature of a real one-night stand. You don’t have to pretend or be polite. Maybe she isn’t like that with guys she dates. She might have needed a one-night stand for the same reason I did—to unwind. Although she didn’t seem wound tight, either. It was more like something had upset her, and I was her distraction.

I’d be happy to distract her again.

Searching online for every connection between us, though, I strike out. No way to distract her again if I can’t contact her. I grumble to myself and text my lunch order to my elderly assistant, Linda, before getting on with the

charity proposals. No sense in delaying the inevitable. Boredom Alley, here I come.

When Linda knocks on my door, I'm surprised. "Come in."

She toddles in, her white frizzy hair curled tight to her head. Her cream suit is sharp, but I know she'd rather be in yoga pants and sitting on the beach. Just two years until her retirement, and I fear that moment might come sooner rather than later if she gets the notion. Her thick, Long Island accent asks, "It's Monday, Cormac. Mondays, you order the Reuben with a side of potato salad. Now you want a chef salad with raspberry vinaigrette? Are you feeling okay?"

I shrug. "Change is good for the soul, right?"

She fusses, pursing her lips at me. "What happened?"

"Nothing," I say with a laugh. "You don't have to worry about me all the time."

"Of course I do. That's exactly my job until I retire in twenty-three months and eight days."

"You're counting it down to the day now?"

She smiles. "Oh yes. If you were moving to a tropical beach, wouldn't you?"

"You have a point." Still, I didn't like that she was counting the days. "Is that it?"

"Don't give me that lip, young man. Something happened this weekend—are the kids okay? Franny didn't get hurt at gymnastics—

"No," I tell her, smiling. I love that Linda worries for my kids as much as I do. "And Aiden is fine, too. My lunch order is not some crystal ball."

"You ordered tuna on rye the day you told me you were getting married, and tuna on rye the day you told me you were getting divorced. You haven't ordered it before or since. So, yes, Cormac, it is a crystal ball into that thick skull of yours."

"What am I going to do when you retire? No one else knows me as well as you do."

She shrugs, then smirks. "You'll train a new one."

"Ugh," I sit back and pout. "That'll be your job the last year you're here."

She sighs, happily. "The *last* year has such a ring to it."

"Are we really so terrible?"

"You know I love you like you were my own, Cormac, but an old lady has to do what an old lady has to do. For now, that means ordering your odd

salad, but don't come whining to me when you're craving a Reuben later on.”
“Don't worry. I won't.” I'm still craving raspberries.

Lily

Oversleeping, when done right, is an art-form.

It's the one thing I've really enjoyed since my restaurant burned away. Well, that and Cormac. Just thinking about his name makes me smile. Silly really. I'm never going to see him again.

I sigh and reluctantly open my eyes. Can't guess the time—the sun is past my window for the day. But when I open it, I catch a whiff of the breeze, and my head goes straight to Cormac. I hadn't noticed it at the start of things, but once we were in the elevator, his cologne hit me. It smelled like the ocean air.

Turning to my room, I take stock of what I have. I could sit back and ruminate over everything I've lost, but that doesn't seem useful. Thankfully, my parents disproved the old adage about not being able to go home again. I'm luckier than most—at least I had a soft landing when I fell on my ass.

I'm staying at their B&B in a first floor room. Not the fanciest room they have—that goes for too much money to be given to family. But it's nice enough. Pale hardwood floors throughout, with white walls and blue brocade curtains. The linens are soft and light blue, and they make me want to sleep forever.

Or maybe that's just life making me want to sleep forever.

I plop onto the bed and huff at myself. I cannot keep mulling over it, but I also can't stop myself from doing exactly that. Until I think of Cormac, Mr. Tall, Dark, and Handsome. Laughing, I decide on a shower.

I have never gone for a guy like him. He was too straight-laced, too proper for me. Usually, I kept things simple and hooked up with restaurant guys who knew it would go nowhere. Running a restaurant meant I didn't

have time for a steady boyfriend. But Cormac seemed like the boyfriend type. He was definitely not my kind of man.

But he *did* make me come, which is more than I can say for most men.

Scrubbing down in the shower, I keep thinking about him. The way he touched me, the way he moved. It is hard *not* to think of him when I'm naked. He was so damned good looking. Lacking the usual tattoos and piercings of my normal hook-ups, but still. And the way he kisses is enough that the memory makes me shiver. His hands, strong and resolute. I smile, thinking about him. Touching myself the way he touched me, but my phone goes off.

I lean out the shower curtain. It's Paxton again, so I ignore it.

He let me down in the biggest way, and there is no good that can come of speaking to him while I'm still pissed off. We were friends before the fire that ruined my life. I'm not sure how to forgive what he did.

My restaurant had been my dream since I was a little girl. Seeing it go up in smoke felt like I lost not only my business, but a part of myself, as well. Oyster Hill was my baby. And I couldn't save her.

Paxton's fuck-up makes the loss so much worse.

It would be one thing if the insurance company had sent only one notice to renew. But he ignored three notices. His excuses ranged from, "My dealer got me some really good shit," to, "Mercury is in retrograde," to, "Maybe I shouldn't have been the one in charge of something so important."

At least we agree on the last one. Not that it matters anymore.

I have to give it one more shot. While drying my hair, I decide I will do whatever it takes. I have to get Oyster Hill back. Not only am I screwed, but so are my employees. They don't deserve this.

Once my hair is dry, I call the insurance company and ask for whoever I need to speak to on the matter. But I get bumped from one to the other, because they know what's coming. Finally, a rep who sounds old and tired gets on the line. That's how I feel, so I think we can find common ground. I give him my best spiel, explaining the whole thing. "...so, I know the insurance lapsed, but I'm asking for some flexibility. We've been good clients for years, and—

"I don't mean to be rude, but what makes you think that? We've had to chase you down every renewal period."

I blink at the news. "What?"

"Your partner was always lax at paying the bill, I'm afraid, and your

account was almost never in good standing, Ms. Olson. I understand you're going through a massive hardship, but the truth is, we cannot make an exception for you. You were going to get dropped as it was. The fire merely sped the process along." His words gut me.

"Paxton didn't...this isn't a recent problem?"

"No. I'm sorry. I know this is hard—

I laugh bitterly. "That's putting it mildly."

"I wish I could help you out. I really do. But your situation is too risky for us to move forward with your company."

"I understand," I breathe. "Thank you for your time."

"Best of luck, Ms. Olson."

"Yeah. Thanks. You too." I dial up the building owner, but I know it's going to be another disappointment. When I get him on the phone, I hear it in his tone. "...and they won't help me out. What's your insurance situation like?"

"Lily, I'd love to help you, but even with insurance, I'm not re-cooping a cent. My premium is too high—I won't be rebuilding, just covering some losses."

"But that location is perfect for a restaurant, Ted. I can't believe you'd give it up—

"I'm superstitious. Rebuilding where a freak fire hit is a bad idea. It's a sign—nothing should be built there. And with my insurance giving me a hard time, I don't have a reason to rebuild. I'm donating the property to the city and taking the tax write-off."

I kick the wall, then hope I didn't leave a mark on it. It's a relief when I see nothing on the wall, but the metaphor hits too hard. *Shit. I'm not leaving my mark anywhere.*

"Lily? You there?"

"Yeah, sorry. Um, I understand. Thanks for your time."

"I'm sorry, too. When I ate at Oyster Hill, I knew you were going places. Don't give up, okay?"

I swallow the hot ball in my throat. "Thanks." Hanging up, I throw myself on the bed, trying not to cry.

Someone knocks on my door, and I know who it is by the softness. "Come in, Mom."

She smiles as she comes to the bed with a tray in hand. Her soft brown curls hardly move when she does—too much hairspray. Mom doesn't wear

makeup. She never saw the point. To her mind, a smile is all anyone needs to look nice. Her green eyes shine and her naturally pink upturned lips suit her round face. “PB and J, plain chips, pickles, and an ice cold Yoohoo. Thought it might cheer you up.”

I grin, then chow down. “Thank you for this.”

“I’ll never understand how you got into French cooking, when this stuff is your favorite.”

“The other stuff is a challenge. This is comfort food.”

She nods gently and sits next to me. “So. It’s after one.”

“And?”

“I thought you might like to get out of the house before you see Aria.”

“Why?”

She sighs, still smiling. “Lily, I know this is hard to hear, but your restaurant died. Not you.”

Choosing to ignore her reality and replace it with my own, I tell her, “This could use more peach preserves.”

“Lily.”

I huff. “I know all that. And your sandwich is perfect. I was just being a snot.”

“I know.”

“This is harder than I’d expected, Mom. The insurance company has completely refused to work with me. The building owner is donating the property to the city for the tax write-off. I have nothing left, and I don’t know what to do.”

She takes a beat, then says, “I’m not sure who coined it, but someone once said that when even you have nothing, you have a world of possibilities.”

“Did they say that on a greeting card or one of those kitten posters from the nineties?”

“Mock all you like, but I think it’s true. At least, that’s what I tell myself every time I think about the Macmillan Resort coming to town.”

Right. I’m not the only one with problems. “Are you and Dad going to be okay when that happens? Money-wise, I mean.”

“That really depends on how it impacts us here. It would be easy to say we’re going under, but some people still want a cozier atmosphere. The resort won’t have that.” She sighs, glancing around my room. “Hopefully, enough people will still want what we have here.”

“Hospitality is never a sure thing,” I murmur.

“No, it’s not. But what business is? Even doctors close up shop sometimes.” She shrugs. “It’s the nature of life.”

I put my arm around her soft shoulders. “I suppose the only thing we can do is to be flexible.”

“Indeed. And on that note, ask Aria if she knows of any job openings. I know you’re not ready to get back—

“No, I am not.”

She smiles. “Well, you need a job, and she might just know of one.”

“I’ll be sure to ask.”

“And if you want to borrow anything of mine to wear when you go out, you’re more than welcome to.”

I frown. “Why would I do that?”

“Because chef clothes are weird.”

“Not for chefs.”

She smiles, but it’s sad. “Sweetie, technically, you’re not a chef anymore.”

“Punch me while I’m down, why don’t you?”

“It’s *kick* me while I’m down—

“No, that felt like a punch, right in the gut.”

She gives me half a hug. “Sorry. But seriously, the veggie pants need to go. You dress like a cartoon character, dear.”

I almost counter that I got picked up in my veggie pants. But then I remember I’d lied about where I was that night. “I’ll think about it. No promises, though.”

“It’s all I ask.”

Lily

Billingsley Academy's parking lot is nicer than most people's driveways. Everything is smooth, the lines are fresh, and the landscaping is precise, not a weed or flower out of place. The building is a two-story red brick mass of overconfidence, complete with crisp white shutters. Each detail screams pricy and snobby. In short, it's the kind of place I could never belong to even if I tried, so whatever jobs Aria might know of are out of my league.

Class is letting out for the day, and at any other school, that would have meant a war brewing in the parking lot. Not so at Billingsley. Instead, they have people directing traffic, so everyone gets a parking space and the pickup line is in order of when each grade lets out. Organized, efficient, and yeah, I could never work here.

My kitchen was always that way, but I never saw the reason to put in that kind of effort for anything else. A kitchen must be able to turn food fast, even in a fine dining atmosphere. An elementary school is packed full of kids who run on their own timetables. But sitting in the parking lot, I am impressed by how well-behaved all the kids are. They line up for their exit, uniforms still pristine from the day.

Are these kids allowed to be kids? They must be, or Aria's son wouldn't attend. Still, though, not even a skinned knee in sight.

Aria Bueller is the one friend I have kept up with since high school, and I'm excited to see her. It's been too long. When I see a mass of curly red hair coming from the front door, I instantly smile, but to my surprise, it's not her. When I realize the red is one of those expensive dye jobs, I roll my eyes at myself. I should have known it wasn't her.

Aria has that Irish lass thing going. Milky skin, bright blue eyes, and wild Merida red curls. I always half expect her to carry a bow and quiver, and the time she got into archery, she had a swarm of guys after her. Aria was the popular one between us in school, so I'm not surprised she got a job working for Billingsley. I presume there is a connection between her and the owner's kid.

When she bounds out of the building, I grin and wave at her from Mom's car. She smiles back, effortlessly winding between cars and people until she reaches me. "I'm so glad you could find a spot," she says, hugging me. "It's a madhouse today."

"Can we trade madhouses?"

She giggles. "I hate to rush this, but I only have an hour before Owen gets out of his running club."

"I thought he was in kindergarten."

"He is."

"And he's in a running club?"

She smiles and her eyes light up. "He loves it."

I shrug and take off, ending up at Bean-Go, our old favorite coffeehouse downtown. It's a little grubbier than most places in Somerset Harbor, which is a part of the appeal. Secondhand couches, old bookshelves with the finish worn down in spots. But everything was chosen with care and the owner, Mrs. LaCasse dotes on everyone. It's like getting coffee with my favorite aunt, and I love it.

We grab some cold brew and pop on a corner sofa. "So," she begins, "how are you doing?"

I laugh once and shake my head. "Crappy. You?"

Her shoulders slump and she sighs. "Same. God, it is nice to say that."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't get out much—either I'm at work or I'm with Owen. So, getting to complain is usually out of the question."

"You don't have work friends?"

Her pretty face scrunches for a moment before she shrugs. "I have people at work I'm friendly with, but it's not the same thing as someone I can be myself with. I don't want to get labeled as a complainer there. Getting the preschool teacher job was a miracle, and I'm not going to make waves or say the wrong thing to the wrong person and have it get taken out of context. Some people at work live for drama, but I've done a good job of staying out

of that mess.”

“Well, what’s crappy for you?”

“It’s not…” She frowns, then sips her cold brew. “I don’t want to sound

—
“Aria, it’s me. Just say it.”

“I love my son. He’s the best thing to happen to me. And I am so lucky to have the job I have.”

“But.”

She smirks. “But it would be nice to have a guy around, and I honestly do not have the time or the bandwidth to make that happen.”

“You’re you. I thought guys just fall out of the sky for you.”

She laughs hard. “Not in a very long time, and the moment they hear *single mom*, most of them run for the hills.”

“Guys make things complicated. Who needs them?”

Flatly, she says, “I miss sex, Lily.”

I giggle at her. “Oh. That. Well, you don’t need a guy for that—

“A vibrator doesn’t spoon you.”

“Get a bigger vibrator.”

She laughs, and I have missed this girl so much. “You know what I mean.”

“You could always have a one-night stand.”

“That’s too depressing to think about.”

I frown. “It’s better than no sex.”

“Maybe. But I guess the truth is, I miss being in a relationship. Having a guy around is nice. And I think it would be good for Owen if I could find someone. Probably. I don’t know. What about you? I know about the fire. No need to rehash that unless you want to. But what about the guy situation for you? Still blissfully single?”

I nod and smile. “Very. In fact, I had a one-night stand—

“Oh, Lily. I didn’t mean anything by what I said.”

“I know. You meant it’d be depressing for *you* to have a one-night stand. For me, it’s liberating. No ties, no responsibilities. I get what I want, and I get out. It’s perfect for me. Honestly, I was kind of joking when I suggested it to you. I cannot imagine you having one.”

She stares into her cup. “I guess I should confess something, then.”

“*You* confess something? You never do anything worthy of a confession. Are you okay?”

“Remember how I told you Owen’s father and I dated for a few months before he died in a skiing accident?”

“Yeah.”

She looks up at me. “Owen’s father was a one-night stand.”

I blink a thousand times and nearly drop my drink. “What?” She laughs, and I realize I yelled that when Mrs. LaCasse leans past the espresso machine to look at me. I wave an apology. “Sorry.” Then back to Aria, I ask, “What?”

“I lied and I’m sorry for that—

“No, no, no. I don’t care about that. Owen’s father is still alive?”

“Probably.”

I cannot get over it. “So, why aren’t you finding him for child support or to be a father to his kid?”

She sighs. “I never got his last name. It was just one night, and I chose to keep Owen. It doesn’t seem fair to dump a kid on a stranger like that.”

“So, what you’re saying is, the sex was bad?”

She giggles. “No, sadly. It was amazing. But the whole thing...I don’t know where I’d even look for him now, Lily. And back then, he just vanished, never called me again. I wondered if the sex was bad for him—

“Oh, come on.”

“It’s a hit on the ego, you know? And then I found out I was pregnant... it’s embarrassing. I didn’t want anyone to know I got knocked up on a one-night stand and he never called. I’ve never had a guy not call after.”

“I imagine that’s upsetting if that’s what you want.”

Her lips pinch at one corner. “That’s never what you want, isn’t it? Tell me all about your one-night stand. I’ll live vicariously through you.”

I laugh and lie, “It wasn’t anything special.”

“That good, huh?”

I sigh. “Didn’t want you to miss sex even more. Thought I’d snow you.”

“It didn’t work. Go.”

“Friday night. I was a McCluskey’s on Fourth—

“Wait, this was *here*? I thought it was in the city.”

“It was here.” I think back on the night and get warm deep inside. “I was drinking my sorrows away when an actual tall, dark, and handsome dude in a suit walked in.”

“Wow. Not your type—

“Nope. But inside of ten minutes, we left the bar and went to the Somerset Harbor Hotel.”

Her eyes bulge right out of their sockets. “You work fast. So? How was he?”

I take a deep breath and smile serenely. “Better than expected. By a lot.”

“Oh,” she swoons, “I am so jealous.” But then she straightens up. “Just don’t be pregnant.”

I laugh. “Slim chance of that, thanks to my IUD.”

“That’s good. Lily, I’ve missed you. I know you’re here for a crappy reason, but I’m glad you’re around for now.”

“I’ve missed you, too.”

“Any chance you’ll be working at a restaurant in town?”

I shake my head. “I am not ready to be in a kitchen again, especially one where I’m not in charge. It’s too soon. If I don’t ask, Mom will kill me. Any chance there’s a job for me at Billingsley?”

“Not there, but a parent was talking about needing a nanny. The job is temporary, the pay will be good, and the kids are great. High energy, but easy. The parents are divorced, but it’s amicable, so no drama there. The dad works all the time, and the ex-wife is about to go on an overseas trip for six weeks, I think. Might be a good transitional thing for you.”

“I’ve never nannied before.”

She shrugs. “Kids are like short adults who believe in magic, don’t know much, and have the physical coordination of a drunk college kid, so think of them as tiny, intoxicated philosophy students, and it’ll be just like when you worked at that college bar. You’ll do fine.”

Famous last words.

Cormac

Wednesday afternoon, and I'm still thinking about raspberries. It's silly to obsess about the whole thing, but I can't help it. Until I get a text from Abigail, asking to call if I have the time. *Might take my mind off Lily*. I shrug and dial her up. "Hey, is everything okay?"

"Everything is fine. Well...not fine. But it will be. You'll just have to be more flexible than usual, and I know how much you hate that."

I frown. "That's not exactly true, Abs."

"Oh please. I bet you still have that knot on the back of your head from when I made you try yoga."

"The human body is not meant to get into those positions. It's not my fault that I fell."

She giggles, and it makes me smile. "Somehow *I* can get in them just fine."

"Yeah, yeah. What's all this about?"

"The nanny thing. We have gone through six, and with me leaving for France shortly, we need another one now, so the kids can get used to her."

"Or you could skip the trip..."

She huffs. "Cormac, we talked about this. I told you months ago about Olivier's family retreat and his grandmother's ninetieth birthday—

"At a winery."

"It's his family's winery, so yes, *technically* I'll be spending a month and a half in the Loire Valley, but it's not like this is some grand vacation for me. This is for his family. I haven't met most of them, and if I don't go, it's like thumbing my nose. His grandmother is turning ninety, and she still runs the

business. We should all be so lucky. Not to mention, his sister is getting married, too. I have to go.”

“And on the day the phrase, ‘veiled excuse,’ was redefined...”

She lets out a frustrated laugh. “Cor, I’m not going through this again. Yes, I’ll be having a good time, and yes, I have to leave the kids behind to do it so they don’t fall behind in class. That doesn’t make me a negligent mother.”

“I never meant to imply that. To be honest, I’m probably just jealous—

“Oh, I know you are, but I need you to stop making this sound like I am not doing my job.”

I rake my fingers through my hair and sigh. “I’m sorry, Abs. You know I think you’re a great mom, right?”

“Most of the time, yes. I know this trip is a point of contention for you, but I’m going. Which means we need a nanny, and—

“Where does my inherent inflexibility come into all of this?”

She sighs. “Because I scheduled an interview for a new nanny.”

“And?”

“The interview is going to be at the Somerset Harbor Yacht Club.”

I close my eyes and huff. “Seriously?”

“I am tired of meeting them at coffee shops and I’d like to make a good impression on a nanny for once. It’s the nicest place in town.”

“You’re worried about making a good impression on the nanny, but we’re the ones hiring her. Shouldn’t *she* be the one who is concerned about impressions?”

“Where have you been lately? Under a rock? Young people want a good job. They want to know they’re coming to work for someone who respects them and will take care of them. We need to step up our game, Cormac.”

I smell a fib. “Is this because Daphne got that British nanny that worked with Mick Jagger’s family?”

She laughed. “Not entirely. But not entirely *not* that. I’m not looking for a celebrity nanny, but attracting a suitable candidate is tough. Especially for two kids as rambunctious as ours. We need someone who doesn’t sweat under pressure.”

“Someone who will impress your country club friends...”

“Is it so wrong to want impressive people around our children? They deserve to have all the good influences we can give them. You said yourself on more than one occasion your nanny was an invaluable part of your

childhood. I want that for Franny and Aiden.”

Meeting at my family's sworn enemy's yacht club is not the worst thing to happen in history. Get over yourself, Cormac. “Still. The Cargills’ place? There are plenty of excellent restaurants in town.”

“I want the best, and your family’s beef with the Cargills is not *my* beef with the Cargills anymore. I promise, when you finally get the resort open, we can interview all future nannies there.”

I grumble, “It’d be great if one actually stuck around, and we didn’t need to interview anyone else.”

“And that is more likely to happen if we wine and dine her, don’t you think?”

She’s not wrong, which is very annoying. “Fine. I will cross enemy lines to meet this nanny, but she better be amazing, Abs. I’m talking about a nanny with a CV a mile long and an accent and first aid training and—

“She comes highly recommended by one of the teachers at Billingsley. I’m not sure if we can ask for much more than that on such short notice. Why did the last one quit, anyway?”

“Something about how she would rather go back to the abbey and live a cloistered life than deal with our demons.”

“During the interview, be sure *not* to mention our children scared off a former nun.”

I laugh. “I prefer to think they reinforced her belief system and helped her find her true calling.”

She laughs, too. “I don’t—

My call waiting beeps. Ignacio Flores. It’s then that I see I’ve missed some texts as well. “Uh, sorry, it’s one of the partners—

“Seven tonight for the interview. Bye.”

I click over. “Iggy, how are—

“Has Linda told you yet?”

Checking the texts, my stomach sinks. “The thing with Clint Bryson?”

“He’s going to back out of the resort.”

“Fuck. What makes you think so?”

“Because he said, ‘I’m going to back out of the resort.’ Everyone is freaking out.”

I had been the one to connect with Clint Bryson. An oil tycoon who wanted to get involved in real estate, Clint is simultaneously the best person to have around and the worst, because he knows his value and won’t let

anyone forget it. I don't blame him—billions of dollars will do that to a person.

But that makes him a tremendous pain in the ass.

Courting his investment took over three months of party yachts, illegal cigars, and extraordinary gifts, which required stalking his entire family online. Given the tens of millions he has agreed to invest into the resort, it was worth the effort. He's the reason we've been able to move forward as fast as we have. But he has the money to easily breach our contract, if he feels like it. And he could be a capricious old bastard.

My foot taps in response. I don't want to do this. "I do not have the time to—

"Make the time, Cormac. You know that's what your dad would do."

There it is. The shadow I'll never be out from under. The worst part is, he's right. "I'll see what I can do."

"Tonight. He's leaving for some trip at ten, so it needs to be tonight."

Which means I can't interview the nanny for my own kids. I swallow hard. I hate this so much. Stepping into Dad's shoes for the company means doing all the things he did, including missing important family functions, future soccer games, and anything else related to my kids. I'd be a fool if I didn't ask myself whether it was worth it. But who else can take over the MacMillan Corporation? A stranger? Dad would come out of retirement if I stepped down, and for him, that would mean another heart attack in a year. I can't let him do that.

Sighing at myself, I tell him, "I'll make it happen, Iggy."

"You're a good man, Cormac. Many people will sleep easier tonight, knowing you're on it."

I won't be one of them. "Thanks. Talk later." I hang up and groan, dreading calling Abigail. She will have to do the interview herself, which means we won't get the nanny. My ex-wife is a woman of many talents, but interviews are not one of them. Probably the real reason she chose the Somerset Harbor Yacht Club—let the venue do the work for her. I pour myself a scotch and sip for a minute, while I figure out how to tell her.

Lily

The Somerset Harbor Yacht Club is the Billingsley Academy of yacht clubs. Though I imagine, anything with *yacht club* in the name could be labeled the same way. It's a gorgeous, stately two-story building, spread out along the Atlantic Ocean, with a marina of their very own. Like Billingsley, the parking lot is landscaped to death, but unlike the academy, the yacht club's plants have a careless feel to them, as though they just happen to grow in a pristine manner. More English garden style than amusement park-sharp hedges.

Mom had hoped I'd get a job at the yacht club when I finished culinary school, despite the fact they gave the B&B some competition. The club has an attached hotel, but it's so different from our place that I never thought of them as competition. It wasn't as though their members would stay at a cozy B&B when they had the option to stay at the club. But to Mom and Dad, anyone renting a room was competition. Despite that, she wanted me to work there because she knew the Cargills were good people and would treat me right.

I park, avoiding the valet. Since I am not a member, I don't want to deal with the awkward hassle of telling them I am here for an interview. Such an odd thing—the only other dinner time interview I'd had was for a kitchen, and I hated the feel of it, so I bombed it on purpose. I knew what I wanted—a restaurant of my own.

Look where that got me...

Sighing, I get out of Mom's car wearing her clothes. Her best blue sweater set and black trousers with my black nonskid sneakers. My size nines won't fit into her dainty size seven flats, and if I'm going to pretend to be a

nanny, I should be in sensible shoes, anyway. I had even borrowed her purse to look the part of a country club-type instead of what I really am.

Mom swore the outfit would give the right impression, but walking to the door of the yacht club, I'm not so sure. I can't stop fidgeting with the delicate sweater set, and I'm sure I'll get a stain on it somehow. But on the drive, I had decided I'd order water, a salad with no dressing or tomatoes, and plain pasta. Can't stain Mom's best clothes with any of that.

The truth is meal planning is my mental happy place and focusing on that keeps the stomach butterflies from leaping out of my mouth.

Inside, the yacht club is lovelier than I'd anticipated. After a few years in Manhattan, my standards for fanciness were raised, but this place could stand next to any bistro or boutique on the island. A golden chandelier above, high-polished dark wood floors below, some antique decorations peppered among the modern stuff. Classy, but not as snooty as expected. Unfortunately, it's also confusing inside, and I don't know where to go.

"Good evening. Are you lost?" a man asks. He's handsome, with shirtsleeves rolled up the middle of his forearms.

"You read my mind. I'm Lily Olson, and I'm here to meet someone in the restaurant, Abigail Charpentier."

He thrusts out his hand with a friendly smile. Good grip on him, too. "I'm Brooks Cargill. I am the event coordinator for the club," he holds up a finger to someone behind me, "and we are prepping for a wedding—

"I'm sorry to bother you. If you direct me—

"No, no. I only mean to say that means I can help you. Follow me."

"I appreciate it." I follow Brooks, noting his wedding ring, as we make our way through the place. He takes me to the host station and asks for Abigail's table, then guides me there. "Abigail?"

She smiles and nods, then stands, shaking my hand. "Nice to meet you, Lily."

"Brooks, thanks again for your help."

"My pleasure. Enjoy your evening." He leaves us to it, and we sit down.

The restaurant portion of the club is equally grand, with white tablecloths and proper place settings, candles on the tables—not those tacky fake-flicker lights, and nice, low music on the speakers. Music is such a controversial topic for restaurants these days, and I'm glad to see they fall in line with my tastes.

"Thank you for agreeing to meet me here."

“Of course.” *Anything for a job right now, and this is a better location for an interview than most.* We order our drinks—her, a Chenin Blanc, me, water. “I’m sure you have a thousand questions.”

Abigail smiles, and it’s then that I notice she’s pretty in a plain way. Like every single feature is precisely what I would expect of a yacht club member. Dark blonde hair, slender, light freckling on her cheeks like she used to get too much sun, and a rock on her finger that could provide all the shade she would ever need. Her clothes are the plain beige things so many truly rich people wear—there’s even a loose string on her sleeve, as if to say she doesn’t care what anyone thinks of her or that she doesn’t spend time noticing things like that.

Our drinks come and after a sip, she leans in, like she’s divulging a secret. “These grapes were harvested too soon. Drinkable, but,” she gives a subtle shake of her head in distaste.

“Too acidic?”

Her bright brown eyes sparkle with recognition. “You know your wines?”

I shrug. “My sommelier—excuse me, my *former* sommelier—used to hold classes for my staff, so we’d be prepared for questions. He was a good instructor.”

“You have staff, and yet you want to nanny?”

“Sorry, I thought you got my CV.”

She smiles and shrugs. “I prefer to hear things from the person I’m hiring, not a piece of paper. People tell you more.”

“Oh.” *Great, spent all that time making a CV for nothing.* “Well, I am a chef—*was* a chef.”

“You’re kidding! That’s amazing. My husband comes from a long line of vigneronns in France, and we are going to visit his family’s vineyard for a month and half soon, which is why we need a nanny.”

“To go with you to France?”

She shakes her head. “The kids have school, and I’m not about to pull them out of Billingsley for that long, but I can’t not go, because my husband’s family is having several major events over that time.”

“That makes sense.” I can’t help but enjoy her energy about food. Anyone who enjoys food as much as I do is alright in my book.

Until we order.

Then she asks a bunch of questions of the server, dictates the temperatures of her foods, and all the other things that kitchen staff has

nightmares about. The kicker is when she says she has a wheat allergy, but then brushes aside the server's advice regarding a bechamel for her filet. He rightly points out that it's wheat flour based, but she doesn't care. "It's fine, thank you."

My inner critic is rolling my eyes, but outwardly, I just order my salad and plain pasta. The server is clearly relieved by my simple request and leaves quickly.

"This is the best restaurant in town, and that's what you order?" Abigail asks.

"Doing what I do, it's hard not to be picky about restaurants, no matter their reputation. If they do the simple stuff well, then it's striking. If they can't manage the simple stuff, then I'm glad I didn't try to get a job here."

She smiles knowingly. "I think it was Anthony Bourdain who said it best—that if a restaurant cannot do a cheese omelet right, then there's no point in trying anything else on the menu."

I grin at the mention. "I loved him. He was a huge inspiration for me and most of the people I've worked with."

"I have seen every episode of No Reservations."

"Me too!" I say with a laugh. It's weird that someone with such poor ordering manners likes his work, but people come in all types, I guess. "So, the kids—"

"Franny and Aiden. They're twins, five years old. Have you worked with kids before?"

"No one that young." The only kids I've worked with were college kids, but if she's not going to ask, I'm not telling.

"But you've nannied before?"

"No. I might be wrong about this, but I think a lifetime in the hospitality industry has prepared me for it, though."

"A lifetime?"

"My parents own a B&B here in Somerset Harbor, and I was raised there. Then I went to culinary school, and had my own restaurant for a few years, before it burned down. A freak electrical issue. I came back, and now, I'm here."

Her confusion lines her forehead. "I would think you'd be eager to return to restaurant life."

"I poured myself into my business, and it's just too soon for me to go back to a kitchen yet."

“What was the atmosphere in your kitchen like? Calm and organized, or chaotic and messy?”

I smile and sit back. “It’s hard to say. Everything was organized, but when you’re turning and burning, things get chaotic. That said, the trick for me was to find the calm in the chaos. To maintain my demeanor, no matter what happened around me. That’s how you earn every ‘Yes, chef!’ from your staff. They have to know you have it all under control, especially when they don’t.”

“You’re hired.”

“What?”

She laughs. “That is exactly what my kids need. They are ruthless engines of chaos, and they need someone who can handle that. If you want the job, it’s yours.”

“Don’t I need to meet your husband or something?”

“Olivier is happy if I’m happy, and their father is too busy with work to be here tonight, but he trusts my judgment.”

I smile. “Okay. This sounds great.” I hope.

Lily

“I have a surprise for you,” Mom says.

I sigh. “Mom, you know I hate surprises. Ever since the fire, I can’t—

“You can take this one. I promise.” She passes me a small black box.
“Open it.”

“You can’t afford—

“Open. It.”

I huff and open the box. Inside sits a thin silver chain with a chef’s knife pendant. A laugh escapes me, before I tear into the backing and she helps me put it on. “What made you do this?”

She smiles. “I know you’ve been feeling disconnected from yourself, and taking this new job as a nanny, I worried you’d feel that way even more. No matter what comes along, Lily, you’re the best chef I’ve ever known, and one day, other people will know that, too.”

I can’t help it when tears make her wobble in my vision. “Thanks, Mom.” I hug her tight.

She squeezes back before she says, “Off with you. Aren’t you running late to meet their father?”

“Ugh. Don’t remind me.”

“I thought you’d be eager to meet him.”

“I like the mom. Mostly. And she divorced him for a reason.”

Mom nods knowingly. “And you’re worried he’ll bad mouth her to you?”

“I’m just hoping everything is as amicable as everyone says it is.”

“Only one way to find out.”

I shrug and head out. The directions to his office are simple enough, and

it's not like Somerset Harbor is very big, so I have no chance of getting lost. But something about meeting the kids' father doesn't sit well with me. Maybe it's because Abigail won't be there to defend herself. Whatever it is, I'm not looking forward to hearing some middle-aged dude whine about his ex-wife and bitch about child support.

On the way to his office, I practice some self-talk that I think could help. "It's just a gig. Not a career. Don't take it too seriously. Calm down."

Maybe that's the real core of the problem. Mom is right to worry that I could feel lost by taking this job. As much as I'm not ready to be in a kitchen again, I'm also not looking forward to a swerve in my career.

Turning onto Main, I get a text. "Apologies. I must cancel our meeting. Something came up at work. Instead, meet me at 3:30 at Billingsley Academy? I can meet you and put you onto the pick-up list for the kids at the same time. We will head to the house after so I can show you around."

I slam on the brakes and bark curses, making the person behind me probably do the same thing to avoid hitting me. "Sorry," I wave them off and pull into a slanted parking space in front of a tiny furniture boutique downtown. Re-reading the text half a dozen times, I'm still just as irritated as the first.

This guy thinks nothing of putting me out like this. These are the people I'll be working for. Super.

Part of me wants to tell him to forget it all. But if I do that, it'll look bad on Aria, since she went to bat for me on this. At Billingsley, reputation is everything. Hell, the same is true of Somerset Harbor. I can't do that to my friend. More than that, if I were to reopen my restaurant in Manhattan, for the first few months, I still wouldn't be making this kind of money.

Even though I have a feeling this indicates the treatment I'll be receiving while I nanny for them, I text him agreeably. Then I toss my phone a little too hard at the passenger seat.

The good news is, the dad won't be around much. Since he works all the time, my on-the-clock time will be with the kids. The bad news is, I have three hours to kill because their dad is an inconsiderate ass.

Looking up and down Main Street, I settle on a walk to cool down. In my lifetime, the furniture boutique has been a bookstore, a birdwatching store, a flower shop, and a kitsch store selling those welcome mats with inspirational messages like, "Live, Laugh, Leave."

The furniture inside is gorgeous hand-carved stuff at high prices, and the

man behind the counter is a sexy lumberjack type. When he asks if he can help me, to make it clear I am not interested, I ask, “Any idea where I can get ice cream around here?”

“You came here looking for ice cream?”

“Nope. Just lost. Haven’t been around in a while.”

“Four doors down, Beans and Things.”

“I thought that was just coffee.”

He shrugs. “They sell all kinds of things there. Get the pistachio. It’s the best.”

“Thanks for the tip.” The sidewalk is blisteringly hot, but periodic trees give enough shade that the walk isn’t entirely unpleasant. The sea breeze helps with that, too. It wasn’t terrible to grow up in a seaside town, not even one as hoity toity as Somerset Harbor. But it always felt like things were temporary.

With so many people coming and going, either to the city or the nearby suburbs, nothing ever feels permanent. Or secure. Like life is so ephemeral... *maybe that is just the depression talking.*

I huff at myself and order a scoop of pistachio. It’s never been my favorite, but the lumberjack made it sound good. The ice cream isn’t neon green like so many. It’s a muted olive color instead. I take the cup out to a sidewalk table and dig in. The way the ice cream hits the palate, firm, but then giving way to a nutty, full-bodied yet delicate approach to the nut is a revelation. I did not know pistachio could be this good. After eating it so fast I get a brain freeze, I march back in. “What’s the deal with the pistachio? How is it this good?”

The woman at the counter giggles. “My grandfather’s recipe. He’s from Italy, and he insists pistachio doesn’t need much. Grind the nuts into a nut butter and work from there instead of adding any dairy products.”

“Your grandfather is a genius. When I reopen my restaurant, I’m going to buy this recipe.”

She smiles. “I’ll be happy to sell it.”

“And I need more, please.” After procuring my second scoop on a cone, I stroll down Main, checking out all the other changes since I was there last. A few shops I know—Deringer’s Drugstore and Alicia’s Health Foods. So much has changed, but the facades stay the same by city law, so the downtown area looks like it never changes. Old-time familiarity amid new businesses to keep things feeling a certain way.

It's a strange kind of comfort while I try to keep myself from being annoyed by my new boss.

But by the time three rolls around, I'm still bothered by the whole thing. Thankfully, I've found a new dessert, so as far as productivity goes, I'm trying to count the day as a win. I have to keep pushing forward with the idea of a new restaurant, or I'll go insane. Definitely not anytime soon, but still.

While trying to sort the logistics of a future fireproof restaurant that I might own, I drive to Billingsley Academy. Parents are lining up for the pickup, and now I get to be one of them. Though I probably shouldn't assume everyone else is a parent. Just as I start to wonder who is a nanny and who is a parent, I watch the teacher extend her hand with the iPad so that the parents can scan their phones at pickup.

Aria waves to me from behind a thick oak tree near the swings. I wait for her to walk over, since I can't enter the gated property. "Ready to meet him?" She smiles at me.

I nod. She points behind me and I watch as a man walks up to us, his head buried in his phone.

Aria says, "This is Lily."

He looks up, and the world stops spinning entirely as I fight my mouth dropping open as the scent of the sea washes over me.

It's Cormac. My one-night stand is my new boss.

Cormac

The messy brunette bun isn't messy anymore. Not a hair out of place. Nothing like the last time I saw it. Her clothes aren't those baggy things. Today, they're decent enough slacks and a casual blue blouse.

But that haunting smile is there. And the raspberries.

I had tried so hard to find her. But finding her at my kids' school seems so wrong. Of all the luck...*this is not what I had in mind when I told Abigail to find a nanny. I should just back out now.*

But I never back out of anything.

They say in cases of extreme danger, your life flashes before your eyes. So why am I only flashing to the night we spent together? Her crooked smirk. Those dancing green eyes. The way she cried out when she came on my—

Stop it. Stop it right now. This is hardly the time or place.

Lily thrusts her hand out to me. "It's nice to meet you...?"

She's acting as though we've never met. I can do that. We can pretend nothing has happened and never speak of it. That's probably best for everyone. But as our hands touch, electricity jolts up my arm. The chemistry we had is still palpable, even now, under these strange circumstances. "I'm—

"Are you Lily?" Aiden asks as he joins us. He has his mother's sandy brown hair and her sense of timing.

"I am," she says firmly, with a smile.

I tell her, "This is Aiden, and the girl about to join us is Franny."

Lily nods, still smiling as she watches my daughter approach. "Twins, right?"

"Yes."

Franny runs to Aiden. She has my hair and my sense of annoyance over trivial matters. “You were gonna wait for me!”

He shrugs. “You took too long.”

“Going to,” I correct her.

She huffs up at me. “He was *going to* wait for me.”

He ignores the complaint, instead looking at Lily with a gleam in his eye. “Do you play video games?”

Lily says, “I do, but I only play them with very special people. Would you two happen to be Aiden and Franny?”

Franny grins with a tooth missing. “Yes, ma’am.”

Lily squats down at eye level with them. “Then, if this guy allows it,” she points with her thumb over her shoulder at me, “I think there could be some video games in our future.”

Franny says, “Mom told us you are a chef. What do you like to cook?”

“I cook an array of cuisines, from mac and cheese to chicken nuggets.”

Aiden sighs. “I’m allergic to wheat. I can’t have any of that.”

But Lily winks. “I know how to make all of that without wheat.”

“Really?” he asks excitedly.

“Mm, hmm. And I like to experiment with vegetables—

“Ew,” Franny gripes.

I explain, “Franny is strictly into meatballs.”

But Lily giggles with her. “I promise I can make veggies taste good. Do you like beets or carrots?”

“Neither!”

“Cabbage or Kale?”

“I have a friend named Kale,” she says curiously, bunching her little eyebrows together.

“No, silly, I mean the vegetable.”

“There’s a vegetable named for my friend?”

“There is.” Lily smirks. “I have a whole world of vegetables I can show you. Trust me, when I get through with you, you’ll love them.”

But my daughter is skeptical of her. “Mom says the same thing, but I never do. Then she sneaks them into my food, and I don’t like that.”

“Vegetables should be front and center on your plate. I promise not to sneak them into your food. When I give you vegetables, I want you to know what you’re eating, so you know what you like.”

Franny smiles. “Okay.”

They share a smile between them before Aiden grabs her hand. “I know a cool rock. Come on.”

“No, we should show her the tree where Kale peed.”

Their teacher, Aria, whines, “Again?”

We leave the gated playground area and head toward another green space right in front of the parking lot. My kids lead her into the area they call the forest, despite only a few trees in the meadow, and I’m left beside myself. This is what happens when I can’t make time for my children. Instead of ensuring that the woman I spent a tawdry night with in a hotel is not their nanny, I had to spend it coddling a billionaire baby man. Now, I get to spend six awkward weeks trying to be a professional at work and at home. Certainly can’t be a cliché and sleep with the nanny. Not that she seems to realize who I am to her.

Maybe she doesn’t recognize me. She did not appear that drunk.

Aria had asked, “Do you want me to add her to the pick-up roster?”

This made it official. I’ll be working alongside my one-night stand if I say yes. If I had said no, then we have to start the process all over again, and I don’t think any of us can take that. Neither of those is a good reason to hire someone to take care of my kids, though.

It’s the way she is effortless with them, like she’s been waiting to meet them forever. The other nannies acted as though it put them out to learn how to cook for Aiden’s needs, and all of them tried to force vegetables onto Franny instead of coaxing her into them. Sure, there’s more to it than cooking, but that’s been a huge point of contention for the others.

Franny takes Lily’s other hand and leads her behind a tree. All I can see is Lily laughing along with my kids, and it’s heartwarming. Every other nanny had a different approach on our first meeting. Strict, avoidant, aloof, petrified, or trying to kiss my ass. Lily is the first to show an interest in *them* over me. I can’t turn that down.

I nod and tell Aria, “Yes, please.”

“Will do.”

When they return, Lily looks at me as though I’m a stranger. The kids ramble a mile a minute about their adventure to the tree and the cool rock, but I can hardly hear it over the blood rushing to my ears. It shouldn’t be this way. I shouldn’t have her around. This is dangerous. But as long as we’re playing at strangers, I should go along with it. Once there’s a break in the pair’s ramble, I thrust my hand out. “Cormac,” I blurt. We weren’t supposed

to know last names, but that seems inevitable now. “Cormac MacMillan.”

She chuckles and shakes my hand again. “Right. We were interrupted. Lily Olson.”

That’s a cute name. Like something out of an old comic book. “Nice to officially meet you.”

“Likewise.”

“I assume you don’t have any carseats, right?”

“No, I’m afraid not. I can pick some up, if—

“No, I have extra ones from the last nanny and can show you how to put them in.”

“Sounds good.” When the kids run off again, Lily asks, “It’s none of my business, but I’m a curious person. If you don’t mind, why did the last nanny leave?”

Do not tell her the kids scared a nun. “It was just a temporary thing for her. Career nannies are hard to find.”

“Oh.”

“How much did Abigail tell you about Franny and Aiden?”

“They’re five. Twins. A bit rambunctious.”

I chuckle. “All true. You should know they are high energy and, like you, are curious.”

“Which gets them into trouble?” she asks.

“What makes you say that?”

“When I was their age, I was definitely trouble,” she says with a laugh.

You’ve been trouble of a sort your whole life, haven’t you? I smile, trying to banish that thought. “Rambunctious is the pleasant word Abigail likes for it. High-spirited is what my mother calls it. I prefer *chaotic*.”

“The teachers here say that they aren’t that bad but I think they have more patience than normal people. Whatever the case, I’m just glad we’ll have someone around who can handle a bit of anarchy. I presume since you are a chef, that’s a specialty for you.”

She smiles, and her eyes flicker with mischief. “If I couldn’t handle a rough go now and then, I never would have made it into a kitchen.”

I don’t doubt it.

Lily

As if I hadn't been nervous already, my new boss was my one-night stand. The coincidence is brutal. But at the school, he acted like we were strangers. *He has to know it's me. Doesn't he?*

But there was no telling glance, no lingering expression of, "Oh shit." Only the cool gaze of a man in total control. The way he was that night.

Driving behind his Tesla X in my mom's 2015 Honda Civic, I can't help but wonder if Friday was just another night to him. If I'm one of the many faceless women he's banged and forgotten. Maybe that's why he and Abigail divorced. Maybe he can't keep it in his pants. How can I work for someone like that? Worse yet—will he bring women home around the kids, and subsequently, me?

I smack the steering wheel to the beat of the drum of the pop song on the radio, but it's just to spend my nervous energy. I'd tried to go with my tried-and-true meal planning, but I couldn't. For that matter, I don't even know what I said to the kids to get them to like me. I was just rambling, but they seemed to like it, so thank my lucky stars for that.

With Cormac, though...oh god, will he want me to wear a uniform? Or call him Mr. Macmillan? If he does that, I can't work for him. I draw the line there. I'm not addressing anyone I slept with that way, no matter how much I need the money.

Ugh, I'm spinning out. I have to stop. Deep breaths. Lots of deep breaths. Just have to breathe. It'll all be okay. Alright, not that many deep breaths, or you'll pass out and ram his car.

I am just going to his house to get the lay of the land and...terrible choice

of words. I'll check it out, and get a feel for...wow, there is no good way to think about this. Shaking my head at myself, I think back to his text. "...We will head to the house after so I can show you around." Nothing awkward or forward about that. More of a casual command, really.

Sort of like Cormac.

He's not the kind of guy to make demands. He's the guy who makes you want to do what he says. The way he worded his text. The way he manhandled me. It's not about what you want—it's about *what he needs*. And not in a bad way. He's the guy who is used to getting what he wants. Even when he had walked into the bar that night, he was friendly, but his presence put the bartender on notice.

Cormac just has that way about himself.

And now, he's my boss.

He slows and turns down what I had always thought was an unmarked street, but is, apparently, his driveway. Long enough to be a street, though. It winds around some trees until they part and reveal his mansion.

Holy crap, this thing is huge.

I snort a laugh at myself, remembering our one-night stand and when I'd thought the same thing. The mansion is one of those boxy, modern affairs with horizontal wood paneling and cement, all it squares. The windows are tall, running from floor to ceiling. The hedges match, all right angles and harsh. He parks out front, and the kids run inside with their backpacks. But he stands by his car, waiting for me.

Shit. Are we going to talk about it?

I park next to him and grab my purse, trying not to freak out. It's fine, Lily. We are two grown-ups in a funny situation. Nothing more than that. Take charge of the conversation, so he can't make it weird. One last deep breath and I get out. "I—

"Thought I should warn you about something before we go in."

"You have a dozen women chained in the basement?"

He frowns, confused. "What?"

"It's a joke."

"How'd you know?"

My stomach flips.

He smirks. "It's a joke."

I snort a laugh. "You're quick."

"Yeah, you too." His smirk blows up into a full smile, and I see the man I

slept with. I try not to think about that.

“No, I just wanted to let you know, my place is not normally quite so messy. But with the kids around, it’s gotten out of control. I have a housekeeper who comes three times a week, Penny, but even she can’t keep up with them.”

“I don’t mind picking up after them,” I say with a shrug.

“You shouldn’t have to, but if you lend a hand now and then, I’d be grateful. Ready?”

“Sure.” Okay, so we are not talking about it. Cool. Following behind Cormac, I’m distracted again.

He’s in a crisp white button down, sleeves rolled up his thick forearms, and his navy trousers cling just right as we climb the stairs. Why is his butt so cute? “Hell of a view, right?”

A half-laugh pops out of me. “Huh?”

But he points ahead. “It’s like ninety percent of why I chose this property.”

And then I see it. The ocean is right there, over the hill. “Oh wow. Yeah, I get it.”

He holds the door open for me. “Welcome to my house.”

Walking through, I’m underwhelmed and overwhelmed at the same time. It’s stunning—the inside took its cues from the outside, all modern and angular. But everything is a shade of gray, and there are far more than fifty. From the floor to the furniture to the ceiling, gray and muted. The windows are the feature, since they show either the ocean or the wooded yard out front. But the living room is shockingly lifeless. Not even a neglected houseplant. This is a single dude’s house, if ever there was one.

“Where’s the mess you spoke of?”

“Right there,” he says, gesturing to the coloring book and crayons next to it on a coffee table. “Plus, their rooms are a horror.”

“Oh.” His standards of cleanliness differ wildly from my own, and now I’m regretting skipping my last bikini wax in the city before our one-night stand. If this is messy, what the hell did he think of me? “Okay.”

“I—

“Lily!” Franny comes running out, still in her uniform. “I wanna show you my room!”

“Want to,” Cormac corrects her.

“I *want to* show you my room!” She holds out her hand for me.

“You got it, kid.”

So, I take her hand, and we run to her bedroom. There, I finally see some color. In fact, all the colors. It’s like a rainbow threw up in there. Angled stripes on the walls, a pink and orange bed, green carpet, and blue breezy curtains, Franny’s room is a riot of colors. She has a dollhouse in the corner that’s almost as tall as I am, and she’s colored over it with crayons a hundred times. Her drawings cover the walls in cats and fairies. I think they’re fairies. They could also be dragonflies.

“Are you an artist, Franny?”

“I am!”

“What’s your favorite thing to draw?”

Her gap-toothed grin kills me. “I like cats, but they don’t hold still to draw them right. Neither do gone flies.”

“You mean dragonflies?”

“That’s what I said,” she says as she pulls one of her drawings off the walls. “See? They’re always blurry when I try to get them to hold still and draw them.”

I nod. “That’s a predicament.”

“What’s that?”

“A conundrum.”

She wrinkles her little nose at me. “You talk funny.”

“Thanks!”

She giggles, and Aiden walks in. Her face drops. “You’re supposed to knock.”

“Sorry, Franny. Lily, can I show you my room?”

“Do you mind?” I ask her.

“No. But his room isn’t as fun as mine.”

“Thank you for managing my expectations. Lead the way, Aiden.” His room, as it turns out, is next door and decked out in Spiderman merch, top to bottom. “Wow. This is a lot of Spiderman.”

He nods happily. “He’s my favorite.”

“Looks like it!”

“Do you like Spiderman?”

“Peter Parker is great, but I also like Miles Morales.”

That gets me an enthusiastic grin. “It’s hard to find Miles’ stuff, but I try. Do you like trampolines?”

“Sure,” I say with a shrug, having never been on one.

“Come on!” He leads me to the backyard, where a trampoline, jungle gym, and swimming pool take up most of the otherwise empty backyard. He runs and jumps onto the trampoline, causing my heart rate to spike. “It’s like being Spiderman!”

“Are you supposed to be on that without your dad around?”

But then Franny dashes right past me and joins him. “Come on, Lily!”

“They got you, huh?” Cormac says as he walks out of the side door.

“Is it okay for them—

“Oh yeah. Everything is padded and safe, and that netting around it could hold back a pit bull, so they’re not going to tear through. Perfectly safe, and it helps them get their energy out.”

“Lily, come jump with us!” Aiden insists.

“Safe enough for adults?”

Cormac laughs. “Go for it. But shoes off.”

I kick off my shoes and run onto the trampoline. It’s more fun than I’d expected, but seconds later, the kids want to go swimming.

“Please, Lily,” Franny begs.

“I don’t have a swimsuit with me. But I promise to bring one tomorrow.”

“Fine,” she sulks.

Cormac says, “How about you two go swimming while I order some dinner or takeout?”

“I want Thai food!” Aiden declares.

“You got it.”

“Yay!” they shout together and run to get their swimsuits on.

It’s the right moment to bring up the awkwardness between us, but something else bugs me. “Why don’t I make dinner?”

He chuckles. “I didn’t want to trouble you with that on your first night.”

“The kitchen is my happy place. I’ll check out what you’ve got and whip something up. If you don’t mind watching the kids while I do it.”

“Not at all. It’d be nice to have a home-cooked meal.”

So, we trade jobs sort of, and he watches them while I scrape through the slim pickings of his kitchen. Thankfully, there’s enough to make veggie pad Thai with eggs, and when I bring it out to the pool area, the kids dig in. Aiden says, “It’s so good!”

“I even like the vegetables,” Franny mumbles around a carrot.

Cormac lets out a shocked laugh. “This was in *my* kitchen?”

“Yes. I think the last person who did your shopping realized rice noodles

are safe for Aiden, because you have quite a good stash of them.”

Seeing his kids chow down on the meal, he quietly says, “Well done, Lily. Well done.”

“I figured since Aiden wanted Thai food—

Cormac laughs, cutting me off. He leans close enough for me to smell his cologne again. “That’s what he calls all Asian food. It’s usually the most gluten friendly, so that’s usually what we order. But he doesn’t know Thai from Chinese just yet.”

“Maybe I can work on that with him.”

“I think he’d like that.”

We dig in too, and there’s an uneasy thing between us as the kids leave the patio table to jump back into the water. I’m not sure how to bring it up, and I know they can’t hear me in there among the splashes. But I can’t do it. Breeching the topic feels odd and wrong and what if he doesn’t remember me?

It’s too fraught with expectations and insecurities. Maybe it’s just best to never say a word. Or maybe he can bring it up. Why should I have to do all the work?

Oh right. Because I work for him.

-

Cormac

Night falls, and after making sure they've done their homework, it's time for their bedtime routine, now with Lily. "You have to make sure Franny brushes her teeth. She won't do it if you don't stay on top of her. I'm also trying to get them to wash their faces, but I'll be happy if it's just brushing their teeth. Aiden is better about it than she is."

"Got it."

We're standing outside their bathroom, and I'm listening for the splattering toothbrush sounds, but I hear none. When the door opens, I start in on Franny, "Did you—

"Did you brush your teeth?"

Franny's lips purse. "Sort of."

"Do you know what happens if you don't?"

"Dad says they rot. But I think that would be kinda neat."

Lily laughs. "I seem to recall you enjoying the carrots in the pad Thai I made tonight. Did you?"

"Yeah, those were way better than Mom's carrots. Hers are too mushy."

"Well," Lily says, squatting to her level. "If you want to only eat mushy carrots, then you don't need to brush your teeth. You don't need strong teeth for those."

"But they're gross," she says with a frown.

"The thing about *my* carrots is, you need hard, healthy teeth to eat them. So it seems to me that you should brush your teeth, if you want me to make carrots like that again."

She huffs. "Will you make them every day?"

“How about every week?”

We get a sullen, “Okay,” before she trundles back into the bathroom. Seconds later, the splattering toothbrushing commences.

“That was brilliant. How’d you know about Abigail’s carrots?”

Lily smirks. “She ordered them that way when we went to the yacht club for dinner.”

“Ah.”

“I find that most of the time when someone doesn’t like a food, it’s because they’ve never had it cooked the right way, and I suspect that’s Franny’s issue with vegetables.”

“My ex-wife does a lot of things right, but food is not one of them. A big fan of boiling everything.”

“English parents?”

I chuckle. “Irish.”

Lily nods. “Not to knock on boiling, but there’s a right way and a wrong way to do everything.”

“I don’t think boiling food for hours is the right way, but it *is* the Abigail way.”

“Oof.”

The kids come out of the bathroom, scrubbed, brushed, and ready for story time.

“Okay, who wants Lily to read them a story?”

Both of them shout, “Me!”

“No one wants a story from Dad?”

They share a worried look, and Franny caves, “You can read to us, too.”

Lily bites her tongue, but she’s clearly laughing on the inside behind them.

“Okay then, I’ll take my consolation prize, I guess,” I say it fussily, but honestly, I’m glad they’re so enamored of her already.

She reads to Franny while I read to Aiden, and then we switch. When I ask her which book to read, Franny says, “Not *The Three Little Bears*. Not unless you’ll do the voices Lily does.”

“She does voices?”

“Uh, huh. And she’s good at them, Dad.”

“Well, I don’t want that kind of competition.” I grab *The Cat in the Hat*, and get halfway through before I hear her little snores and close the book. Tucking them in is my favorite part of the night, and I wouldn’t trade it for

the world. Closing her door, I nearly bump into Lily in the hall. “Is he asleep?”

“Almost.”

I go in, and Aiden is mid-yawn. “How’d it go with Lily?”

“Can we keep her?”

“For a little while, remember?” I tuck the blankets in around him. “Just will Mom is in France.”

“Right. Okay. Well, I want her to stay forever.”

I kiss his forehead. “Understandably. Goodnight, slugger.”

“Goodnight, Dad.” I turn out the light, which switches on his Spiderman nightlight, and though I hope he doesn’t bring it to college, I understand if he wants to. He’s always had a thing about the dark.

Lily is still in the hallway when I close his door. She obviously has something on her mind, and I hope it’s the thing that’s been on my mind all afternoon. “Glass of wine?”

“That’d be nice.”

We go to the kitchen, which she had cleaned before she even delivered dinner to us by the pool, and I get a bottle from the fridge. “It’s nothing fancy —

“Perfect.”

I pour, we clink our glasses, and the silence sits heavy in the air. I’m not sure how to start. After a beat, I tell her, “Do you—

“I think we should talk, Cormac.”

“Agreed. But I’d prefer to be sitting for this. It’s been a long day. Couch?”

“Sure.”

I take the bottle with us into the living room, because this could be a big conversation and I want to be prepared. Setting it on the long coffee table, I tell her, “Okay. What would you like to talk about?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“I like your necklace.”

She chuckles. “Thanks, but not about that.”

“Well, the kids like you already—

She chuckles and drinks half her glass. “Not the kids. And for the record, they’re great. I’m not just saying that because it’s my job. I mean it, Cormac. They are a lot of fun.”

“Not too energetic for you?”

“Oh, they’ll give me a workout for sure, but I like that about them. Honestly, I’d been kind of judgy about Billingsley and the kinds of people who send their kids there. I wasn’t sure if they got to have a childhood. It’s good to know I was wrong about that.”

“Some kids don’t, I can assure you. I heard one parent makes their kids swim laps for an hour for every half hour of TV they watch. I’m not a fan of screen time, but that’s crazy. I make sure Aiden and Franny have a good childhood. They deserve to have the best childhood I can give them.”

She nods, smiling. “They really do.” But then her smile fades, and her eyes brim with thoughts. “We should probably talk about the situation. I totally understand if you don’t want me to work for you.”

“No, the kids like you already. Why wouldn’t I not want you to stay?”

“Because...of our night together...”

“Ah. That.” What do I say? Maybe just let her declare what she wants and go from there, because legally, this could get sticky fast. This is a delicate situation.

She worries her bottom lip, then says, “Like I said, the kids are great, and I could really use the job. But I don’t want things to be weird, either. That’s not good for anyone, especially them.”

“I agree.”

“So, I was thinking that as long as we keep thing professional between us, then there shouldn’t be any issues. You can be my employer, I’ll be your employee, and we won’t cross any lines. Right?”

That stings for some reason. *But what did I want her to say? Please take me to bed right now?* I finish my wine and pour another. “We are two mature adults. I don’t see any reason we cannot conduct ourselves as such.” But it feels like I’m lying to her. “I don’t know you in any real capacity, Lily, but I’m going to assume things in your former profession were apt to fall along these lines. Given what I’ve seen of kitchen culture in the media, I don’t think I’m too far off, right?”

She chuckles. “If by that you mean people in kitchens hook up a lot, yeah. A lot. All the time, in fact. I once caught a busser and a dishwasher trying to do it in the walk-in.”

I laugh. “Trying to?”

“He couldn’t stay hard because it was too cold.” She snickers. “So, yes, I am very familiar with how this goes.”

“Old hat, for you then. Good. I am not accustomed to such things, so if I

overstep in any way, I ask that you let me know. I will try to keep things as professional as possible, understand, but if I behave too familiarly or in any way that makes you less than comfortable here, please tell me and know that I never intend to be anything less than professional with you.” *Yep. That’s a lie. Is it?*

She breathes a sigh of relief. “I’m glad we got that out of the way. I wasn’t sure how to bring it up before, and with the kids around, it never felt like quite the right moment—

“Trust me, I understand. I had thought to bring it up, but they are little sponges, and even if we spoke in code, I imagined they would somehow tell their mother what they heard and she would crack it.”

“So, you didn’t tell Abigail?”

I nearly huff a laugh into my wine. “Uh no. I’d like to keep this between you and me, if that’s alright with you.”

“I’m not sure,” she admits. “Do you think she should know?”

“I cannot imagine why.”

“She’s their mom, I’m their nanny. I don’t know. I’m not great with secrets.”

“You’re honest to a fault. That’s good, most of the time. But I don’t think it will do you any favors in this department. Abigail has a lot on her plate at the moment with her big overseas trip and that would only add stress, when there’s no need.”

“That makes sense.” She takes a breath. “I won’t tell. It’s not really anyone else’s business, anyway. I just wasn’t sure about how things are with the two of you.”

“We’re good, now that we’re divorced. Better at co-parenting than being married to each other, I’m afraid. We adore our kids and our friendship.”

She smiles, and something in my chest beats anew. “That’s nice to hear.”

“Worried I’d be some embittered ex-husband?”

“Well, you never know.”

I smile. “True. For instance, I never knew I had the ingredients on hand to make pad Thai.”

She laughs and I want to make her do that again. “You never know what lurks around the corner.”

Or in my mind. Unfortunately, that’s where all those naughty thoughts will have to stay. As I watch her sip her wine, her necklace catches my eye. I want to taste her soft skin there. I should have memorized her body better

when I had the chance. What might have been...

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Cormac

Driving out to the construction site of the new resort is not a hassle, but it feels like one. Not only because I am the oldest brother and I shouldn't have to go out of my way to meet with Beau—although I shouldn't have to and he should come to see me—but it is a hassle because it takes me away from sulking in my office about Lily.

When I park next to a few beat up white pickup trucks, I take a moment to collect my thoughts. I know what's coming. He's going to tell me to drum up more investors for some new addition he wants for the resort. As though I'm not already busy with those we have. I'm the CFO, but he's the COO, so it's my job to find the money he wants to spend. Sometimes, though, I have to rein him in, and he's always a little bitch about it.

The construction site is bustling with workers who are getting the site ready. We are in the earliest stages of site preparation, the earthworks. This is the groundwork upon which everything else will be built.

Most of them know me. Coming out here as often as I do, I'm friendly enough with them and know a few by name. The project of building a luxury resort takes time, and this conversation happens at least once a week, so I've had many opportunities to get to know the crews.

“Hey, Chuck.”

The crew chief tips his head up for a moment before diving onto his sub sandwich lunch.

“Beau around?”

“White trailer.”

I nod and make my way over to it. Earthworks primarily focus is on

modifying the natural terrain and manipulating the soil and rock materials to achieve the desired shape, contour, and stability of the construction site. We have already removed the vegetation and the topsoil and completed most of the excavation and are about to move onto the grading of the land.

There's a complex of trailers for the men to have offices on-site, but Beau likes to be more hands-on usually, so I often find him chatting alongside the crews and not in the offices. Knowing my brother the way I do, I knock first.

"Come in."

A blast of ice cold air hits me as I walk into the trailer office. No woman in sight, so at least he's in the office alone. On the inside, this place is like any other trailer. Flat brown carpeting, a cheap desk and a hall that I presume leads to a bathroom. Nothing fancy. Nothing like the resort that will stand here soon. "Hiding from your crews?"

Beau rolls his eyes and snorts a laugh, as he looks at a blueprint. "Got the feeling I'm underfoot today."

He has the same dark brown hair as I do, but Mom's eyes. I hate him for it—hazel eyes are better than blue. They have a green hue to them that I've always envied. He's half an inch taller than me, but I have bigger shoulders, which makes me feel better about it. Petty? Yes. But we're brothers. If we're not petty with each other, then who can we be petty with?

"They're pretty busy out there." I sit in the guest chair in front of his desk. It creaks. "You know you can get better furniture in here—"

"I like the crappy stuff. Keeps me motivated to stay on top of them. Look at this." He points to a fountain. "I think it should be bigger, don't you? Something more Bellagio, less public library. What do you think?"

It's a trick question. If I disagree with him in any way, it's an argument. If I agree with him, he'll say it maybe it should be even bigger because I rolled over too easily. "What's actually on your mind, Beau?"

"The fountain."

"You made me come out here for a fountain?"

He smirks. "You're too smart for me, Cormac. Always have been."

"Skipping past the denials and going straight to flattery? That can't be good. How expensive is the upgrade you want, Beau?"

"It's not that expensive—"

"How much?"

He pauses, looking everywhere but my eyes. Shrugging, he says, "Only another eight mm..." His mumbles are inaudible.

“Louder.”

“Eight million.”

I laugh.

“Hear me out—

“You’re already ten over budget!”

“If we are going to make our resort a destination, we have to spend. You know that!”

I sit back. If I don’t hear him out, I’ll never hear the end of it. “Tell me about this eight million dollar upgrade. I am dying to know all about it.”

“I’m thinking about this as an investment in our future—

“What upgrade, Beau?”

“If we’re going to be a destination resort, then we have to give people what they want, and research shows what people want is an amazing spa, fabulous dining, and great activities, both for kids and adults. We need to expand the golf course and the spa and dining. Maybe add a wave pool.”

“Wouldn’t that cost more than eight million?”

It is hard not to yell at him. We had settled plans months ago for all of those things, but he sees something shiny on the Travel Channel, and he scraps the plans. “Beau. I—

“That’s your ‘no’ tone.”

“I understand wanting to make things the best they can be, and I am with you on that. But we have to do it responsibly.”

“I am tired of this,” he says, shoving his rolling chair from the desk. “Our family has the money to do all of this without even denting our inheritances. I’m tired of pulling cash from our asses to make this resort happen! It’s bullshit!”

“I know—

“For that matter, we could walk into any bank and walk out with more than the money we need—

“I’m aware.”

He huffs for a beat. “Then why don’t we?”

“The money and relationships you want to leverage aren’t ours. They’re Dad’s. If you recall, we are on our own for this project.”

“Oh yes. Dad’s idiotic test to see if we’re *worthy* of his legacy.” He rolls his eyes. “Like I said. It’s bullshit. I’m tired of his games. We’re not kids anymore. He knows what we’re capable of. I don’t understand why he’s going out of his way to make things more difficult for us. Isn’t that the point

of making a shit ton of money? To make things easier for your kids?”

I laugh. “Are you actually complaining about the lavish lifestyle you live, or was that *not* your Aston Martin parked far away from the worker’s trucks out there, Mr. Man of the People?”

“I like nice things. I don’t apologize for it.”

“My point is, we’ve had things easy our whole lives, Beau. It’s time we get our hands dirty. I see Dad’s point on the matter. I don’t like it, because it makes my life more difficult, but I get it.”

“Seriously? You’re taking his side? Like always?”

Eye rolling is a family trait. “Look, I understand your side of things. He’s treating us like kids who need to learn a lesson, instead of men in their thirties. To a degree, it’s insulting. But I also see his point. Besides, this could be a genuine opportunity for us to build our own relationships instead of always relying on his.”

He huffs again. “It’s annoying.”

“You’re right. But I hesitate to say this—as much as he’s a stubborn old bastard, Dad won’t be around forever. We have to have our own business relationships in place before that happens.”

“Alternatively, we could just live off our inheritances the rest of our lives.”

I chuckle. “Okay, sure, but then what would we leave our kids?”

“The way things are going, I’m never having any, so...” He shrugs.

“You haven’t been single that long. Relax. It’ll happen.”

“Easy for you to say. You’re already divorced.”

Laughing, I shake my head. “Not exactly the outcome one hopes for when they go into a marriage, Beau.”

“Says you,” he teases. “Regardless of all that, what do you think about the upgrades? Can we make them happen?”

“Not with already being this far over budget. I’m sorry. It’s just not doable.”

He gets that look in his eye, and I can feel the push-back in the air. “What if we were to do only *some* of them?”

“**I**t won’t make any sense to do them. People talk about amenities, but studies have shown that the highest ROI for resorts is the rooms. Both guest rooms and meeting rooms. So, if you want to spend, it makes

sense to spend more there. Make more suites out of the existing floorplans. For the meeting rooms, upgrade the lighting, the climate control, the tables, whatever you want there. The expenses will be far lower, and we will get more for it.”

“What about the amenities?”

“Beau,” I smile and shake my head, “you already put together an incredible amenity package for our guests. They will love what you’ve done. You don’t need to worry about what you’ve already accomplished. You did well.”

“Well, I still have to work with an architect to finalize large portions of what we want and I have one particular person in mind,” he says as the worry lines on his face start to fade. That shocks me a little bit. I had not thought he’d fall for that.

“You really think I did a good job?” He asks.

“Of course. What is it you’re so afraid of?”

He jams his elbows onto the desk and holds his forehead in his palms. His voice is ragged. “Everything.”

I pat the back of his head, and he jerks up, grimacing. “Sorry, man, you reminded me of my kids when they’re having a bad day.”

He laughs once. “How are they? I should have asked.”

“Good. Their new nanny is great with them.”

“This one isn’t going to run away?”

“Not so far.” As long as I don’t chase Lily off by trying to sleep with her, things should go just fine. But damn, it’s hard not to. She bent over the counter last night, and I nearly lost my mind. Not that I can tell Beau about any of it.

He nods, smiling. “I’m glad to hear it. Can’t have another one run out on you when we’re neck deep in this shit.”

Which is why I’m not putting the moves on her. “Agreed. And on that note, I am meeting with another investor soon—

“And you didn’t think to mention this until now?”

“I’m not exactly sure how it’ll go. He’s not like the rest of them. He’s skittish and more of a family man.”

“And you’re not?”

I make a face at him. “I am a divorced dad of two, who barely has time for his kids, even though he has them half the time. The investor is an older man who has a huge family with the same woman he’s been with for forty

years. I think he'll be averse to working with a bunch of young men. He's very traditional, and I'm not sure how to woo him."

"The same way you woo anyone. Tell them what they want to hear until you get what you want."

I laugh. "This is why you're single."

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Lily

In the kitchen of my parents' B&B, Dad cooks breakfast the way Dad cooks breakfast. Messily. It's all I can do to keep myself from diving in and taking over, but I can't. I don't want to offend him. So instead, I grab a pastry from the counter basket. It's one of those flaky, delectable things with the cream cheese center that I've loved since I was a kid, and I cannot help myself.

"Those are for the guests," he says with his back to me.

I don't know how he knows, but he always does. "Charge my room."

He snorts a laugh and shakes his head. His graying brown hair is thinner than it used to be, and his shoulders rounder. But he's still the same guy who used to do all the repairs to the B&B himself and give the best piggyback rides. Those shoulders have seen a lot of wear and tear over the years. It's no wonder that they slouch now. "You know, I have it on good authority that you could be making those pastries instead of just eating them and making us buy more from the bakery in town."

"I'm a chef. Not a baker."

He chuckles. "As you have said many, many times. But I still don't understand the difference."

"I cook. Cooking is all about instinct and changing things on the fly, and knowing your ingredients and how the seasons affect every little detail, and you have to taste and experience it all. It's about being in the moment."

He turns a little to frown at me. "And baking?"

"Edible chemistry projects."

He laughs. "How's that?"

"Baking is all about being able to do the same thing repeatedly with the

same ingredients. Bread is this thing that people rely on to be consistent. Same with any other baked good. And you can't really taste as you go along, because eating raw dough is bad for you. *And* your product isn't ready in a few minutes. It's all based on chemistry that you hope you got right, but you won't know for *hours!*" I shudder at the thought. "I mean, there's a lot of science that goes into cooking, too, but it's totally different from baking. Baking is way too much pressure."

He shrugs. "Well, you could make breakfast—

"I can't cook for other people en masse like that, Dad. Not anytime soon." I finger my necklace, thinking about the question.

"It's been some time, Lily. You have to get back on the horse."

"Not long enough."

He sighs.

My thoughts return to the bad wiring that caused the freak fire in the restaurant and ruined my life. Paxton turned out to be less reliable than a ham sandwich—

"I still don't understand how the whole thing with the insurance payments could have happened. What was up with Paxton?"

"He didn't keep up with the insurance payments and it lapsed. Evidently, he had been letting it almost lapse for a couple of years, unbeknownst to me, so when I called them and tried to work something out, they weren't having it."

"That's crap."

Nodding, I nibble more of the pastry for comfort. "I know. It pisses me off, too, but I get it. We weren't a good investment for them." Those words make my pastry taste off. "I don't want to talk about it, if that's okay."

"Well, what now? How is that babysitting job?"

I chuckle. "I'm nannying, Dad."

"Right. How's it going?"

"Really well, weirdly."

"Why weirdly?"

I shake my head. "Never thought I'd be a nanny. Never would have occurred to me to even try it out, had Aria not lined the job up already."

"And you like it? Being with the kids?"

I smile instantly. "I do. They're a little high-strung, but I think it's just because they've had no one to really engage them."

"They have parents—

“Parents who both work. I’m sure if they had a stay-at-home parent, they’d probably be fine. But without someone there for them like that, kids with their kind of energy run amok. So far, they’ve been really great.”

“Your mom says their mom is overseas.”

I nod. “She’s spending time with her new husband’s family at a winery in the Loire Valley. Birthdays, weddings, all kinds of family events are lined up that cannot be rescheduled. That’s why they hired me on such short notice.”

“And the dad? He’s treating you right?”

Oh, I do not need to talk about their dad with my dad. One, he doesn’t need to know that I slept with him, and two, he doesn’t need to know I’m working for the enemy. “He’s great. I think I’m going to finish this in my room before the guests arrive for breakfast.”

“You need proper food to go with your pastry.”

“I’m good, thanks.” I jog over to my room and close the door, before accidentally telling Dad anything he does not need to know. Standing at my dresser and picking at my pastry while thinking, I’m baffled. It’s too confusing. When I’m at Cormac’s place, everything just fits. Me with the kids, me with him. It’s been good, and he hasn’t been anything but professional.

And my god, I wish he would be unprofessional. It doesn’t help that he’s handsome, sophisticated, charming, fun, smart...why the hell am I not jumping on him? *Oh right. The boss thing.*

Besides, I don’t have time for a boyfriend or anything like that. Not even a friends-with-benefits. That would be way too destructive. I like him. Using him like that would not work out. Best we just stay friendly.

I realize the pastry has fallen apart when I notice my fingers are empty and covered with buttery goodness. Pastry bits sit atop my dresser like a light dusting of flakes from heaven. I’d picked it apart while working on my Cormac nerves. I huff, which only spread them out more, and use my hand to scoop them into the wastebasket, hoping not to get ants.

Nope. Better to flush.

After flushing the crumbs away, I stare at myself in the mirror. Maybe the reason Cormac is so professional is he’s sober now, and he’s a horny drunk. Or maybe because he sees me as a matronly type now that I’m taking care of his kids. I huff at the mirror.

Or, possibly, he’s not a jerk who doesn’t take advantage of his employees. It’s not taking advantage if I give him the advantage, though. But I’m the one

who said we should be professionals.

In all fairness to Past Lily, she was trying to be good and mature and boring and why did I listen to her?

I flop onto my back and stare at the ceiling. Doesn't matter now. It's too late to turn back the clock. Cormac is off-limits. He needs a nanny. Not a fling, and flings are all I am capable of at the moment. Or ever.

I've never been good at the whole dating thing. It was one of the many benefits of being a chef. No need to worry about dating when you're working eighty or more-hour weeks. There are few men who will date a woman who works that much. Or at least, I never found them. Not that I looked much.

Over the years, I'd had a few guys who would have called themselves my boyfriend. But the feelings never worked out for me. They cared more than I did, and eventually, I called it quits on each of them, except for Murphy. He bailed on me, saying I was cheating on him.

I never cheated on him, and when I told him that, he said the restaurant was my other boyfriend. I couldn't argue with that. He was unequivocally correct there. And maybe that is the real reason I cannot fathom going back into the kitchen yet. I lost my love. I can't date again this soon.

So flings are where it's at.

And that's not where Cormac is at. Although, I didn't exactly have to cajole him to the hotel that night. Maybe I'm selling him short. He might need a fling, too.

I laugh at the thought of carrying on with him. How could we hide that from the kids? Or anyone else? It's silly to think we could.

But the thought of doing it makes me want him even more. He was an animal in bed. The ways he moved his body—

“Lily,” Mom says before knocking and opening my door. “You want some breakfast?”

“No thanks, Mom.” Breakfast will not satisfy my appetite.

Lily

More than anything else, I need a distraction. So, I gather all the ingredients for the recipe. Beach towels, sunblock of varying strengths, a wide-brimmed hat, a huge beach bag cooler, a bikini, and other associated items sit in my Target cart. The cheap plastic sunglasses in the kid seat part stare back at me, as if to say this isn't exactly what I need. That I should face my fears and get back on the horse.

I turn the sunglasses face down on the towel so they stop staring at me.

Without knowing what the kids will need for the beach, I grab the components of both crudité, those crispy snap pea things, and some fresh fruit, as well as a case of bottled water. Since they have a day off from school, the beach seems like the perfect way to spend it, and I could certainly use some time in the sun. I look like a damned ghost.

On my way to their house, I bounce to some pop music and hope the kids like the ocean. I'd never asked, and no one had ever brought it up. But what kid doesn't like the beach? Pulling up to the house, I decide to ask Cormac before bringing it up to them. Just my luck, he's ready to leave for work when I walk in. Hopefully, I can—

“Good timing. I need to leave early. They've had breakfast. Have a nice day—

“Do the kids like the beach?” I ask quietly.

He pauses and frowns. “I think so.”

He doesn't know? “Do you mind if I take them?”

He shrugs. “Sure. If they feel like it. Towels are in the hall closet. Gotta go.” Cormac dashes out the door.

Aiden is too into his book to notice me, but Franny's head pops up from her drawing on the coffee table. "Hi, Lily."

"Hey there." I stroll into the gray-on-gray living room, enjoying the splash of color on her drawing of what might be a butterfly, a fairy, or a very colorful airplane. "What do you two say to going to the beach today?"

That got Aiden's attention. "Really?" Franny grins.

"Yes. If you feel like—

"I need my swimsuit," she blurts as she runs to her bedroom.

Aiden chases right after. "Me too!"

I'm glad to see them so into the idea. While they change, so do I, and my new black bikini's matching board shorts are more comfortable than I had thought they'd be, which makes the whole *being exposed* thing more tolerable. I'd never been much of a swimwear person at the beach. Tee shirts and shorts were my usual idea of scantily clad, but the bikini had called to me, thanks to the board shorts.

When I come out of the guest bathroom, they are dressed, towels over their arms, goggles on their eyes (mostly), and half-rubbed in sunblock smears on their arms. Franny's sandals don't match, and I don't think she cares. I laugh. "You two were ready for this, huh?"

Aiden grins. "I thought we were gonna get to swim in the pool today. I didn't know you like the beach."

"It's been a while, but I love it there. I just don't get to go that often. Ready?"

Franny asks, "Do you have snacks?"

"I was a chef, Franny. There will always be snacks."

Suspicious of me, she asks, "Are they vegetables?"

"Some."

"Okay," she huffs. "But they better be good."

"If you don't like them, I'll buy you a hot dog."

She cheers, "Yay!"

Aiden cautions, "Mom says hot dogs make you sick and die."

"I won't tell her if you don't."

"Okay!"

We load up and head to the beach. I'm happy to see it's too early for most people, and we have the place almost entirely to ourselves. The sun is shining, the seagulls are swooping, and the warm breeze has us running to the water. In short, it is a perfect day. As the days away from my kitchen turn

into weeks, my list of things that bring me joy has expanded, and I am surprised to learn that includes a day by the shore with kids.

I had never really minded kids, nor had I ever enjoyed them in any real capacity until now.

They were fine, in theory. But in reality, kids were an abstract concept of messy clothes and random noise. They were a terror when brought into my restaurant—little walking lawsuits, as far as me and my staff were concerned. After all, they were great at tripping staff and patrons alike, or dumping their juice onto the floor, or any other number of child-related issues. In fine dining, they were a liability simply by being themselves. It was hard to see them and not think, “Problem.”

But getting to know Franny and Aiden, I realize just how bleak that outlook is. As they splash and laugh and play, I join them, and it’s impossible not to get caught up in their carefree attitudes. There is no guile, no self-consciousness, no fear. They are simply in the moment, and I find myself in that same place, enjoying it all.

Maybe kids are liabilities in fine dining because it’s not designed for kids. And maybe that should change.

When I whip out the snacks, I set out some dips to go with the vegetables. Mostly for Franny, although I can’t stop myself when it comes to broccoli and that strange excuse for a sauce, ranch dip. She chows down as much as I do, and Aiden nibbles on the crispy snap peas, but his eyes remain on the volleyball net someone had left up.

“You want to play?”

“Yeah. But I don’t know how. And I don’t have a ball.”

I turn and dig into my beach bag. “Here, hold this,” I say, handing him a bottle of sunblock. “No, that’s not it...where is...hold this, too,” I say as I pass him a volleyball. “I’m not sure where I put it—

“Here!” He says, giggling.

“No, I don’t think so,” I say, as I pretend to keep digging.

He laughs harder. “This is the ball, Lily!”

“Oh. There it is. Why didn’t you tell me you had it?” I wink at him over my sunglasses.

“Come on!” he squeals as he runs to the net.

Me and Franny run to catch up, and just as I’m about to launch into a lesson, a familiar man walks toward us. But I smack my hands on my hips and tease, “That can’t be Cormac MacMillan. He’s not wearing a business

suit.”

He laughs and the kids run up to him for hugs. Then he picks up Franny on his hip and says, “I thought a business suit might be overkill for the beach.”

The breeze tousles his dark hair as he smiles at me. His navy swim trunks and linen shirt combination suit him. *If this is his typical beach attire, then he should live out here.* The outfit is even more well-fitting than his business suits, and something about it makes my body react to him in ways I shouldn’t. Slowly, I nod, trying to think of something intelligent to say. “Uh, do you play volleyball?”

“A little. When I was a teenager.”

Bet he was one of those cute boys who could aim the ball at a group of girls and spike it there so he’d have a chance to talk to them. I nearly laugh at the thought—as if Cormac MacMillan needed an excuse. *He probably just walked right up to girls—*

“So, do you want to play?” he asks, shaking me from my thoughts.

“Let’s do it.” Bad choice of words. But also not the wrong words.

We run the kids through the basic idea, as he lowers the net for them. Once they get going, though, Franny and Aiden hardly need us around. Their hand-eye coordination isn’t great, so they take to just throwing the ball over the net to each other, and we stop objecting after the first couple of minutes. But then Aiden says, “If we’re doing it wrong, why don’t you show us?”

“Yeah,” Franny chimes in.

We shrug and they step back as we begin to play. Cormac went easy on me—I could tell. “I’m not a child. You can play harder.”

“If you say so.”

The match heats up after that, grunts and slams between us. Almost like the night we’d had together. I dive for a spike, but hadn’t seen the shell in the sand to my right, and I slip instead of diving, twisting my ankle as I fall onto the sand. “Shit!”

The kids giggle until they realize I’m hurt, and then Cormac and the kids hop into the sand next to me. He says, “Lily, are you alright?”

“I think I’m fine. Just twisted—

“Nothing snapped?”

“No. Not that bad.”

“Are you sure? That looked like a hard fall.” The concern in his eyes touches me.

Softer now, I tell him, "I'll be okay."

Franny asks, "Is it broken?"

I smile at her. "No, not at all."

Cormac asks, "Can you walk?"

I sigh. "Let's find out." He helps me to my feet, and his firm, strong hands warm me through. Once I stand, I smile. "See? I'll be fine." But when I take a step, I nearly fall. Instead, I fall into Cormac's arms. "Nice catch."

"Yeah," he says, looking into my eyes. But then he clears his throat and looks away. "Let me help you to the beach towels. You need to rest your ankle."

"I'm okay—

"Kids, what do we do when we hurt ourselves?"

"We rest," they say together.

I frown at him in confusion, and as he walks me to the towels, he says, "They like to keep playing no matter what happens to them. So, I have been drilling into them that when you hurt, you rest."

"That's smart."

"For kids and stubborn adults."

I giggle. "I'm not stubborn."

He helps me to sit. "Willful?"

"That's a nice word for stubborn."

"Obstinate?"

"What's a word for a smart ass thesaurus?"

He grins. "Cormac." I snort a laugh, and he takes the towel next to me. "Kids, you can keep playing. I'll take care of Lily. Go on."

"Okay," they shout together as they run to the water.

"Looks like volleyball is not their sport," I note.

"They're five. They'll bounce back."

I smile and roll my eyes. "So, you took off work for this. I thought you were a workaholic."

"I am. But I didn't want to miss this."

"Why don't you go hang out with them? I'll be fine."

He smiles at me. "If I run out there, one or both of them will run back here to keep you company. Better I stay put."

It's then that I notice his fingertips are dangerously close to mine on our overlapping towels. I feel stupid, but just being this close to Cormac makes my heart flutter. *The kids, I'm supposed to be watching the kids.* But looking

out at the water, they're fine. I want to say something, anything to him.
“Cormac, why did you leave work today? The real reason?”

He swallows first, and his breath gets tight. “Isn't it obvious, Lily?”

I shake my head, afraid to say the wrong thing.

He looks at me, lip pinched like he's nervous, too. “I thought...if...” His fingers graze mine. “Spending time here would be something...we could do together.” His head tilts in that way.

That way. He comes closer, leaning in—

“Can we have snacks?” Franny asks near my feet.

Cormac

“Of course,” Lily blurts, before she digs into her bag.

Shit.

Aiden says, “I want more than snacks. I’m hungry.”

“Yeah,” Franny adds.

“It *is* getting late.” Lily smiles and shrugs. “Ready to head home, then?”

“Yes, please,” Aiden says, while Franny nods.

“I’ll pack things up. You stay put,” I tell Lily.

“I can help—

“Not with that ankle.” I gather all the things and load them into the cars. Towering over Lily, I extend my hand and ask, “Ready?”

“I can get up,” she says as she tries to stand. But when she puts her weight on the ankle, she starts to fall.

I catch her, and for a moment, holding her like I’d dipped her, I wish I had. That we’d been dancing to some romantic tune, and I had held her close because she wanted that, too. She stares up into my eyes, a blush on her cheeks. But then I blink back to reality and help her stand up straight. “Better?”

“Yeah.” Her voice is less than a whisper as her eyes narrow to my lips.

My heart isn’t the only one that’s racing. Or perhaps I am delusional and seeing what I want to see. She’s a young, vibrant, smart person full of possibilities. I’m a father with decades of baggage. Oh, and she’s my employee. The fantasy must end now. I clear my throat to shake my thoughts free. “Can you drive?”

“I think so. But maybe the kids should ride with you? Just in case.”

“If you’re that worried—

“I’ll be fine. I’d like to drive myself. But their safety comes first.”

I nod once and give her my arm to lean on as she hobbles to her car.
“This is intolerable.”

“Hmm?”

I scoop her up, and she laughs like I’d hoped she would. Walking in the sand with her in my arms is a challenge, and I hope I don’t twist my ankle, too. But I tell her, “Much faster this way.”

She giggles. “Yeah.”

Franny grins at us. “Daddy, you’re like a knight.”

I laugh. “You’re too kind, Lady Franny.”

My kids have a field day with that, and on the drive home, Lady Franny and Lord Aiden discuss the castle they’ll build one day. It sounds marvelous, but truly, all I focus on is Lily’s driving. *Is she okay? Why is she driving so slowly? Is she trying to make me think she doesn’t drive like a maniac?*

Rolling my eyes at my ego, I huff a laugh at myself. Leave it to me to think my presence influenced her actions. When we park at the house, I help the kids out first, before helping Lily into the house. Again, being so close to her that I can smell her and feel her warmth, I am transported to the night we spent together. By the time I get her inside, I’m so in my head that I hardly hear a word she says. “I’m sorry. What was that?”

“If you don’t mind, I’m not up to making dinner.”

“I thought we might order Thai food—

“Yay!” the kids holler.

“Sounds good,” she says.

But the children are asleep when it arrives. I have to wake them just to eat, and they don’t do much of that. An early bedtime is in order, and Lily frets about not being able to help with their nighttime routine. I assure her, “I’ve been doing this mostly on my own until you came around, so don’t worry about it.”

“I just feel bad. You hired me, and—

“And you got injured in the line of duty,” I tell her with a chuckle, “so relax. I’ve got this.” When I finish up with the kids, it’s after seven, and Lily is still in the living room. “Hey, I—

“If they’re in bed, I guess it’s time for me to go.” But she doesn’t make a move to leave.

“Need me to help you up?”

“Not yet.”

I swallow hard, confused. “How about a drink?”

“I’d like that.”

“Glass of pinot for the road?”

“Sure.”

Pouring two glasses, I stifle my nerves. No reason for me to be this nervous around her. We’re just two adults, enjoying some wine to unwind after a nice day. Honestly, her injury aside, it’s been the nicest day I’ve had in months.

I bring the wine and sit with her on the couch. Not too close. I don’t want to confuse her or make her uncomfortable. But I’m dying for the closeness. It’s an ache in my chest that never goes away. “How do you like it?”

“Pretty good,” she says between sips. “Not too sweet.”

I nod, not really sure what else to say. That moment on the beach had sent me spiraling, and now I’m more confused than ever about me and Lily. Not that there’s a me and Lily to—

“Cormac?”

“Yes, Lily?”

She worries her bottom lip as she stares intently at my face. “I like it here.”

“Good. I’m glad to hear that.”

“Working here, I mean. It’s nice. The kids are great...”

“Right. *Working here.*” *Is that all you like?*

“The boss is kind of an asshole,” she teases.

I laugh. “Oh, is he? You should tell him all about it.”

Smiling, she plays along. “Well, the thing is, he’s really nice and cute and tries to be involved with his kids—

“I’m not hearing the asshole part.”

“The asshole thing is, he and I hooked up once before I came to work for him, and now I can’t stop thinking about his lips on me.”

My mouth goes dry, and I nearly drop my wine. Setting it onto the coffee table, I tell her, “What an asshole.”

She giggles and leans closer. “Yeah. Makes it really hard to concentrate at work. I keep thinking, if we kissed, then maybe I could be better at my job.”

I fight a smirk and softly tell her, “For the sake of your job, then...” Leaning to her, I breathe her in. The sweet scent of raspberries hits me, and

I'm drunk on Lily before I even touch her. I brush my lips against hers, letting her warmth set my heart at ease. She opens to me, wrapping her arms around my neck. The moment she slips a moan, I'm brought on by it. Hard and ready, just waiting for the go ahead.

But then she stiffens up, and my bliss comes crashing down around me. I break the kiss and pull back. "What is it?"

Her lips are pink from our kiss, as is her chin from my stubble. But she blinks away, sitting up. "Um..."

I've done something wrong. She's my employee. This was inappropriate. Apologize! But I can't. I don't regret kissing her. Besides, it's better to hear her thoughts first.

"I know I initiated that and everything," Lily speaks with regret in her voice, and it kills me, "but I think I shouldn't have done that. I'm sorry, Cormac. If I—

"Don't worry about it. Call it a fluke." I don't want to call it a fluke. "We don't need to discuss it any further." But I want to.

"It's just..." The way she sighs makes me think it's not the kiss she regrets. It's telling herself *no more kisses* that she regrets. "I really need this job. I can't always just do whatever I want now. Sometimes, I have to make the smart decisions, and that means doing the right things, which do not include pursuing my boss. But I haven't had a boss in so long that the dynamics of it get muddled in my head. Does that make any sense at all?"

"You think crossing that line will cost you your job?"

She doesn't nod right away, which makes me feel better about things. But she shrugs instead. "It just doesn't seem like the right thing to do."

"Because it's hard for you to think of yourself as an employee instead of being the boss like you were at your restaurant?"

"Yeah. It's hard for me to think of you as my boss. Not that you're *not*, obviously, but I got so used to being a boss that I don't put myself into the mindset of an employee around you. Plus, with the way we met...that sort of changes how I think about you. And I need to be more careful than that. You are my boss."

"I get what you're saying, and don't misconstrue what I'm about to say as anything more than the words themselves. But Lily, I don't really think of you as an employee, either." I shake my head at myself. "When I come home, knowing my kids are well cared for, it makes my life easier. Most of the time, you cook dinner for all of us. We have a little routine every night...this is

more comfortable than I've ever been with any other nanny we've had. Maybe that's why it's easy for me to overlook the boundaries that should probably be there. Things just fit."

She nods. "Yeah. Same here."

Be reasonable, Cormac. Hormones cannot be the reason you lost the best nanny the kids ever had. No matter how she makes you feel. "That said, I don't want you to be uncomfortable here. Ever. I get what you're saying about needing the job and the complications that could come into play if we took things...too far. So, if you're okay with remaining as my employee, we will keep our hands to ourselves."

"Like we agreed before?"

I nod, though it kills me. "Today was a great day. I haven't been this relaxed in years, and I should have thought about what we were doing before we did it. I apologize, Lily."

"But I started it—

"Yes, but one of us needs to be the grown-up, and since I'm the boss, I should have put a stop to it. That's why I apologized."

She sighs and stares at her feet for a moment. I have a feeling I could take all of that back and have her on me in a flash. As much as I want to, I can't do that. Not to her or me. "Yeah. I should go—

"But you'll be here tomorrow?"

Lily smiles and something in my chest rises. "Yes. I'll be here tomorrow, Cormac. I like it here too much to stay away." When she stands, though, she wobbles.

I hop up and help her stay on her feet, and before I know it, we're face to face once more. Raspberries and wine in the air. Her lips, succulent and pink. Tension builds in my muscles as she leans in. I'm fighting the urge to meet her in the middle and murmur, "Professionals, right?"

She clears her throat and leans back. "Yeah. Professionals."

"Let me walk you out."

Cormac

Let me walk you out? She's right. I *am* an asshole.

Can't help but think about it on the drive out to the construction site. No amount of loud rock music or cursing at fellow drivers will change what happened last night. I should have made a better move with Lily. Something we couldn't ignore or take back. Something bigger than a kiss.

I want to see her come again. Want to make her moan my name. To make her feel...anything.

That first night, she seemed so alive, so charismatic. As much as she enjoys the kids, there's something missing. She laughs and has fun with us, but it's almost as though there's a hollowness in it. Like she's not entirely there with us. But the night we were together, that was not an issue. And last night as we kissed, that spark was back.

Maybe that's the real reason she broke the kiss. It's strange to think of someone as fearless as Lily Olson being afraid of anything, but last night, she was. And it didn't seem like she was afraid of losing her job. Not really. There was too much hemming and hawing after the kiss, almost as though she was talking herself out of enjoying it.

But why?

Strange to think she would be afraid of pursuing me. It's pretty obvious that I'm not about to fire her for anything like that. Perhaps it is not about me. Could be that she's been hurt by some guy before—what woman past the age of eighteen hasn't been?

I shake my head as I park the car and sit with that thought for a minute. I could be reading this all wrong, but it seems like Lily has been through

something painful and is scared to get involved with anyone. That would explain the string of hook-ups she alluded to. From what I knew of chef culture via Abigail's television habits, chefs are notorious bed-hoppers, but with Lily, it feels different from that.

It feels profound.

Getting out of the car, I shield my eyes from the sun. Even with sunglasses, it's too bright outside for my liking. The earthworks crew has leveled so much of the land that there are few trees left and none that give shade anywhere near me. The walk to Beau's trailer office blinds me further—sunlight reflecting on his white building is sharp, giving me a headache.

I knock and walk in when he calls out. "Hey."

"Have a seat."

"Before I do, do you have any aspirin?"

He frowns. "You okay?"

"Screaming headache all of a sudden."

He pulls out a bottle from his desk drawer. It's so empty that the bottle sounds like a maraca when he tosses it. "Ibuprofen work?"

"Yeah, thanks."

"Down it with some coffee. It'll work better." He gestures to the coffeepot on the table near the door.

"Sounds good." I pour a paper cup full and down the pills as he begins.

"The estimates have come back from the architecture firms..."

A high-pitched whine fills my head the longer Beau speaks. It's not that I don't want to hear him, but it's hard not to blow off his requests for more money when my head keeps throbbing. He blinks at me, finished speaking. Crap, I should say something. *If I ask a question, maybe he'll fill me in.* "And?"

"And I think it would be great if you could..." he rambles on.

The pills kick in faster than expected, which is nice, but I still can't focus on Beau. It's as though my brain has replaced thoughts of pain with thoughts of Lily's smile. A pleasant distraction, to be sure, but a distraction all the same. Dammit, he's staring again. *Say something clever.* "Well, what do you think about it?"

"I think they're a joke of a firm, and I'm not willing to hire them with that kind of attitude."

"That's harsh."

He chuckles. "A modern American resort and hotel does not need Greek

columns around the entire building, Cormac.”

I half-laugh. “That’s their suggestion?”

“I just said...weren’t you listening?”

“Yes. Must have missed that part. This headache is a killer.”

“That’s worrisome. When was the last time you saw Doctor Hamilton?”

I roll my eyes. “It’s nothing, Beau. I swear, you’re as bad as Mom with these things.”

“Whatever. Anyway, I don’t want an architect who wants to make our resort into their showpiece, you know? This is ours. It should be *our* specifications.”

“Agreed.”

He smiles. “Good. Because I think we should...”

And I’ve faded out again. Only this time, it’s not the pain or Lily’s smile. It’s her naked body in the hotel...maybe it’s because we’re building our own hotel and resort, but I can’t help but think about what happens there. All the nasty, sweaty sex you can have without worrying about the neighbors or washing the sheets after. All the ways being in a hotel feels so much freer than in your own home...the way you can experiment—

“Cormac!”

“Yeah?”

“Are you even listening to me?”

“What else would I be doing, Beau?” Definitely not fantasizing about a bending Lily over in every bed in our resort.

He frowns. “I don’t know. But you’re not here, and this is important.”

“Apologies. I really am trying to focus. I promise you have as much undivided attention as I am capable of right now. Go ahead.”

Perturbed but undeterred, he continues. “As I was saying, Beckett gave me a short list of architecture firms with better reputations than that Italian design house, so I’ve been going through them and...”

I wonder if Lily’s ever been to Italy. She’d love it. All the food and wine and sex...I sigh. The thought of her on a topless beach, a glass of wine in hand, just relaxing as the waves nip at her toes...I have to stop these fantasies.

She is a professional. It’s not her that I’m hooked on—it’s the fact that she’s doing such a great job with the kids that I don’t have to worry about them as much as I used to, and the relief is making my brain think it’s more than that. My unwound mind doesn’t know what to do with itself.

With the other nannies, it was impossible to relax. I kept waiting for the phone call to tell me she was quitting or there was an accident or both. Kept waiting for the other shoe to fall, all day, every day, and that made it impossible for me to focus at work or on anything else. And forget dating under those circumstances. I do not know how Abigail managed.

Whatever the case, Lily and I should not have kissed last night. No matter how good yesterday felt.

It was wonderful. Every detail simply fits. We moved together like a cohesive unit with the kids, even when we were just having fun.

Especially then.

There was no bickering, no uncomfortable silences. No things left unsaid between us, and no stifling pressures. Just a pair of adults taking care of a pair of kids and enjoying each other's company. Like a normal family.

She is not family, Cormac. She's the help. You've crossed enough lines already. If you keep going on like this, you'll screw everything up. Stop it.

"Seriously, stop it."

I blink back to reality. "Stop what?"

"Stop pretending to be here when you're not."

"You sound like Abigail."

Beau makes a face at me for that one. "Too far, man. That was too far. You know how I feel about your ex-wife."

"You hate her," I huff, "and I've never understood why exactly, when I don't hate her, and *I'm* the one who divorced her."

"I hate her because she was never good enough for you."

"Solidarity, then?"

"Something like that."

I sigh. "Beau, you don't need to hate Abigail. We're not bitter exes. Things just didn't work out."

"And if she had tried harder—"

"No," I tell him sharply. "Sometimes things don't work out. That doesn't mean you hold it against anyone. Abigail is a great mom to my kids. Don't forget that."

He huffs. "I'll give her that. She *is* a great mom. And a good listener, which is more than I can say for her ex-husband."

"What now? I was listening."

"Then what do you think of Beckett's idea?"

Our little brother—who hated when I called him that—usually had great

ideas, and being our company's general contractor, he knew the business. So, I said, "He's probably right."

"But that firm costs twice as much as everyone else."

Shit. I sigh. "So, get more estimates—"

"I have gone to every firm worth going to, Cormac. All but *them.*"

"Why not them?"

"You mean, besides the expense?"

I nod. "When has that ever stopped you?"

He chuckles. "When my CFO has done nothing but bitch about cost, hasn't been in contact with our investors, and stopped listening to me after he drank all my coffee, asshole."

Lily was right, after all. I *am* an asshole. "I'll make a new pot."

-

Cormac

“I don’t need a new pot of coffee, Cormac, I need support here,” Beau grumbles.

But I make the coffee, anyway. It might clear the Lily-scented fog in my brain. As I pour the water into the machine, I tell him, “I’ve already secured the financing from Clint Bryson—

He laughs once sharply. “Clint Bryson is a temperamental old coot, and if you think a handshake is the same as money in our accounts, you are sadly mistaken.”

I whip my head around so fast that my headache threatens to return. It seems he has forgotten our roles. “*I* am the Chief Financial Officer here, Beau. I know how money works, and I don’t need you to tell me how to do my job.”

“Oh really? I wasn’t sure anymore.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You took a day off!”

His words leave me baffled. “Huh?”

“Since when do you take a day off in the middle of the week, Cormac? You. The workaholic. The one I can count on to be in the office early and late, the man who gives me shit for taking vacations, took an impromptu day off.”

“So?”

“So?” he asks, incredulous. “We are in the biggest project of our lives. This is the most important thing we have ever done. For you to just up and take a day off—

“That’s where you’re wrong, Beau. Very, very wrong.”

“Are you joking? What the hell else is even close to this?”

I press the button on the coffeemaker, trying to calm down. It’s not his fault that he doesn’t get it, and if I snap at him about all of this, he never will. Calmly, I sit across from him. “My children, Beau. They are the biggest project of my life. The most important thing I have ever done. It’s bad enough that I come to work early and stay late. That I’m a workaholic. I love my job, don’t get me wrong. Working for our company is all I ever wanted to do when we were kids. But that was long before I had my own kids.”

He takes a deep breath to calm himself. I can see the argument in his eyes, but also that he knows better than to say it out loud. “Look, I love my niece and nephew, and I didn’t mean to imply anything by what I said about the job—

“I know you love them.”

“But I still need your support here, Cormac. The day you became a father didn’t mean you stopped being my brother.”

“Look, I appreciate you want me around—

“*Need* you around.”

I half-smile. “I get that. But do you know why I took yesterday off?”

“You said something about the beach.”

“I needed a half a day off to spend it with my kids doing something fun. And for once, I felt fine doing that. Do you know why?”

He shrugs. “Why?”

“I felt comfortable taking the time off because I know I can trust you to handle things around here.”

His brow furrows. “I’m not the CFO.”

“No,” I say, chuckling, “you’re the COO. We are on equal footing, Beau. You don’t need me around all the time. You can handle it. I have faith in you.”

He swallows hard. “It’s just that...Dad doesn’t.”

“Is that what’s really going on? Dad’s shit getting in your head?”

“I don’t know.” Tension falls from his shoulders. “This is a lot, and decades of his business lessons and life lessons and all the rest of it keep popping into my head. I’m pretty sure I’m going to screw something up, because he has no confidence in me—

“Why do you think he named you COO, Beau? For shits and giggles?”

He frowns. “Because then I wouldn’t have my hands on the company’s

finances.”

I laugh hard. “Because he fucking trusts you, you nitwit.”

“You really think so?”

“I know so. I realize he’s been hard on all of us, but I think you get more of his ‘Money wins!’ bullshit than any of us—

“He told me to tattoo that backwards on my forehead so I wouldn’t forget it, because I spend money like a drunken sailor with a fistful of Viagra on leave in a brothel.”

That’s our dad, alright. “You like nice things. He’s not wrong.”

“Which is why I need you around to rein me in.”

I chuckle. “So, you admit you have a spending problem?”

Slowly, he half-smirks and nods. “Maybe.”

“I’ll make you a deal. I will warn you ahead of the next time I need time off, and you will learn to rein in your own spending. Like a grown-up.”

“I might have agreed to that, had you not added the jab at the end.”

“Come on, you have to admit Dad is not entirely wrong about his assessment of you.”

He shrugs. “Which is why I need you around.”

“I’m taking the training wheels off, Beau. I’m going to spend more time with my kids.” And not just because Lily is there. “They need me more than you do.”

“Oh fine. Be that way.”

“You mean, be a dad?”

He snorts a laugh. “Maybe.”

“Or do you mean, be *their* dad and not yours?”

“Hey!”

“You’re the one saying you need someone to rein you in, not me. I think you’re too comfortable having me here to say no to your impulses. You don’t need me. You need the absence of me. Otherwise, you’ll keep overspending this project into the poorhouse.”

Beau’s mouth opens for a second before it closes again. He frowns, then slumps. “You may be onto something with that.”

“I know—

“I’ve been looking at marble inlays for the spa walls.”

“So?”

“The real stuff.”

“Again, so?”

He sighs. “So, it’s three times the prices of the other materials I was looking at. And I like it...because it’s expensive. Not because it’s better, not because it’s nicer. But because it’s pricier.” Another sigh. “I may need to reevaluate some priorities.”

“It’s nice to hear you say that.”

“It’s nice to hear you say much of anything.”

“I don’t follow you.”

Beau readjusts in his chair, getting ready to go on the offensive. “Until I called you an asshole, you hadn’t said more than ten words since you walked in my door.”

I can’t argue with that. “This headache—

“Don’t give me that, Cormac. Why do you think that ibuprofen bottle is almost empty?”

“Headaches getting you, too?”

He nods. “And the closer we get to each step of this process, the worse they get. It feels like one misstep, and Dad will pull the plug on this.”

“Is that why you’ve been stressing about every minute detail?”

“Why else?”

“Okay. How about we both agree to take more time off while we make this happen?”

He laughs. “Take time off? Have you lost your mind? The only thing Dad hates more than failure is delayed failure, and taking time off will delay the resort.”

“You *can* take a day off now and then, Beau.”

“I don’t have kids to use for an excuse like you, Cormac.”

“My kids are not an excuse. They are everything to me.”

His lips thin into a flat line, and he holds his hands up. “Sorry. I didn’t mean it that way. I only meant that I don’t have something else pulling me from here. This resort is *my* everything.”

“Maybe that’s the problem. Maybe you need something outside of here.”

“What, like a hobby? You think crocheting will unwind me?”

Rolling my eyes, I laugh. “Yes. Exactly. Crocheting. I’m sure Dad would love to hear you took a day off for needlework.”

He laughs hard. “Oh god, it would almost be worth doing it just to see his face when he hears that.”

I sigh at the thought and tell Beau, “Back to Clint. I will get things on paper as soon as I can with him. Okay?”

“You better. The other firm books fast, and I want their best architect. James Lawrence. He’s a legend for a reason, and that legend’s name should be on our resort, so the sooner the better.”

“I’ll call him right away.” Narrowly averting Beau’s meltdown had been enough to distract me from thoughts about Lily but as soon as the conversation switches to cars, I’m back at it. It’s impossible to stay away from her in my mind.

And that must remain the only place that’s true. I have to stay away from her in real life, or I’ll ruin everything.

-

Lily

That kiss.

I can't help but think about it when he comes home. When we're tucking the kids into bed. When I say goodbye to him for the night. Or when I'm alone in my room and the night ticks on with no one else in my bed. The memory of the kiss curls my toes.

It doesn't help that it's Saturday, so I'm not at work. Cormac can take care of his kids without me just fine. The only problem is, I have nothing to do but mull over what's going on, or rather, what's *not* going on. Feels like I'm going out of my mind, waiting for the weekend to be over.

"Why don't you have dinner with someone?" Dad asks, as he sweeps the kitchen.

"Huh?"

"It's a Saturday night. I don't imagine you were used to spending those at home when you lived in the city. And you look bored."

I shrug. "Maybe we can watch a movie or something."

He smiles, but there's a hint of pain in his eyes. Dad comes closer, speaking low. "We're not that booked, and I had hoped to have some quiet time with your mother tonight."

I do not want to know what he means by quiet time, and I think I do. Fighting the urge to cringe, I tell him, "I'll see myself out. Just tell her I took the car."

"You got it, kiddo."

I grab her keys and bolt out of the B&B. On my way to the car, I text Aria and, as luck would have it, her mother is visiting, so she doesn't need a sitter

for Owen. We meet at *Reynold's Bar and Grill* on the south side of downtown. Of course, she walks in looking like a million bucks in a little black dress, while I'm in donut-printed chef pants and a tank top. We sit at the bar and I order a Negroni and fries, and she picks a bellini, before the chat begins.

Aria asks, "How is the new job? I'm so excited to hear all about it, but whenever you pick up the twins from school, we never seem to have a minute to chat."

"The job is great. Honestly, I like it way more than I thought I would."

"How so?"

"Well, I figured they'd be a pair of spoiled brats or something, and they are not at all. Franny and Aiden are seriously exceptional kids. Thank you for setting me up for this."

She smiles. "I'm so glad to hear that. I was worried. You're not much of a kid person."

I shrug. "Yeah, but they're pretty cool. Plus, showing Franny that vegetables aren't evil is fun." Our drinks come, and mine is only so-so, but the fries are amazing.

Aria steals one and says, "I should have ordered some."

"I thought we'd split them. How is your job going?"

"Right as rain. I love my kids, and Owen loves Billingsley, so I have no complaints."

That is way too cheery. "Aria. It's me."

"Oh, you know. Teachers like to gossip. It's nothing—"

"Hi," a guy says to her as he interrupts her and ignores me.

She casts a withering glare at him. "I was talking to my friend."

He gives me a pathetic smile, then turns back to her. "So, are you new in town?"

"I'm a single mom."

"Have a nice night, ma'am." He scoots away as gracelessly as he entered the picture.

"Ma'am?" she snaps, and I can't stop laughing.

"That's the part that pissed you off?"

"Ugh. It's one thing to be rude enough to interrupt, and ignore you, and act like I'm only here to talk to him, but for fuck's sake, *ma'am*? How old do I look? He's older than I am! You saw his gray hair, right?"

I keep giggling at her. "I did, I did."

“Oh, the nerve of that guy!”

“So, you were talking about work?”

She sighs. “Right. Well, Jenna, she teaches third grade. Some of the other teachers have been talking about how she had been all over this single dad at parent-teacher night, and it’s been a whole thing all week. I feel so bad for her.”

“Was she all over him?”

“He spilled grape juice on his shirt and she handed him some paper towels and a Tide pen she keeps in her drawer for just such an emergency. According to her, that’s all that happened. But if the wrong person thinks they saw something, that is all that matters.”

Good thing no one saw me and Cormac kiss the other night. Or nearly holding hands on the beach. Abigail would fire me in a second, I’m sure of it. “People can be really terrible when they want to be.”

She nods. “I mean, I get it—sometimes you have to make your own fun when you have nothing going on in your own life, but they’re acting like she went down on him in the classroom or something.”

I laugh. “Well, we all know how sexy third grade classrooms can be. Especially with spilled grape juice on the floor.”

She giggles. “So, you mention the kids. But what about Cormac? With Abigail still being gone, I figure you haven’t had time to interact with her much yet.”

“Actually, she did my interview, and it was just me and her. She seems great.”

She waits for a beat, and when I don’t say anything, she asks, “And Cormac?”

“I really like Abigail.”

Her brows drop. “Why won’t you talk about him? He seems perfectly nice. Is he not?”

“No, no. He’s great.” Too great.

“Lily, you can tell me. I’m not going to say anything to anyone. You know that.”

“It’s nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

Another dude comes up to her. “Hey there.”

“I am a single mom, and so help me God, if you call me ma’am when you leave, I will throw my bellini on you.”

He laughs. “I wouldn’t dare. And single moms are great.”

“Okay, you’re not a jerk. But I’m here with my friend tonight. Thanks anyway.”

He smiles and nods. “Have a good night.” Then he leaves.

“Why can’t more guys be like him?” I ask as I drain my drink and flag the bartender over. “Another, please.”

“What happened with Cormac?”

I’m almost buzzed enough to tell her. “Like I said—

“Like I said,” she says firmly, using her teacher’s voice on me, “I am here with my friend tonight. Not my acquaintance. You can talk to me, Lily. Did he try something on you?”

“Oh yeah,” I said, nodding my thanks to the bartender as he passes my drink.

“Oh, my god. I’ll kill him. I will fucking—

“No, no. Not like that.”

“He’s a dead man.”

I start giggling again. The thought of the waif attacking the man made of muscles tickles me. “You don’t need to kill him, Aria.”

“I do, if he—

“I started it.”

She flutters her pretty eyes at me. “Oh.”

I sigh. “I like him.”

“Oh, my.”

“And I kissed him.”

“Oh, my god.”

Nodding, I sip my drink. “It’s...it was a mistake, I guess. But I genuinely like Cormac, and I don’t know what to do about that, since I work for him.”

“And...he likes you?”

“Yeah. We’ve agreed to keep things professional, but god, it’s hard. Like there’s this constant tension between us. We get along perfectly well. We even have a routine now with the kids. I pick them up, help with whatever schoolwork they might have, make supper. By the time supper is ready, Cormac is walking in. We eat together, then after some kind of activity, swimming or the trampoline or going for a walk, we put them to bed. And that’s the worst part.”

She frowns. “How come?”

“Because...at the end of the day, I don’t want to leave. I want him to kiss me and take me to bed.”

“It sounds like you’ve gotten too comfortable.”

I nod. “Oh yeah. And I don’t know how to change that. It’s not like I’m a trained nanny or something, and in restaurants, the line between employee and employer is blurry at best, so I don’t have much of a framework for this kind of thing.” Nervous rambling is thirsty work, so I finish my drink. “It gets worse.”

“You didn’t...?”

I sigh. “Remember the one-night stand I told you about?”

“Yes.”

I make a face at her with big eyes.

“Oh, shit.”

I laugh. “Yep. That’s pretty much what I was thinking when you introduced us.”

She giggles behind her hand, gasping. “That’s why you had that weird look on your face, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“Wow. Crap. What are you going to do?”

“Like I said, we’ve agreed to be professional about everything. After we kissed the other day.”

She sighs, finishing her bellini. “I am so sorry, Lily.”

“Me too. Especially because I like him so much. But I’ll be okay.”

She tips her head onto my shoulder. “I wish I could help.”

“Hello, ladies,” some dirtbag says behind us.

I flip him off without turning around, and Aria says, “Get lost.”

“Always wanted two woman at the same time—

I face him, and he’s as slimy looking as I thought. “And I’ve always wanted ten million dollars in my bank account. We can’t always get what we want. Go away.”

His eyes dip into my cleavage before he goes. Yuck.

“You know, back in high school, I was a little jealous of how easy it was for you to get guys. Now, I’m so glad not to deal with that on a regular basis.”

She chuckles. “It’s not all it’s cracked up to be.” Then, her mood turns. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I think so. It’ll just take some time to work through this. In the meantime, let’s order some more fries.”

She grins. “And I’ll buy them.”

“That’s awful nice of you, since you ate all of mine. Will I get any of these?”

“Let’s get two orders.”

Cormac

“Uno!” Aiden shouts.

“Buddy, as much as I appreciate your enthusiasm for the game, you don’t shout Uno every time you put a card down. Only when it’s the last card you have. That’s what uno means—one. That’s how you tell the other players you’re down to one card.”

He frowns up at me. “But it’s more fun this way.”

Franny shouts, “Uno!” as she puts another card down.

“Sweetie, I just said—

“Aiden’s right. You try it.”

I will never win an argument in my own house ever again. I’m outnumbered. “Uno!” I shout as I put a blue card down. In all fairness to the kids, it is more fun this way.

It’s Sunday, the day I used to love back when I was a bachelor. A day for lying in bed, doing the Times’ crossword, and drinking mimosas. Now, my Sundays involve waking up early and making pancakes for the kids before we go on a hike, which balances out the pancakes. Today though, a bit of rain stopped us from the hike, so I decided to teach them how to play this.

“You know, the storm has passed if you two want to go on our hike.”

“Uno!” Aiden shouts, giggling as he slaps a card down.

“That card doesn’t go with that color or that number.”

“Yeah,” Franny says, “Try again.”

He leans close. “What about this card?”

I groan. “That I’m about to pick up four new ones.”

“Yay! Uno!” he gets up from the living room floor for a celebratory

dance. So, of course, Franny joins him.

“That’s not very sportsman like.”

She grins. “I’m not a spore man.”

I laugh and wish Lily was around to share this moment with. The thought makes that familiar spot in my chest ache. The one that tells me that being a professional with her is a bad idea. I want to give into it. To take her in my arms the next time I see her and—

My phone rings. And it’s a FaceTime call from Clint Bryson. “Kids, quiet

—
“Uno! Uno!” They chant as they dance around the cards on the floor.

I accept the call and hurry out to the pool area. “Hi, Clint—

“Sounds like you’re having a party.” There is a bunch of background noise on his end, too, and he’s sitting down, the lucky bastard.

I chuckle as I pace next to the pool. “That’s my kids. They’re learning how to play Uno. Badly. What’s going on where you’re at? A storm or something?”

“I’m on my jet.”

Of course, he has his own jet. “Well, I hope you’re flying somewhere nice.”

“As do I. I have some concerns about your little resort, and I’d like to speak about them as soon as possible—

“I have the time now, if you’d like.”

He shakes his head. “Call me old-fashioned, but I prefer to do these things in person. I’m flying to Somerset Harbor as we speak. I’ll be at your house in a couple of hours in time for supper.”

Oh shit. What do I say? No? How could I? He’s investing millions of dollars into our resort. I’m not exactly thrilled with him inviting himself into my house with my kids around like he owns the place. But I’m not in a position to tell him no, either. What would Dad do? I force a smile on as I maintain eye contact and tell him, “That sounds like a plan.” Not a *good* one, but a plan all the same. “We usually order—

“I’m looking forward to a home-cooked meal. Haven’t had one of those in ages.”

“Great,” I say.

The warmth of the pavement feels good beneath my feet. Pacing when nervous has always been a quirk of mine and this place has proved to be the best place for that. But before I could take a step back, my foot slips. My

body follows suit and gravity takes over, plunging me into the chilly shallow end with a loud splash. My hands instinctively keep the phone out of the water, thankfully, but the rest of me is soaked. I can hear Clint's laughter as I come back up for air.

Between laughs, he manages to ask, "How did you keep your phone dry like that?"

"Just lucky, I guess."

"Luck had nothing to do with that. That was skill."

Sluicing the water out of my hair with one hand, while keeping the phone up with the other, I ask him, "Around when can I expect you?"

"Around seven, give or take twenty minutes. Can't make promises for tail winds."

"Jet problems," I say knowingly, even though I have no idea if that's true. "See you then." He hangs up, and I'm at a complete loss. But it's only for a moment. I call the only person I can count on these days. She answers and presses the FaceTime button.

Being waist deep in the chilly pool should keep my libido in check. "Hey, Lily."

"Cormac," she says, frowning. "What's going on?"

"I'm sorry to bother you on a Sunday—"

"That's not why I asked. You're all wet."

I raise an eyebrow at her, which makes her blush.

"Uh, wrong wording. Um—"

"I fell in the pool, because an investor distracted me by inviting himself over for a home-cooked Sunday supper."

More frowning. "But you don't cook."

I nod, hoping this goes well. "Which would be why I called you."

"Oh."

"I know this is short notice and I hate to ask the favor, but I am desperate to impress him. This supper could make or break my resort. I cannot explain how important it is, but I will add a generous thank you bonus in your pay this week, if you can make it here—"

She laughs. "I'd do it without the bonus, but I'm happy to take your money. What time?"

"He'll be here around seven."

"Then I'll see you around five-thirty with groceries for a proper Sunday dinner."

“My god, Lily, you are a lifesaver!”

She giggles, and I want to make her make that sound all the time. “I’m happy to help, Cormac. Really, it’s not a big deal—

“Maybe not for you. But for me, it’s huge. Thank you.”

“Yeah. See you soon.” She hangs up.

I take a deep breath, since I averted the first crisis. Now for all the others

—
“Uno!” Aiden shouts as he runs and jumps into the pool in his clothes.

“Not uno!” Franny says, giggling as following along. “Canada ball!”

She jumps in near him in the middle of the pool.

When they come up for air, I can’t help but laugh. “Franny, it’s cannonball, not Canada ball.”

“You’re not supposed to have your phone in the pool,” Aiden says.

“I was on an important call and fell in.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yes, thanks. Besides, you’re not supposed to have your play clothes on in the pool.”

“Okay.” He yanks at his wet shirt.

“Just leave it on, kid.” I shake my head, chuckling to myself. “You know, for someone who is such a stickler for the rules, you certainly like to make up your own a lot.”

He grins. “Yeah.”

I smirk and roll my eyes before walking out of the pool and setting my phone on the table. “Guess what, kids. Lily is coming to make dinner tonight.”

“Yay!” They shout in unison.

I feel their enthusiasm in my heart. “And so is a business associate of mine, so when it’s time for bed, I need you to go with no arguments. Okay?”

Franny nods. “Is Lily making vegetables?”

“I’m not sure. Why? I thought you like when she does.”

She makes a face. “They’re okay.”

“You eat her vegetables all the time, like they’re your favorite thing.”

“I don’t want her to feel bad.”

Knowing how much she hates veggies, I’m moved by the gesture. “That’s a nice thing you’re doing for her, then. You’re a good egg, Franny.”

“I’m not an egg,” she laughs.

The kids splash each other, and I hope that will tucker them out since we

missed our hike. They haven't taken a proper nap outside of when they've been sick in a year so I don't hold my breath for that.

Grabbing a pool towel, I dry off and look at my phone. It's the last place I saw Lily's face.

Sighing, I watch the kids make up rules for a new game and play it badly, while they have the time of their lives. I miss that. The time when things were easy and nothing mattered except for fun. That's where adults screw things up. We have all sorts of inconvenient rules.

Like employers shouldn't date employees.

Lily is a woman worth breaking every rule for.

-

Lily

A home-cooked dinner on microscopic notice. Outstanding.

As I peruse Gifford's Grocery aisles for supplies, I can't help but notice the ambiance. Gifford's has been around since I was a kid, and it's always been the same, homey place. Warm hardwood floors, some items in old barrels, but in a chic way. The lighting makes everything glow, so it looks like it's at the peak of freshness, and being at Gifford's means it is. Somehow, the place always smells like cinnamon rolls when I first walk in. Part of me wants to know how they manage that, but I don't want to ruin the magic.

Walking past a barrel of melons, my mind wanders. I'm not sure what to think of Cormac asking this huge favor. I mean, it's not like I was doing anything else—just painting my toes and preparing for an early bedtime to catch up on some sleep. But still. It's a little rude of him to assume I had nothing going on. I mean, really. How dare he?

I should have just said I was busy. Or simply told him, "No, that's too far outside my job description and I don't want to be held responsible, in case things go south with the business deal."

For that matter, "No," is a complete sentence. I have to remind myself of that.

I don't owe him an explanation for things that are outside my current line of work. In a perfect world, this would have never been an issue because he never would have thought to ask for such a huge favor.

In a perfect world, I'd still have my restaurant.

I'm on the hill of employment now. Someone at the top of the hill makes

a demand downhill, and the next person asks the person below them to make it happen. Which is one of the many reasons I wanted to be my own boss in the first place. I grumble at the selection of seafood, like the dead fish are to blame for my predicament.

Doesn't matter now. I said yes.

And it's not that I mind cooking for the family or guests or whoever. I really rather enjoy that part of things. Cooking for him and the kids helps me get out my cooking urges. But the assumption—

“Hi, can I help you?” The man at the butcher counter asks.

I smile, not wanting to waste time. There will be five people, so I'll need, “Two whole chickens, please. With the giblets, if you have them. And the necks, too.”

His eyes widen and he smiles. “Coming right up.”

I imagine it's not every day someone asks for what most people think of as spare parts. But giblets and necks make the best gravy and a roast chicken needs a proper gravy. Standing there, I run through the list of things I'd like to accompany the roast chicken, while I wonder about Cormac. It's not like him to absentmindedly fall into the pool, so he must be quite concerned about the investor. Which means I need to knock this meal out of the park.

The butcher passes the packages to me. “Anything else?”

“That's it, thank you.” Onto produce. Can't have a home-cooked meal without good produce and a dessert, and I mean to make this perfect. It'd be easy to foul it up out of my annoyance on the short notice. After all, I'm a chef. I can blame the food itself for not being good—who is going to argue with me, if I tell them the produce was of poor quality or they should have given the chicken a different feed or anything else in my realm of expertise. But I don't want to do that. As perturbed as I was when Cormac first called, I know he wouldn't do it without a reason.

He is worried, and I can help. I shouldn't *have* to. But I am going to. Why does this sit so weirdly with me?

In produce, some gorgeous Yukon golds catch my eye, along with the berries. Ripe, plump little things just screaming to be dessert. I grab both, along with the requisite supplies for lemonade, a delicious green salad, and steamed green beans. Simple and classic for a reason—we're going for home-cook, not chef-cook. And hell, I have made the same meal for my kitchen crew frequently. On my way to the dairy and freezer sections, I grab a bottle of pinot gris and a bottle of rosé.

Maybe the situation sits weirdly with me because I'm the employee, not the employer. I made a point of taking care of my kitchen crew. My restaurant would not be just another place where dishwashers, bussers, hostesses all got taken advantage of...and maybe I feel a little taken advantage of in this situation. After all, I doubt he would have asked any of his other nannies to do this.

None of his other nannies were chefs. Calm down. It's not that deep.

I huff at myself for getting overwhelmed and annoyed, and find I'm in front of the freezer section. Gluten-free puff pastry acquired, I zip to the dairy for the last few items—butter, sour cream, heavy cream, cream cheese, all the creams. Simple foods pair well with dairy.

On the way out to Mom's Honda, a new thought hits me. Cormac trusts me. Not just with his kids—although that's huge. But he's used to trusting people with his kids. He asked *me* to cook for his investor. He didn't order delivery and try to pass it off as his own cooking, or call a friend. Cormac called *me* to impress someone. And I think that says something about his opinion of me. Or, at least, of my food. He knows he can count on me.

It's that thought that I hang onto as I drive over to his place. In his opinion, I am trustworthy. Or my food is. Either way, he's counting on me. Of all people.

I try not to make that mean more than it does, but it's hard not to. If Cormac has grown comfortable enough to depend on me for things outside of my job description, then he doesn't think of me as just an employee. I hesitate to call us friends, though. It's not like we've shared our deepest, darkest secrets or whatever. I'm not sure what word describes a woman who you've slept with, who now nannies for you, and who you ask for off-the-wall favors from, but I think Cormac would call it Lily.

I snicker to myself as I pull up to his place, and he pops out of the front door in a flash. He's dried off and dressed in a navy polo and khaki shorts—casual, but nice enough to meet with an investor on the weekend. He gushes, “Thank you, thank you, thank you for this, Lily.”

“You're welcome, but seriously, it's not—

“It is,” he says firmly. “It really is. Let me help carry the groceries.”

“Sure.” We unload the car, and as soon as we walk into the house, the kids hug bomb me. “Alright, you two. I have a lot of cooking and very little time to do it. Who wants to help with the green beans?”

“Me!” Aiden says as he raises his hand.

Franny merely makes a face at the thought of a vegetable.

“Franny, you can wash the berries if you promise not to eat all of them.”

She grins. “Okay!”

“Aprons, you two.”

They scramble for the aprons I had picked up for them last week, and Cormac stares, mouth agape, as we refrigerate some of the items. “How?”

“How what?”

“They’re helping you.”

I laugh. “Kids like to help.”

“Yes, I know that, but I mean...they have aprons.”

“Is that okay?”

He laughs, still staring at his kids as they put their aprons on. “Certainly. I just...I never thought they’d be into this.”

I lean closer, breathing in his scent, and for a moment, it’s hard to concentrate on the topic at hand. Being close to Cormac, smelling him...I fight not to get lost in other thoughts. Quietly, I tell him, “They usually get bored in about ten minutes, but they like to feel helpful. Don’t worry—I keep them away from the knives and all that.”

“I’m not worried, Lily. Just shocked that you’ve gotten them this far. And those denim aprons are adorable.” He sneaks out his phone to take their pictures as they tie the belts around each other.

“I wasn’t sure if you’d be cool with them in the kitchen, but they both showed an interest when I was making dinner, so I picked up the aprons. You don’t mind that they’ve been helping out?”

He shakes his head. “Not even a little bit. It’s good for them. I don’t want them to grow up as spoiled as I did.”

I smirk. “You turned out alright.”

He laughs again. “Gee, thanks.”

Aiden asks, “Lily, what do I do with the green beans?”

“I’ll show you.”

Lily

The kids prove invaluable kitchen aids, washing the produce relatively well and keeping out from underfoot. Thankfully, we had a little practice before this debacle arose, so they understand the mission. To my surprise, their interest lasts for twenty whole minutes, before they feign tiredness and depart for the living room.

After an hour, things are winding down, and Cormac's worried face is replaced by his game face as he watches the door. I had never seen this side of him before. His demeanor is calm, cool, and collected, and it's kind of a turn-on. Who am I kidding? It's definitely a turn-on. As he walks into the kitchen, he has the strut of a predator. "Something smells incredible in here."

"That would be the roasted chicken, gravy, and mashed potatoes, most likely. The combination of the smells always makes me hungry. I warn you—I'm not a baker, so if the berry tart comes out weird after dinner, we'll just make sure he drinks more wine to make up for it."

He clutched at his flat stomach. "I gained a pound just hearing the menu."

I laughed and stirred the gravy again. "How are the kids? Nervous?"

"Not at all. I have them changing clothes, so they look a little more presentable, but Franny just wants to know when she can have some berries."

"Soon, I promise. Well, after dinner." I shrug.

He smiles and for a flash, I see that worried look again. "Clint will be here soon."

"Twenty minutes, if he keeps his schedule." Draining the green beans in a colander, I'm half in the conversation and half out of it.

"Thank you for all of this, Lily. I can't even explain how much you are

saving my ass right now.”

I smirk. “Well, it’s a cute ass. I’d hate to see it in trouble.”

He chuckles softly and his voice drops an octave as he says, “Thanks. But I’m not in here just to distract you from cooking.”

“You’re not distracting me. I have everything under control—ah, shit.” I jerk my hand from the steam over the green beans and shake it, trying to ignore my burning fingertips.

He rushes to me at the sink, grabbing my hand to look at it. “Let me see.”

“I’m fine—

“Let me see,” he says, forcefully taking my hand in his to look. “Doesn’t seem too bad. A little pink. You okay?”

I chuckle. “Cormac, I’m fine. I burned myself worse than this half the nights at the restaurant. Don’t worry about it.”

His eyes flicker down at his hand, still holding mine. For the briefest moment, he hesitates to let me go, and my breath catches in my throat. But then he does. “Right. Of course. Sorry.”

There’s that moment just before a kiss that the tension hangs in the air like a mouthwatering scent. Right now, my mouth is watering. But I sip my water and get back to the green beans. *Don’t freak out. Plan the food. I made salad, blanched the beans, chicken skin is perfect and golden brown, sour cream and chive mashed potatoes are done. We are not about to kiss, so put it out of your mind.*

“Uh, you said something about not being here only to distract me. Good job, by the way.”

He sighs. “I’m sorry I made you burn yourself.”

“I’m was just giving you shit, Cormac. What’s up?”

“There’s another favor I need, and it’s a lot, so I’m not sure how to ask it.”

I shrug, checking the gravy again. Facetiously, I tell him, “As long as it’s reflected in my bonus, ask away.”

He laughs uncomfortably. “Not real sure how I’d explain this one to my accountant.”

I give him a look. “What’s wrong? You sound nervous, like you want me to sleep with the guy.”

“Well—

“Cormac!”

He laughs again. “Not that!”

“Oh. I was gonna say I don’t have that many lines in the sand, but that’s one of them.”

Cormac shakes his head, smiling. “Nothing like that. Not at all.”

“Alright then, out with it.”

“Clint Bryson is a traditional man. Very old school. That’s why he wants a home-cooked meal tonight—I don’t think he gets very many of those, being that he’s usually jet-setting around the world. The life of an oil tycoon, I suppose.” He shrugs his meaty shoulders.

I deadpan, “Wow. I hate him already.”

He smirks. “Can’t blame you.”

“Go on.” We set everything ready for whenever the oil tycoon shows up. I can finally relax, if Cormac would spit out this favor already. He’s been dragging it out so long that now I’m nervous, too.

“He’s family-oriented.”

“And?”

It’s the most nervous I have ever seen Cormac. He chews on the inside corner of his lip, almost giving himself a dimple, and it’s too damned cute. Whatever he’s about to ask, I’ll say yes. And I hate myself for being so easily manipulated, but at the moment, I don’t care.

“I was hoping you wouldn’t mind pretending to be my girlfriend tonight.”

“Oh, that’s easy.”

He frowns. “How’s that?”

“Just tell your accountant you had to hire an actress.”

He laughs once. “I’m not sure if that’s a yes.”

I sigh. “Cormac, this is a lot.”

“I know. And I’m sorry. I don’t mean to ask so much of you, Lily. But like I said, he’s got a thing about family and tradition and all that stuff. If I am a single dad with two kids and no one to anchor the family, he’ll worry. And that makes me worry he won’t invest with us.”

“Surely you have other investors—

“None who are putting up this kind of cash. Without his investment, the resort’s construction will take years instead of being done in the next year and a half. Possibly even sooner, if he’s happy with us. Clint bases his investments on his gut feeling, and he’s from Texas, so—

“And you didn’t think to ask for barbecue or steaks?”

He frowns. “Can you do barbecue in ninety minutes?”

“Okay, fair point. No—you can’t really do barbecue in ninety minutes.

But I could have done steaks or beef of some kind. Dammit.” I turned to the stove, wondering if I’d already completely fucked the dinner up.

“I’m sure he’ll love the meal, Lily. Don’t know how he couldn’t—you’re an incredible chef, and it all smells amazing.”

“You’re just saying that.”

Cormac stands next to me, his hand near mine. The closeness makes my stomach flutter. “I’m not. You know how good you are. Don’t get in your head.”

I sigh. “Sorry. I’m just...I need a kitchen again or something. Just not ready for that. I don’t know.”

“Well, that works out for me,” he teases, gently elbowing my ribs.

I smile and roll my eyes. “Lucky for you.”

“Lily, I know it’s a hell of an ask...”

“You can say that again.”

“Lily, I know it’s a—

I elbow him back, a little harder than he got me. He laughs. “You were half right before, you know.”

“*Half* right? I’m never only *half* right about anything,” he kids.

“When I asked the word for a smart ass thesaurus. I could have just asked for the word for a smartass, and the answer would have been the same. Cormac.”

He laughs and leans closer. “Yes, well...I am what I am, I suppose.”

“About this new and dangerous favor, how would we manage that in front of the kids? If you’re affectionate or whatever, they’re going to catch onto our scheme. I don’t want to confuse them, or god forbid, they mention anything to Abigail.”

“I love my kids. They are my world. That said, neither one is terribly observant about things like romance or what have you. Abigail dated her new husband for a long time before they realized they were a couple. It’s a non-issue.”

I sigh, still unsure about this. “You’re sort of springing this on me, Cormac.”

“I know. And if I had any other person I could call in for this, I would. I don’t want you to feel backed into a corner about it.” He swallows hard. “If Clint gets weirded out by me being single, then I guess...I’ll figure it out. I’m sorry I asked, Lily. I hope it didn’t make you uncomfortable.” His disappointment is so heavy in his voice that it weighs on me, and it might

crush me.

“It’s not that.” How do I explain I like him, so pretending to be his girlfriend won’t confuse *only* the children? *I can’t tell him that. Lie.* “It’s just that—

The doorbell rings.

“Oh shit,” Cormac blurts, before the kids dash for the door. He’s right behind them.

Fuck, I can’t believe I’m doing this. I strip off my apron and join them at the door, standing next to Cormac and behind the children. As Aiden opens the door, I slap a smile on my face and put my arm around Cormac. His eyes widen at me, and he smiles, too. We face the investor together.

He’s a middle-aged man with thinning hair and a huge smile. His weekend outfit of a white polo and red shorts with tiny blue sailboats tells me Cormac knows his audience well. In the driveway, a limo sits, waiting for his return. He passes over a bottle of Chateau Lafite to me and says, “Isn’t this the picture perfect little family?”

I beam at him. “Welcome to our home. Come in.”

Cormac

I cannot believe she's doing this. Thank God. He walks in and Aiden shuts the door for him. Clint immediately ruffles his hair, which makes my son's nose bunch up for a second. Clint chuckles. "I bet you're a scamp."

Aiden looks up at me. "What's that?"

"A troublemaker."

He turns to Clint with a proud smile. "Yes, sir."

Clint laughs, and I introduce him. "This is Franny and Aiden. Kids, this is Mr. Bryson."

"It's a pleasure to meet you both," he says, sticking his hand out.

Franny is the first to grab on. "You too." Then Aiden. The pair run off to the living room, thankfully.

"And who is this?" he asks, eyes glowing on Lily.

She smiles sweetly, and I tell him, "This is Lily. My girlfriend."

"It's so nice to meet you, Clint."

"The pleasure is all mine," he says, shaking her hand. "Something smells wonderful."

"That would be dinner, and I should go check on it. Excuse me."

As she leaves, he quietly says, "She's quite a catch, Cormac. How long have you two been together?"

"Not long, but in some ways, it feels like she's always been here." It surprises me how true that feels.

"I understand. I could not imagine my life without Ava. Show me around."

"Of course." I tour him through the house and out to the backyard. "...

and that would be the pool I fell into—

He laughs hard. “That was an impressive save with your phone. If you can think that fast on your feet, then I can understand why MacMillan Co has the reputation it has.”

“Well, I grew up playing a lot of tennis, so I tend to be quick on my feet. But as far as business goes, everything I learned, I learned it from my father.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Too many your age don’t appreciate the older generations.”

“I—

“But I’m curious about something,” he says in a tone that worries me.

“What’s that?”

“It would be no hardship for your father to fund your resort. Why not let him?”

Because he’s trying to teach us another lesson. “Because I’d rather we did this on our own. He could, certainly, but it’s important for my brothers and I to build relationships ourselves, to move MacMillan Co forward ourselves. If we relied on him for everything, then how could anyone justify doing business with us after he’s gone?”

“It takes foresight to understand that, and too many people do not. I can’t tell you how many people want my money without understanding their own future.” He shakes his head, annoyed. “They think my money will swoop in and fix whatever they need. It’s foolish, and I don’t invest with fools.”

“I can’t blame you. With the market the way it is, everyone should think about their future. Not what someone else can do for them.”

“Precisely.”

The French doors open, and Lily stands there, smiling. “Gentlemen, are you ready for some food?”

“How could I say no to that?” Clint asks facetiously as he walks in.

Behind him, I walk in and give her a hug, whispering, “Thank you.”

She bobs her head once before closing the doors. The table is set and everything looks incredible. As we sit, she walks us through the meal. “Lemon and herb roast chicken and gravy, sour cream mashed potatoes, steamed green beans, and green salad. Clint, would you prefer your wine or would you like to try one of ours? I have a crisp pinot gris and a mild rosé, but if you’d like, I also made lemonade.”

He smiles, still eyeing all the food. “This looks divine and smells even better. I’d like to try the pinot gris.”

She pours him a glass, along with the two of us. Franny holds out her glass for wine, too. Lily says, "Of course." Then she pours her a glass of lemonade. When Franny makes a face, she says, "You're welcome."

"Thank you," Franny sulks.

Aiden sticks his tongue out to tease his sister, but with a sharp look from Lily, his tongue vanishes back into his mouth. "May I have some lemonade?"

"You most certainly may," Lily says as she pours for him, too. We pass around the foods, making our own plates.

Clint notes, "You have a lovely home."

"I love it here in the country," Lily says.

"You should see my ranch," he adds. "It's an hour outside of San Antonio in Bandera. Seven hundred acres of good Texas country."

"That sounds lovely."

"You ever think of buying a ranch, Cormac? Sounds like the little lady would love one."

She grins, but I can see in her eyes, she wants to kill him for calling her *little lady*. I fight the urge to kiss her for holding back. "Never considered myself much of a ranch guy. Maybe a cabin in the woods?"

But Lily shakes her head. "Come on. You've seen horror movies, haven't you? Nothing good happens in a cabin in the woods."

Clint laughs. "Pretty and smart. Where'd you find this one?"

"The wanted ads," she teases.

He laughs, not knowing how close to honest she's being. After he bites into the chicken, he pauses, face falling. My stomach knots in an instant. *What's wrong? Mine is perfect. Why isn't he smiling anymore?* But then he lets out a happy groan. "Oh my god. This is incredible. I demand the recipe."

She laughs musically. "A chef never reveals her secrets."

"I thought that was magicians."

"Us chefs, too."

"Are you an actual chef or—"

"Mm, hmm," she says, as she sips her wine.

He turns to me. "No wonder you scooped her up. Better watch your waistline. She'll fatten you up in no time."

I chuckle. "If you see me a little thicker at the holidays, you'll know why."

"I'll put you on a diet in October to make up for it," Lily says with a wink.

Clint laughs, and I count my lucky stars that she's playing along so well. She doesn't deserve a mere bonus. She deserves *everything* for this performance. I gulp as I wonder just how much of it is a performance, though. Everything feels too natural...too right. Like we're just a couple, chatting with a business associate, like it's not all a lie. Probably just my imagination, but I can't help but wonder if she feels it, too.

As we devour the berry tart for dessert, I'm preoccupied by the raspberries on it. Each one making me think of her.

The kids get squirmy and sleepy, and before I can think to say it, Lily says, "Kids, I think it's your bedtime." Then she looks at me.

I nod. "Go get ready. I'll be there in a few to tuck you in."

"Okay," Franny says. "It was nice to meet you, Mr. Bryson."

"Yeah," Aiden adds while yawning.

"It was wonderful to meet you both, as well." The kids scurry off, and he says, "I have never met such well-behaved children in my life. What's your secret?"

"Good nannies," Lily says, smirking.

I laugh a little uncomfortably, and Clint chuckles, too. "She's not wrong, Clint. I've lucked out in that department in innumerable ways." I mean every word of that about Lily. For a moment, she hid her smile behind her napkin, and I know it's only for me. I haven't sorted out what her bonus will be, but it's going to be big.

"It is important to find the right people for the job," he says. "That is why I am so picky about where my money goes for investments. Why I like to surprise drop in on my projects. I must admit, it surprised me you were willing to let me in on your family dinner."

One of Dad's rules comes to mind. *Lies are best told with a casual smile.* "We're happy to have the company."

Lily smiles and nods as she eats. "I never get to meet any of Cormac's friends from work, so this has been a welcome change."

"You're keeping her all to yourself? I can hardly blame you, but a girl likes to go out, Cormac. You better treat her right or someone else will," he teases.

"Thank you!" she says, smirking at me, like she's told me this a hundred times. "But I think he's a little greedy with my time, and I don't mind that at all."

He chuckles. "Of course. About the resort. When do you see it opening?"

And more of Dad's wisdom comes to mind. "Depending on the investors, we could see an opening in as little as three years."

"Three years?" he asks, appalled. "How little is everyone else investing?"

"It's a tricky thing, Clint. You know better than anyone how volatile the resort industry is, and people are skittish to invest in an unproven product."

Lily chimes in, "It takes a visionary to see a brighter future. Unfortunately, mavericks are scarce."

He smirks. "Don't think I don't know you're buttering me up to be your maverick, young lady."

She giggles. "Well, I should hope so, otherwise you wouldn't be the businessman Cormac has been speaking so highly about."

More chuckles out of him. "She's shrewd. Are you sure you don't need a chef to come on at MacMillan Co?"

"Oh, don't threaten me like that, Clint," she says with a laugh. "I could hardly work in an office all day. Give me a sweaty kitchen over a frosty boardroom any day."

He laughs, and I sit in awe of Lily. *How is she this good at playing the role of the dutiful partner?* I do not know how she's doing it, but I'm grateful beyond measure.

After dinner, she cleans off the table, but I tell her, "Let me—"

"No, no. I have bored Clint enough with my kitchen stories. I'll get this all put away while you two chat. Clint, would you care for a nightcap?"

"I am set with what I have, thank you. And dinner was incredible. Truly."

"I'm so glad you enjoyed it." She cleans off the table like a pro, arms loaded with plates as though they were nothing.

Once she disappears into the kitchen, Clint firmly says, "Marry her."

I laugh. "Like I said before, all of this is pretty new—"

"And she's perfect. Marry her."

"Let's talk about the resort." Before I get lost in thoughts of Lily in a wedding dress.

Lily

Standing in the doorway, we wave at Clint as his Escalade pulls away. Once he's out of sight, I close the door. "Well, that was...something."

Cormac laughs. "Um, yes. Yes, it was."

"About that thing I said—nannies raising your kids, and that's why they're so great—

He laughs again. "You weren't wrong. And the thing I said, that I lucked out in that department...I meant that about you, Lily."

I blink, unsure of what to say to that. "You did?"

"Yes." He steps so close I can feel his body heat. "I consider myself very lucky to have found you."

I gulp as I look up into his piercing blue eyes. "You do?"

"Haven't I been clear about that?" His gaze drifts to my lips.

My heart pounds in my chest. "I—

"Dad," Franny whines in her pajamas. "You were supposed to tuck us in."

"Of course, sweetie. I'm sorry," he says, rushing to her. "Let's do bedtime."

"Okay," she says, yawning as she holds his hand. The pair toddle down the hallway together, and I'm moved by the sight. Cormac really is a great dad.

That was too close. Too much. He had that look again. We had agreed not to...have that look again. It's too dangerous. Abigail will fire me. I can't get caught up in his gaze and cologne and handsomeness. Shaking the thought from my head, I finish clearing the rest of dishes from the table and set about

cleaning up.

I had cleaned as I cooked, so it's not too much, thankfully. Thinking about the dinner, I try not to think about any of it too hard. As annoyingly traditional as Clint could be about some things, he seemed like a decent enough guy. And with Cormac treating him like a VIP, I'm pretty sure he can't be too evil. I doubt he'd do business with someone repugnant. But all of that is really just a way for me to ignore the actual issue from supper tonight.

It felt right.

Not the part where Clint called me *little lady*, because yuck. But the rest of it—pretending to be Cormac's girlfriend, having an almost maternal role with the kids—there was no part of that I didn't enjoy. I was right. This is confusing.

Thankfully, the kids didn't seem to pick up on anything weird. Once Franny had her berry tart, nothing else seemed to matter to her, and Aiden devoured more green beans for his dessert, bypassing the tart even though it was gluten-free. She kept giving him a look like he was crazy, but he was undeterred. Neither one appeared to care about whatever we were talking about.

When I heard Clint say the thing about marrying me, though, my heart stopped.

Since our titles are total fiction, it's a moot point, but...do I even want to get married at all? I cannot picture a guy who would marry someone who is hardly around. Once this job is over and I go back to a kitchen, though, do I want to keep hooking up instead of hitching up?

I shake my head at myself and keep washing. No point in wondering about all of that stuff now. It doesn't matter. What matters is tonight went well, and from what I overheard, it sounds like Clint is interested in going through with the investment. Smart of him—if I were in his cowboy boots, I'd invest in Cormac, too. I might not know his business, but I know a solid investment when I see one.

And there is no one more solid than Cormac MacMillan. When he hugged me earlier, I felt it again. That block of muscle that is his body. God. It's like he lives at the gym instead of the office. I'm not sure how he makes the time, other than he once mentioned that he usually works out at lunch. Whatever the case, it was hard not to picture him naked. Those shoulders, those pecs, that eight pack—

“Hey, Lily,” he says quietly as he walks into the kitchen.

“Oh, hey.” I was not just thinking about you naked.

“I just wanted to say it again. Thank you. For everything. You were amazing tonight.”

I laugh. “I’m happy to help—

“Seriously,” he comes closer, “don’t just brush this off. I won’t. You may have single-handedly saved my resort tonight. This is a huge deal for me, for my company, for hundreds of jobs in the area. It’s a shame that those people won’t know your name for that. But I will never forget what you did for me. Thank you.”

My heart is racing. I swallow hard and look him in those piercing blue eyes. “You’re welcome, Cormac.”

His little half-smile kills me. “And I hope it wasn’t too strange—

“No. I mean, a little, but no. Not really.” The dinner wasn’t strange, and maybe that’s what’s strange about it. But after Clint left...

“Good, good. How did you know how to do that?”

I frown. “Cook?”

He laughs. “No. How to be the perfect hostess and fake girlfriend.”

“Oh.” I shrug. “It’s not that different from catering to any other high net worth person, and my restaurant was usually full of them. Plus, all the chatter between them made for good fodder for tonight. I used to hear all kinds of conversations at the restaurant. A lot of it was business-type stuff, schmoozing and all that.”

“You did it flawlessly. I am not paying you enough.”

“That’s probably true,” I tease. It’s not true at all. If anything, he’s overpaying me.

He laughs. “And your bonus this week will reflect that. Anyway, I’m going to straighten the living room. The kids left their books out. Oh, unless you want a hand in here—

“I’ve got it. Almost done, anyway.”

He nods. “Thank you again, Lily.”

“Yeah.”

After he leaves the kitchen is when I can breathe again. I should have kept him in the kitchen just so I could absorb more of him. His scent. His cute little half-smile. My head drops, and I stomp my feet as quietly as humanly possible just to get the tension out of my body. It’s so hard to be around Cormac sometimes, but especially tonight.

I take a breath to clear my head. The supper was a lot of fun, and I should

focus on that instead of what I don't have. How nice it was to have a family dinner and meet a billionaire. It's not every day that I do that while pretending to be my boss' girlfriend. Plus, dinner turned out great, so I have that going for me.

And the best part of all, I helped Cormac.

Maybe I'm hopeless, but I enjoy helping him. I like being the person he can count on. I like being there for him. As much as the request had put me out, it also flattered me to be the person he thought of for this. He's this guy with loads of money. He could call anyone to help with this problem, and of all the people in the world, he called me. It is strange to think of myself as reliable in that way. But maybe I've grown.

I chuckle, thinking about how my kitchen friends would laugh at the thought of calling me last minute for anything food-related. They know better than most that I am a planner. Hell, even at my restaurant, I had a template for the food. Because of seasonality, it was never the same twice, but the techniques and methods followed a pattern they could rely on. It simplified things and made the kitchen less stressful.

Now, though...

There is nothing predictable when it comes to Franny and Aiden. Or, for that matter, Cormac.

Him asking me to pretend to be his girlfriend after everything? Never in a million years would I have thought he'd do that. Yet somehow, tonight's evening went off without a hitch, and I actually enjoyed pretending to be his girlfriend. Especially with the nanny job at hand. And he played along brilliantly, just like I knew he would. Otherwise, I wouldn't have said something so brazen.

Once the kitchen is clean and leftovers are in the fridge, I'm not sure what to do. Clint is in the living room, and I have to walk through there to get out of the house. Which means I have to walk past him. And I'm not quite ready to see him yet. Or to say goodbye to him yet.

I have to get out of this house. This is not healthy for me. Not when I'm crushing on my boss. I am obsessing over every detail. I have to stop.

Just go out there, tell him goodnight, and run to the car. It's as simple as that. Do not doddle. Do not pause. If he says something, he will repeat it tomorrow. If he asks why you ran out of here tomorrow, tell him it was cramps. Grab your keys and go.

In the living room, he's near the entrance to the kitchen and crouched on

the floor, looking at one of the kids' toys. I smile down at him. "Um, I cleaned everything up. The leftovers will make a nice—

Cormac stands up and looks in my eyes, but it's the look in his that cuts me off from whatever I was saying. Without a word, he comes in close and he hooks his hand around the back of my neck, pulling me to his lips. My heart leaps in my chest, and I'm in his arms before I can think. I don't want to think anymore. I only want this.

-

Lily

Cormac backs me against the living room wall. His mouth makes me shake for him. Each kiss is hotter and sweeter than the last. He tastes like wine and berries, and I am drunk on him. Maybe this is wrong, but that only makes me want it more.

He kisses along my jaw, then whispers, “I don’t want to stop.”

“Then don’t.”

He nibbles my neck. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

Cormac’s fingers lace between mine and he presses my hands to the wall, looking in my eyes. “You know you can say no, right?”

I nod, too wet, too wound up to say no or even remember the word.

He holds my hands over my head and kisses me again, as I wrap my leg around his to pull him closer. He’s hard, and his erection rubs against me where I want it to. I tremble against him, yearning for more. But then he pulls back, a panicked look on his face. “The kids—

“I didn’t hear anything.”

“Me either. But,” he releases his hold, “let’s take this upstairs to be on the safe side.”

“Oh. Right.” The idea of how to do this while they’re home hadn’t occurred to me.

Cormac takes my hand and leads me upstairs. I hadn’t been in his room before—there was no need for me to be. But it is almost just as I had pictured it. As he closes the door behind me, I take it all in. The snick of the lock makes things feel different. Real. “To keep them out. Not to keep you in.”

I laugh. “I know.”

His enormous windows overlook the forest and in the distance, the ocean sits black, glittering beneath the night sky. A king-sized bed sits against the far wall, and as we walk in, a motion light gradually crescendos dim. Dark green sheets dress the bed, which is flanked by a pair of wooden cube nightstands, each topped by small silver lamps. It is clean and masculine, with sharp angles and nothing for décor.

He wraps his arms around me from behind and kisses my shoulder. “If you change your mind—

“I’m not.”

“You can, though. At any time.”

I smile. “I know.”

He moves my ponytail out of his way and licks up the back of my neck. I can hardly hold still when he does that. It makes me think of the first time he did that. When he was inside of me. I let out a little moan, and he murmurs, “Every time you make that sound, you make me want to hear it again.” He licks me there again, and I cannot stop the moan.

He turns me around and kisses me harder than before, groaning in my mouth. I want this. I want him undone, coming after me. Wanting me.

I wrap my hands around the back of his neck and he grabs my ass to pick me up. With my legs belting his waist, he carries me to his bed. Setting me on the end of it, Cormac tears his shirt over his head and tosses it away. He grabs for the button at the top of his shorts, but I swat his hand and take over, unbuttoning him. He laughs and eagerly watches me as I slide them off of his hips. Underneath, a pair of gray boxer briefs stretched over his cock.

They have to go.

Slowly, I work them down his body and flutter my tongue over the root of him and all the flesh there as I expose it. He sucks in air through tight teeth, like a reverse hiss. Once his cock is out completely, I am amazed I got all of that in me before. I lick across the broad head of him, taking my time to get him on the edge. His body arcs to me, coming forward instinctively. But he doesn’t thrust into my mouth—he is careful not to, in fact. Maybe he doesn’t want to offend me or wants to be gentle or something.

This will not do at all.

Wrapping my lips around him there, I enjoy the growls from his throat as I take more of him into my mouth. His growls make me ache for him. He tastes so good that I want to take all of them at once, but I also want to torture

him a little. To make him feel at least some of the strife I've been feeling around him.

And that's what it's been. This whole time, since I've been working with him and our agreement not to let this happen, has been pure torture. Each time he passed me in the kitchen or we swapped bedtime story duty or any other moment we've had since that kiss on our beach day, I have longed to feel him pressed up against me. To taste him. To feel those electric lips on me again. Never in my life has someone had such a hold on me.

Maybe that's why this feels so good. And so right.

Soon, I have him in my throat, thrusting into my face and breathing hard. He grabs my ponytail to keep me at his pace, and I love that. Feeling like he has all the control, while knowing it's me who has him by the balls. He bucks into my mouth, his cock straining inside the skin. Cormac hisses, "I need to be inside of you."

I look up at him from beneath my lashes, and he meets my gaze as I take him further in. He rasps, "Fuck, Lily, I need—"

But I shake my head and keep at him, sucking him in so deep that I can hardly breathe. I massage his sac as I do it, and soon, his fingers weave against my scalp. He sucks in a breath and his cock tightens as he thrust into my throat. Cormac warns, "Soon!"

And I keep at him, sucking, rubbing, bobbing at his pace, doing anything I can to make him come. I want that more than air. Want to make him feel good. Want to taste all of him.

No. Not want. I need to. Whatever this is between us, I *need* to make him feel good.

His grunts and gasps grew loud as he came down my throat, his body jerking out of his control into my face. When he stops shuddering and pulls out from between my lips, I can't help but smile up at him. I'd done it. Made him feel good.

Cormac growls, "Take off your pants."

But instead, I lick up his soft shaft. "You're spent."

He laughs harshly, half out of breath still. Then he pushes me back against the bed so hard that I bounce on it, and he tugs at my pants until they slide down my legs, leaving me in my underwear. Cormac gets on his knees between my feet and kisses up my legs, one side, then the other, as he makes his way to my core. There, he gently bites me over my underwear, and I yelp and pop up onto my elbows.

“Hey!”

He laughs in that throaty, manly way. Then he runs his palm over me there, pressing against me. “Are you always this wet for me?”

I breathe, “Yes.”

“Good.” He pulls my underwear off and lies on top of me. But instead of thrusting into me, he straddles my waist, careful not to give me his full weight, and pulls my top off. “That bra has to go.”

“Well, I can’t do that while you’re sitting on me.”

Instead of moving, he rubs my tits over my bra, letting the lace bite into my nipples. He palms me there, warming me through and making me moan again. “God, that sound.” At that moment, he hardens up again and climbs off of me and as he does, I lose the bra and pull my ponytail down. I want to shove him onto the bed and mount him right then. To close the distance between us and feel him fill me up again. I yearn for it.

Cormac lies beside me and, with a hand on my chest, presses me onto the bed. He kisses my shoulder, my collarbone, taking his time with each kiss. His hand stirs a circle around my nipples before he cups my breasts. I lasso his neck with my arms and pull him close to me, longing for more. But he is in no hurry.

And it drives me crazy.

“Cormac,” I whisper. “I need you.”

“I’m all yours.” He pulls me onto him, only not where I’d thought he would. Instead, he pushes me upwards until I straddle his face. The padded headboard in front of me, I grab the edge as he wraps his arms around my thighs and his mouth starts in on me.

“Mm, fuck!” I hiss.

His mouth fits around my clit, sucking in pulses on me there. I am shaking hard for him, and I nearly lose my grip on the headboard. It’s so intense that I zip through the buildup and wonder if he’s going to drown. So fucking wet. My body throbs on his tongue, and before I know it, I’m coming on his face. I bite my forearm to stop from screaming so loud that I wake anyone.

When I start to come down, my body goes limp, and Cormac guides me into the bed, laying me next to him. He climbs on top of me, and I kiss my taste from his lips while he parts my thighs. Our kisses are feverish, both of us too filled with the need for this to slow down. His cock presses against me there, and I jut my hips up to meet him, taking in as much as he’ll give me.

As he fits inside, I'm shaking all over again.

Once he's up to the hilt, a new sound comes out of both of us. Not a moan, not a grunt. Something in between that comes up from our souls. I tightly wrap my legs around him, and he scoops beneath me, pressing me to his chest as he thrusts. Close is not close enough.

At that angle, he rubs that right spot inside. The one that makes my eyes roll back and draws me near. I bite his bottom lip, needing something, anything, to dig myself into. A way to stay grounded and not lose myself in the moment. But all it does is make me want more. So I cling to him, with my arms around his ribs. I'm too lost to his body, too desperate for every touch and sound. I need this too much, and it scares me.

But I can't stop, either.

Cormac makes me feel wanted and safe, and there is nothing in this world that I want more than that. He holds me tight again, then rolls onto his back, keeping me on top of him. He thrusts up into me as I ride him, and he strokes the side of my cheek, staring into my eyes. Another one builds up, bigger than before. My breaths are shallow, and I'm weak all over. I grind down hard on his cock for the pure pleasure of it, and he grabs my ass, pushing and pulling me against him. He growls, "Baby, yes, come on me. I want to feel it again."

I shatter on his words, him calling me baby, him telling me to come on him. It's all more than I'd hoped for, and I cannot hold back this time. Bliss rips through me, unleashing my control. My scream is cut short by his hand suddenly over my mouth, and I'm grateful for that. As it dies and I'm limp once more, I lay onto his chest and listen to his rapid heartbeats. Just as I catch my breath, he rolls us back onto me.

Dizzy and weak from coming so hard, I softly hold his face as he pumps into me. His every stroke drives into my spot again and again, and as he swells from it all, another climax washes through me. Suddenly, he's on my mouth, absorbing my screams as I come. And this time, he comes too, pounding wildly into me. His body jerks hard, all control lost to his own orgasm. Our kisses grow languid long into the night.

Cormac

This woman is too much. Too much heat, too much sexiness. All of it is too much. And yet, I can't get enough of her.

At supper, when she presented the berry tart, I couldn't help but smirk at all the raspberries on it. Each one made me think of her scent. It was a silly thought, but I couldn't help it. Eating the tart had made me think of eating her, and from that point on, I had the hardest time staying focused. Which might be why I took a shot at kissing her in the living room. I needed this.

I need Lily.

After she returns from cleaning up in the bathroom, I don't want to stop kissing her. Ever. Her lips, her chin, her jaw, the curve of her neck, I want it all. It'll take more than her moans to get me hard again after that, but I don't care if I ever get hard again, just so long as I can make her come. Kissing down her throat and chest, I pry her thighs apart as I kneel between them.

She groans, "Cormac, what are you doing?"

"Whatever I want."

Her whining moan response makes me lose my mind. "But you...I don't think you can get hard again."

"I don't care," I mumble at her navel, before I kiss her there, too. I snake my fingers between her thighs and up to her pussy. She's wet again, and it's all I can do not to yell at my cock for not being ready. But her sweet little body distracts me from that.

I pet her there, running my fingers up and down her softness and making her tremble. Her reactions are everything right now. She did so much for me today that I have zero plans for sleep tonight.

She whimpers, “What about you? If you can’t come again, that’s not fair

—
I rasp a laugh. “I don’t give a shit about this being fair to me.” When I graze against the little rough patch inside of her, her body locks up and she gasps, her head digging back into the pillows. There it is. The spot I was hitting with my cock that made her shake even more. As I touch her there, joggling two fingers on it, I rub my thumb on her clit.

“Oh my god—

“Pillow, baby.”

She grabs one and shoves it over her mouth. It’s a pity we have to be quiet, but neither of us wants to be interrupted by curious questions, either. She latches her arms tight around the pillow, and her body stiffens even more.

So, I lick her clit.

She lifts the pillow for a breath, then clamps it back down. But I still hear her when she groans, “Fuck!”

I make a meal of her there with my fingers still inside of her body, working her over. There is nothing else but the woman in front of me. I whisper, “You taste even better than I imagined you would.”

She must have not the pillow down too tight, because her voice shakes as she gasps, “You imagined how I taste?”

“Mm, hmm,” I murmur against her clit before I torture her there with my tongue. Her fingers grasp onto my hair, the tips dragging on my scalp. When I hit just to the side of her clit, her stomach goes rigid. So, I concentrate there, until her body clamps onto my fingers. I can feel her pulse inside of her, and I love knowing I’m the one who makes it race.

She has made my pulse race since the moment I met her.

And it’s not just a sexual thing, either. Not even close. This is so much more than that. Day in, day out, I find myself preoccupied by thoughts of Lily. Some dirty, some not. Some are simply about the day on the beach. How wonderful it was. Every day that I come home from work knowing she will be here when I arrive, it makes me look forward to being home instead of the office. In fact, I’ve taken to leaving a little earlier than I used to.

With everyone I love here, why the hell would I stay away any longer than I had to?

Wait. Did I just think about love...oh, she’s about to come. I keep at her, staying right where she likes it. Thinking of her coming makes my cock throb

back to life somehow. As she comes, her heels dig into my shoulders, making her arch over the bed. I struggle to keep up, but I manage, cocking my head and hand up to stay with her until she drops back down.

She flings the pillow from her red, sweaty face, and I launch up to her, thrusting straight in. We cry out together, too caught up to care about anything else. I pound into her, and she meets me, thrust for thrust. When she tightens again, I'm thrilled to know she's about to come again. I want this so bad. Want to feel her come on me, because of me.

Her glazed eyes and gasping lips are my new obsession. I cup the side of her face in my hand and can't stop staring. Her too, it seems. Our eyes lock, and for however long this lasts, there is nothing else in the world. Just us.

The heat of the moment rises in my body, ecstasy climbing my spine. Nothing has ever felt like this. No one has ever experienced anything this good. Showing her how I feel about her with my body is incredible. It's all I can do not to blurt things I shouldn't say. Things I shouldn't feel.

She digs her face against my palm and kisses me there, baring her neck to me. I lick her soft skin, breathing in the sweet scent of raspberries as I bury my face into her hair. She closes in around me, pussy, arms, legs, all pulling me in. I want this woman every day, every minute.

Her moans call to my orgasm, making me come with her. It's earth-shattering, life-altering, mindless, and so good that it almost hurts when I come deep inside of her. I bite the pillow her head is on to keep myself from screaming, and she bites my shoulder to do the same. When the bliss falls away, there is only us again. Panting at each other's faces as we gaze, lost in each other's eyes. Free falling into one another.

I'm not about to pull out. Not yet.

The connection between us, both literal and metaphorical, is too strong. Her lips are pink from too many kisses and I wonder if mine are as well. She smiles, reaching to my cheek. I kiss her palm the way she did to me. But then she takes that hand and places it over my heart. Sleepily, she murmurs, "So fast."

"You make it fast."

Her smile grows, and our mouths meet over and over. I wish I could get hard for her again, if only to please her that way once more. But I'm sure I'm done for at this point. I thrust out of habit, not because anything will come of it. But touching her means I need to do it. Lily gasps a little bit, then giggles.

"What?"

“Tickles.”

“Oh.” For that, I will pull out. But I’m not willing to see her flee to the bathroom yet. I enjoy having her in my bed too much for that. “Stay there.” I go to the bathroom for towels for us both, and rejoin her in the bed. After cleanup, she puts her head on my shoulder, so I wrap my arm around her. The other hand is free to play with her hair, and she runs her fingers through my short chest hair and grazes against my nipple. Which makes me twitch.

“What?”

“Tickles.”

She giggles at that, then does it again.

“Oh, you brat!”

She laughs hard, and I tickle her until she begs me to stop. As she gathers her breath again, she lays back down on me. “Cormac?”

“Yes?”

“Thank you for counting on me.”

“That might be the last thing I expected to hear after all of that.”

She sits up a little to look me in the eye. “About today. The stuff with Clint. It means a lot to me that you trusted me to handle that.”

“Lily, I trust you. Period.”

She lays back onto me. “Thanks for that.”

“I’m the one who should thank you.”

“You already did. Several times, actually.”

I chuckle. “Well, I can’t help that. It’s too fun to make you come.”

“Same here.”

I kiss the top of her head. “To be honest, I have more than one reason to thank you.”

“Oh?” She yawns.

“I cannot remember the last time I have gotten this many erections in a night.”

Her giggles are music. “Gee, you’re such a romantic.”

She wants romance? I don’t think I can do romance on short notice. Not without saying the wrong thing. “The night I met you, do you know what I was thinking?”

“What?”

“This seedy bar is exactly where I need to be, because no one I know will be here.”

She laughs. “Snob.”

“No, that’s not how I mean it. I needed to be someplace I wasn’t worrying about everything. Making the right connection, drinking the right drink. Saying the right things to the right people...I needed to be somewhere that I could just be.” I pause, screwing up my courage. “And then this woman, in what I ended up finding out through Google are chef clothes, so clearly not going out to see and be seen, this woman picks me up. Me, when I’m haggard and feel worn to the bone with stress, and she still wants me. So, my first thought when I met you was, ‘How? How can she possibly be interested?’”

“Are you kidding? Have you seen you?”

I laugh hard. “Once or twice.”

“And *you* were haggard? *I* was in a depression spiral, not willing to wear anything but my chef clothes because I was so upset about my restaurant.”

I give her a squeeze and kiss her again. “Which was how I knew you definitely were not a sex worker.”

She laughs again. “What?”

“The chef clothes. That was my second thought, to be honest. That if a woman will hit on me when I looked that rough, she is a sex worker or needs new a contact lens prescription.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I don’t wear contacts.”

“I know that now. But at the time, I thought it might explain the outfit.”

She nudges me with her elbow. “You dick.”

I laugh and wrap her up in my arms tightly. “Things aren’t conventional between us—

“Oh really? I wasn’t sure.”

“Who’s the smart ass now?”

She grins at me.

“Convention aside, Lily, I’m really glad you’re here right now. I’m glad that I took the near-sighted girl to a hotel. And I’m glad for all the things that have happened in between.”

“Me too. Jerk.”

I grin down at her. “Ready for sleep?”

“Mm, hmm.”

“I suppose I will allow it.”

She giggles again. “Why? What did you have planned?”

“I was going to keep going at you all night.”

“Can you even get hard again after all of that?”

“God no,” I say with a laugh. “But my fingers and tongue aren’t tired.”
She yawns. “I am.”

“Well, then.” I roll her onto her side and cuddle her as the big spoon with my arm over her waist to keep her close to me. To dream of raspberries.

Cormac

A crash downstairs jolts me awake, which wakes Lily. I whisper, “Stay here, I—

“Dad!” Aiden hollers, sing-song up the stairs. “Can I have cereal?”

Relief hits like a truck. Not a burglar. Then I realize the real threat. The kids could see her in my bed. I yank my sweatpants up and tell her, “I’ll do my morning routine with the kids and—

“After you go, I’ll see myself out.”

But I shake my head. “Please don’t.”

“How come?”

“I’m calling in to work. I want to spend today with you. If you don’t have anything else—

“I don’t.”

“Good. Okay. Let me take care of them, and I’ll be back soon.”

She yawns and buries her face into the pillows, as I pull a tee shirt on and run out the door. The crash turned out to be a bowl that shattered upon impact with my floors. A teary-eyed Franny is picking up shards, and I lurch forward to snatch it from her. “I’ve got it, sweetie.”

“I didn’t mean to—

“Of course not. It’s okay.”

Her little sniffles rip my heart out. “Aiden was hungry. I wanted to make him cereal.”

He puts his arm on her shoulders. “I’ll be okay, Franny. I’m not that hungry.”

But she keeps sniffing anyway.

After sweeping up the pieces and checking half a dozen times for anything I missed, I let her back into the kitchen. “You want to help me make cereal?”

She bobs her head. “He had a bad dream, and I wanted to make him feel better.”

“You had a bad dream, buddy?”

He shrugs as he pulls up a seat at the kitchen bar. “I was in a big scary castle and I kept hearing screaming. It was weird.”

God, please do not tell me he heard me and Lily and that we were not the cause of his nightmare last night. “That is weird. Rice crispies or cheerios?”

“Cheerios, please.”

After getting them fed and clothed, I race upstairs to dress like I was going to work. If I didn’t, they would want to stay home, too, and I need to have the talk with Lily. As I dress, I hear her light snores, and I can’t stop smiling.

I kiss her forehead on the way out and dash out the door with the kids just in time. Crisis averted, no burglar, no injuries, no one knows anything—

“Dad, why is Lily’s car still here?” Franny asks.

Shit. “She had a friend pick her up. Car trouble.” Wow, two lies in under ten seconds. That has to be a record.

“Oh.”

Thank god, that’s where she leaves it. On the way to school, all I can think about is how much last night means to me and what our steps should be going forward. It’s a sticky situation to be in, all things considered. I have left myself vulnerable to many problems, not to mention the snark of my family.

I can hear it now. “Couldn’t find anyone, so you *hired* someone?” But the truth is, I don’t give a fuck. Let them talk. The only people whose opinions matter are me, Lily, Aiden, and Franny. And Abigail, considering she’s the one who hired her. That might be a little awkward at first, but she is a reasonable person.

Dropping the kids off, I give a wave to their teacher as I unbuckle their seats. Once they are with her, I smile and drive off. I’m too in my head to make conversation right now.

This thing between me and Lily cannot be a onetime situation. I want more. There is no way for me to go back to a strictly professional, or even a friendly relationship. I had tried to kid myself into believing that would work, but it was never going to. There is just too much here between us.

On the road, I get a text from Clint and have the car read it to me. “Great dinner last night. I want to sign the papers to move forward with the investment. And you are a lucky man. Lily is a hell of a woman. Talk later.”

I laugh and smack the steering wheel in celebration. This is it. The thing I’ve been waiting for—the thing we’ve all been waiting for. It’s finally here. I debate getting Beau on the line, but...I want to share this with just Lily for now.

After a pit stop at the cute bagel shop downtown, I race back home, eager to tell her the good news. When I open my bedroom door, her snores are fainter now. As much as I hate to wake her, I cannot hold this in. So, I kiss her lips and she starts for a moment, before melting against me. “Good morning.”

Lily yawns. “Good morning.”

I proffer the bagels. “Peace offering for waking you?”

“Mm,” she snatches the bag, “you can wake me with bagels and iced coffee anytime.”

I chuckle and undress, slipping my sweatpants back on before getting into the sheets. Meanwhile, she’s halfway through her sesame and cream cheese by the time I join her. “Guess what.”

“Hmm?” she asks around a mouthful.

“Clint texted. He wants to sign the papers for the investment.”

“Oh my god,” she says, half choking. After knocking back more iced coffee, Lily smiles. “That’s wonderful, Cormac. I’m so happy for you.”

“He says you’re a hell of a woman, and I agree.”

“Aw. Flatterers, both of you.”

But I shake my head. “Not flattery. It’s the truth.”

Something uncanny fills her eyes and she sets her food aside, which has me worried. She was way too into the food a moment ago for this to be anything less than serious. “Cormac, I think last night was a mistake.”

“No.”

She sighs and can hardly look me in the face. “I don’t...with the kids and Abigail—

“They love you already. What’s the problem?”

“I couldn’t take it if they ever hated me. If *you* ever hated me.” Her sadness wrecks every bit of joy I had a second ago. “This was a mistake. I can’t do this—

“And I can’t stop,” I said, kissing her to make her worries disappear. If

she pushes back, I will stop. If she says it again, I'll back off. But instead of pulling away, she climbs on top of me. I'm out of my sweatpants and hard for her in a flash. But before she straddles me, I break the kiss. "Lily, if you mean any of that—

"I don't know what I mean. All I know is I want you. I want this to be real. And I'm scared of what that means."

"Why are you scared?"

She worries her bottom lip for a moment, before admitting, "Because I haven't felt like this before."

I'm elated to hear it, and I kiss her without another thought. She straddles me, already wet. As soon as our bodies crash together, our sounds fill the room. Her warmth soothes me in ways I never knew I needed. The slide of her body on mine is intoxicating. It's all I ever want to feel. As she rides me, her tits bounce in my face, but I want to watch her lips as she moves. Pursing, gasping, quivering. I run my hand up to her cheek and graze my thumb over her open pink lips, but she is too deep inside of herself to notice much of anything else.

It's then that I wrap my arms around her, needing her closer than she could be. To feel her pressed against me. She takes my face in her hands and kisses me, and every thought fades into nothing. All but one.

I love Lily Olson. It's too soon to say it to her. But I vow to spend each day showing her in a hundred different ways.

Her chest flushes and her sounds grow ragged. When she clenches on me and her body locks up, I take over, bouncing her on me. She unleashes herself, lost to her orgasm. My new favorite event. As she stills, I roll her over, staying deep inside of her. Her hair has gone wild over my pillow like a halo, and each whimper and moan is ecstasy. In the morning light, she's the angel of my bed.

Rolling myself into her, there is little I can do to hold anything back. My body, the words I long to say to her. I want to give her everything of me. Every sound she made sends my blood roaring. When she grips my forearm, eyes wide on mine, I know she's close again. She pants, "Baby, I'm—

"Yes, do it," I tell her.

Her eyes flip back as she groans and writhes beneath me. I can't stop now. That trapped pressure shoots heaven through my body, and there's no holding it back. As I come, I clench around her, needing this and so much more. I kiss Lily for the pleasure of it and to keep my mouth from saying

something that could scare her away.

Lily

As soon as I sit at the table where Aria is waiting for me, she asks, “You fucked him, didn’t you?”

I laugh and my cheeks burn. “How did you know?”

She smiles and rolls her eyes. The server jumps at the chance to take our orders and leaves. Aria says, “Because you haven’t looked me in the eye in over a week when you come to get the kids, and Cormac’s been a grinning idiot the past couple of times I’ve seen him.”

I sigh, still smiling. “Yeah, well.” Then I shrug.

“Wow. It must be incredible for you to keep your mouth shut about it.”

I nod, too lost for words. “I don’t even know where to begin.”

“Start from the beginning.”

“It all got going the night his investor came over for supper...” I tell her the whole thing, and end with, “...it’s been a couple of weeks now, I think, and Aria, I have never been so happy and so terrified in my entire life.”

“Ok, yay for happy, but why terrified?”

“Let’s not brush aside my happiness so easily—

She laughs. “I’m not. I figured we’d circle back to it, because this may be the first time you have ever told me you were happy with a guy.”

Blowing out a breath, I can’t help but think about every reason I’m scared to death right now. “When Abigail gets back, I’ll be fired when she finds out. *If* she finds out.”

“You don’t know that—

But I cut her optimism off with a look.

“Well, sure, but I mean, I get it.”

I nod, and our drinks come. After I knock some back, I tell her, “Jobs come and go, that’s the nature of them, I guess. I can survive that. In theory. But I’ve really started to love my job. It’s so weird. I never thought of nanny as a career path for me, but they are such great kids, you know?”

“More than most. Yeah. I know.”

“And the thought of never seeing the kids again—

“Wait, why wouldn’t you be able to see them if you got fired? You’re dating their dad.”

I huff. “And how long do you think that will last once Abigail finds out? She probably won’t want me around the kids—

“You’re being silly, sweetie. I see it all the time. People get bitchy for a little while and then they get past it for the sake of the kids. It’ll be okay.”

“That’s not the only thing I’m scared about, Aria. This thing with Cormac...it’s not like anything I have ever felt. And we’re actually dating, which is weird for me.”

“Welcome to relationships, Lily. They are scary and bring up all kinds of feelings and it’s uncomfortable—

“Why does anyone do this to themselves? It’s so much!”

She giggles. “Because it’s also wonderful. Breathtaking. Life affirming. It’s the reason to get out of bed in the morning and the reason to sleep well at night, knowing that someone loves you.”

“Well, now you’ve gone too far. Love? Pfft.” I shake my head and finish my drink. “That’s a little much.”

“The drink or love?”

“Both. Although I don’t mind it for the drink.”

She rolls her eyes. “Come on. Isn’t that what you’ve been talking about?”

“No,” I say with a credulous laugh. “I’m not...this isn’t that. I loved my restaurant. I *like* Cormac.”

“Self-deception is not a good look, sweetie.”

“Whatever. Anyway, we’re keeping things private, making sure to keep our hands to ourselves in front of the kids, that kind of thing. And it’s not like we go out on dates, since Abigail doesn’t know yet and we want to make sure we are the ones to tell her, not some gossipy socialite.”

“That seems too reasonable for someone who thinks she’s not in love when she is, in fact, in love.”

I shoot her a glare. “You know how they say women aren’t funny? They’re wrong. They just haven’t met you.”

“Seriously, you keep making moon eyes when you talk about Cormac. It’s disgusting, and I’m so happy for you. Not jealous at all…” she teases.

“You want Cormac?”

“Obviously not him. But someone of my own one day. Someone who makes me swoon—“

“I am not.”

“Girl. You are gushing. Own it. It was adorable.”

I huff. “Fine. Maybe a little.”

“Because you love him.”

“Because he’s a great guy.”

She smirks, and I know she has an argument loaded. But she changes tactics. “And his resort? How is that going?”

“Oh, I must have skipped that part. Clint signed the paperwork. He has the investment he needs, and the project is moving fast.”

“That’s great!”

“Well, fast as a resort moves, anyway. Which is, evidently, glacially slow. But he swears that’s speedy for such an extensive project,” I shrug. “Not my thing, so I don’t know.”

She nods, and our food comes. Her steamy carbonara makes me wish I’d ordered it, too. Looks like they did it properly with the raw eggs and everything. My salad seems too green and healthy by comparison. She asks, “And your parent’s B&B? How are they taking the news?”

“I haven’t brought it up.”

“Surely, they must know it’s coming—

“Mm, hmm.”

Aria frowns. “You *did* tell them who you’re dating, right?”

“Not exactly.”

“Lily!”

“I will. It’s just that this is all so new, and I don’t want to tinker with it, you know? Things are fragile enough without my parents giving things a shake.”

“Fragile how?”

I huff. “The whole ex-wife thing.”

“And I told you she will get past it, if it’s an issue for her in the first place. After all, she moved on long before Cormac did. I think it’s only fair that he gets some happiness, too.”

“You know what? That’s a good point.” He *does* deserve some happiness.

All the better if that happiness is with me. “Anyway, about my parents, I’ll tell them. Eventually. Honestly, I kind of put his project’s impact on my family out of my mind. Easier to get through the day wearing blinders.”

“I get that. But the sooner your parents hear it from you, the better. Right?”

I gulp a bite of salad down. “Sure. How’s Owen?”

She beams. “He’s great. Killing it at running club. I might have a future marathon runner or track star on my hands.”

“Oh, awesome.”

“But I have another question about Cormac. And it’s none of my business, but—

“Go ahead.”

“Is he...good?”

“I told you already.”

She smirks. “You did, but a one-night stand is one thing. Night after night is the real proof.”

My lips slide into a smile before I can stop myself. “It’s better. Every single time. I’m not sure how he does that. But something about it...” I flush warmly just thinking about Cormac in bed. “I can’t explain it.”

Her smirk grows smug. “I can.”

“What is it?”

“Love.”

I roll my eyes. “Cut that out.”

“Can’t. You keep bringing it up.”

I kick her shin under the table, which only makes her laugh. “You’re a brat.”

“I’m not the one who is pretending not to be in love.”

“I’m not pretending anything. It’s just that...I’ve never been in love before, and I don’t think I know how.”

“Oh, Lily,” she says sweetly and gives my hand a squeeze. Her head tips to the side and with all the kindness of a Disney princess, she adds, “You’re a moron.”

I laugh hard. “Gosh, here I thought I was getting some kind of sympathy.”

“Come on. You have been in love before.”

I frown, lost. “Huh?”

“Your restaurant.”

My first instinct is to roll my eyes at her. But she's not completely wrong, either. "I've wondered about that more than I care to admit."

"The problem with loving your business is that it can't love you back. But that's not an issue with Cormac. By his mood, I'd say he already does."

"Okay, let's not speculate on him. Let's work with the ingredients we've got here and now."

"Sure. You can't stop getting all lovey every time you talk about him."

I nod once. "Counterpoint, I am not sure I can love a person. I was good at loving my restaurant, and that may have left me unable to love anyone else."

She snorts a laugh. "Whatever you say. But when you talk about him or the sex, you're practically having a hot flash right in front of me."

"Counterpoint, that's just hormones and they don't count as feelings. I think."

"You're just fighting me on this to be stubborn. You know I'm right or you wouldn't object so hard."

"Counterpoint, I am changing the topic, so you don't keep thinking I'm fighting you on this."

She giggles. "Sore loser."

"I might be a loser, but at least I have a date."

She kicks my shin this time, and I laugh with her. As she goes on about her dating woes, I can't help but worry about my own and how complicated things will be when my parents find out I'm sleeping with the enemy. Who is also my boss.

Lily

Standing in Cormac's kitchen, it feels odd to think of it as *his* kitchen. Not mine. But since I do most of the cooking in there, he doesn't care that I rearranged it for efficiency. Or that brought in some flowers for the previously barren countertop. Not that I like a lot of things on counters—they are my workspaces, after all.

But his home is so sterile that it needs some cheering up. I have no idea how an angular, minimalist home affects a child's mental health, but Aiden eagerly helped me pick out the first flowers and Franny selected the vase, so I think they're over it, too. Every couple of days I take them to the florist, and we chat about what flowers look nice together and bring them home. Cormac's only comment on it was, "Those are nice."

Maybe he doesn't realize he can decorate? Or maybe he doesn't care either way? I'm not sure. But he likes the flowers, and it's a start. Not that I think I should have a say in how his home is decorated...but it'd be nice if I did.

I smirk to myself and stuff containers of raw veggie strips and cheese cubes into the kids' backpacks. After a couple of long, uncomfortable conversations, we decided to have dinner with my parents so they could get to know Cormac and the kids. So, packing them some things I know they'll eat is the best course of action, when my Dad will do preparing dinner. He's a skilled cook, but after decades of cooking for mostly couples, he's not so good at kid food. I'm trying to keep everyone on his good side at the moment, too, and hungry children will not help the situation.

Dad hadn't exactly reacted well to the news of what had transpired

between us, and Cormac decided the best way to handle the situation was upfront. Mom, being the reasonable, mature adult she is, suggested I keep them as far from each other as possible, but I agree with Cormac. I don't want to keep my love life from my family.

Especially when this is going as well as it is.

I wedge some extra red bell peppers in for Franny—her new favorite veggie of the week. Getting lost in the food helps me to calm down, so I focus on that instead of the potential crisis of dinner with my parents. But then another distraction pops up. My phone rings. *Who the hell calls people out of the blue these days? Psychopaths?*

No. Not psychopaths. Paxton. *Oh hell. Should I even take it?* I huff, knowing I will. *He probably needs bail again.* Flatly, I ask, “Hey, what’s up?”

He blurts “Lily, I know you hate me but please don’t hang up!” as one word, no breaths.

I chuckle. “I’m not hanging up on you, Paxton. The caller ID said it was you. I picked up on purpose.”

“So, I have big news. You remember Carl Raines from Chandelier Group?”

Wow, that’s a blast from the past. “Uh, that big conglomerate that was buying up a bunch of restaurants on the Lower East Side?”

“Yes, that’s the one.”

Shit, he’s on a bender again, isn’t he? He sounds like he’s been up for three days, coked out again. This conversation is a waste of time. “What about it, Pax?”

“Carl quit them—

“Why should I care about some random guy from a thousand years ago? What’s this call really about? Are you using again? Should I call your sponsor?”

He laughs. “Actually, no. I’ve been sober for a few months. Like, straight through this time, Lily. I’m doing good.”

Previously, when he lied about using, he claimed a couple of days sober. Or even a week. But months? I’m not buying it. “It’s okay, man. I’m not judging you. Are you somewhere safe?”

He laughs again, and I realize it’s not tinged with that hint of madness his laughter used to sound like. “I’m in my very own apartment, sober as a judge. Well, none of the judges I used to party with, anyway. I’ve been hitting my

meetings every day. I even got a new job—that’s how I know about all this.”

“Why do you sound so hyper, then?”

“Because I’m excited, okay? Hear me out, and then you can hang up on me.”

I huff. “I’m not hanging up on you. If anything, I’m texting your sponsor

—
“Go ahead. She’ll tell you how proud of me she is.”

That’s a weird lie. Okay, maybe it’s not a lie. “Alright, what’s all this about?”

“So, I’m working at Aleena—

“Bullshit!” I bark, then slap my hand over my mouth, hoping the kids didn’t just hear that.

He laughs. “Seriously. I’m in group with one of their sous chefs and she set me up. Anyway, I’m working at Aleena’s and in walks Carl Raines. As soon as he sees me, he recognizes me—

“That’s strange.”

“I know! I’m back of house, but he came to your place right after we opened and I was still waiting tables back then, because we weren’t fully staffed, remember?”

Blinking at the flowers, my mouth drops open. “Good god, man, how much of your memory has come back since you stopped using?”

He laughs again. “A shocking lot. Like I’m remembering all sorts of shit I wish I could forget that I did, but also some good stuff. Anyway, he comes straight to me, talking about you.”

“Me?”

“Yeah. He swears up and down that he had the best meal of his life because of you.”

I’m touched. “That’s so sweet of him. Thank you for telling me—

“That’s not all, Lily. He’s opening his own restaurant. That’s why he quit Chandelier Group. They weren’t moving in a direction he liked—too stodgy, too old school. He wants to move into a style of cooking he calls ‘Lily Olson’.”

I laugh once, sharply. “What?”

“He’s obsessed, and since the accident, he hasn’t been able to track you down. He even hired a PI to find you, but the guy swears it’s like you fell off the face of the Earth.”

“I’m staying at my parents’ place in Somerset Harbor. How is that falling

off the face of the Earth?”

“Somerset Harbor is not in Manhattan.”

I huff and roll my eyes. I remember being that myopic, too. “So, what’s up with Carl?”

“He wants to hire you. Let you have full control of the entire restaurant. He’d be the owner, but everything else is yours. He wants you, Lily. Bad. And he’s willing to make it worth your while. He’s scared someone else will scoop you up before he can, so his offer is...extensive.”

My mouth goes dry. It’s not the same as my own place, but it sounds damn nice. “How extensive, Pax?”

“Aside from salary, you’d get part ownership.”

I almost drop my phone. This is better than I could have hoped for when I picked it up. By a lot. “Tell me you’re tweaked out of your mind, and you did not just say that.”

“I’m not and I did.”

This could change everything. My career, back on track. My life, back in Manhattan. I could be myopic again, focused entirely on the thing that makes my blood pump. The rush of kitchen life, the fire.

But is that what I still want?

The hours, the back pain, the screaming—

“So, what do you say?”

I take a breath. “I’m not sure.”

“What?” he shouts.

“I’m not sure, Paxton. Things are...different now.”

“Lily, you have the gift. You can’t let that go to waste in some town no one has ever heard of. You’re practically in a fly-over state—

“I’m in the fucking Hamptons. I’m still in New York!”

He laughs. “Are you though? You’re on Long Island.”

“Look, I appreciate this. Really, I do. But I’m not sure if I’m ready to be back in a kitchen yet. After everything I lost, it’s hard to think about trying again.”

“Okay, that I get. I’ll text you the number. You can make your own choices from there.”

“Thanks. And what made you get sober this time?”

He sighs. “Me. After screwing up so monumentally for you, I hit a bad place. Like, dark. Real dark. I blamed everything and everyone but me for that mistake, and after a while, I realized it was me. I was the one who

screwed up. Sure, the drugs didn't help with that, but I'm the one who didn't renew the insurance. I'm the one who got so lost in using that I stopped eating for a while—

“Oh, Pax.”

“Yeah. And how bad does drug use have to be for someone who works in restaurants to stop eating? That's what a busser asked me one night, and I realized I had to fix this. So, I did. Or rather, I am. Every minute of every day, one day at a time.”

I smile, and my eyes sting. “You know something? You sound like the you I met in culinary school. I've missed that guy.”

“Me too. I'm working on finding him again. And I'm sorry it took fucking you over to do it.”

“It's nice to know something good is coming from all that.”

“I know you're reluctant to call, Lily. It's a big step. Please don't let my mistake ruin your life. You are meant to do this.”

His words choke me up. I sniff back the tears. “Thank you, Paxton. I need to go.”

“Okay. Whatever you choose, good luck.”

“You too.”

Lily

“You are meant to do this.” Paxton’s words keep ringing in my ears even as we load the kids into Cormac’s SUV. Part of me thinks he’s right. Until recently, I’ve never felt more alive than when I was in my kitchen. The shouting, the flames, the scents of old mop water and grilled steaks, swearing at my co-workers one minute and fiercely defending them to patrons the next, making out in the walk-ins...all of it made my pulse pound. Back then.

Now, I’m delighted to pack beach lunches. Do laundry for teeny tiny clothes. Play board games. What the hell happened to me? But when I get in the passenger side of his SUV, it becomes painfully obvious.

I’ve been domesticated.

I snort a laugh at myself and stare out my side of the windshield, watching the scenery pass by. It’s not as though I resent the changes—to my continuous surprise, I actually enjoy them quite a lot. But I don’t know what to think about any of it. Not really. The differences in my life are stark.

It shocks me I’m still debating any of this. My inner chef is screaming to call the guy. But the rest of me catches a glimpse of a different life each time I see Cormac’s profile.

Is there any reason I can’t do both, once Abigail returns and they don’t need me anymore?

Cormac softly asks, “Everything okay?”

“Yes. Why?”

“You’ve been quiet since I got home. The kids—

“Oh, they’ve been good all day. I just—

“When does Mommy get back?” Franny asks.

He says, "In seven sleeps."

I raise an eyebrow. "Seven sleeps?"

"Seven days."

"Oh." Seven days until all of this becomes something else. Something irrevocable and real. It was one thing to be behind closed doors only. Being out about us would be a monumental shift, but a needed one. I want to go to a movie with my boyfriend. Or anywhere else in public with him.

The title thing is a work in progress. I've had boyfriends before. But no one as...established as Cormac. No one with an ex-wife or kids, and no one I've felt this strongly about.

We had agreed to tell Abigail about us when she returns and to let the chips fall where they may. Telling her was going to be an adventure, but everything with Cormac had been since the night we met. I should be used to that by now, but I'm not.

"You were saying?"

My stomach flips when I think of telling him about the offer. But I'm also excited to share the news. "I spoke with—

"Lily, do your parents live in a hotel? That's what Dad says," Aiden asks.

I smile. "Sort of. It's called a bed-and-breakfast. People come to stay there and my Dad cooks breakfast for them. And sometimes other meals, too."

"Is it like my Dad's resort will be?"

"No, not quite. It's cozier. Less stuffy."

Cormac teases, "Hey. My resort will not be stuffy."

"You know what I mean."

He gives a little shrug and the barest hint of a smirk. "I guess."

"Are there maids?" Franny asks.

Cormac frowns. "What makes you ask that?"

"I've been teaching them Old Maid. I tried to explain the concept, but I think she didn't quite get it," I quietly explain to him. Then I turn around to her. "Their B&B doesn't have housekeepers, Franny. They clean the rooms themselves."

"Oh."

Cormac asks, "How did your parents come into owning their place, anyway?"

"My grandparents started it way back when Somerset Harbor was just a quaint fishing village. At first. Most of the guests were fishermen, here for

the cod fisheries before they collapsed. There weren't any hotels around back then, so it did great right at the start."

"It's nice that we have so many legacy businesses downtown. I know some of them change hands often, but those who have stuck around are here because they've earned it. I think that makes downtown Somerset Harbor really special."

Smiling, I'm glad to hear that, especially from him. "The downtown area could use the publicity you'll be bringing them, too. Do you plan to collaborate with any of them when you open?"

"For now, that's getting ahead of what we have planned. But I am open to it. Anything we can do to support small businesses will support us, too."

"I'd have thought you wouldn't care about that sort of thing."

But he shakes his head. "Not at all. I know Beau wants the resort to be a destination in and of itself, but no resort is the end-all, be-all to every single guest. People want to explore the area. Our restaurants will be world class, but sometimes you just want a burger and fries, you know?"

"I want a burger and fries!" Franny blurts.

"Me too!" Aiden says.

"Sorry." Cormac laughs. "Tonight is not that kind of night. Tonight, we have dinner with the Olsons. And what are we going to be?"

"On our best behavior," they chant with all the enthusiasm of a funeral mourner.

I giggle. "It won't be that bad. Dad usually cooks normal food. Nothing fancy."

Franny warily asks, "Does he like vegetables like you do?"

"Less than I do."

She doesn't know I can see her in the mirror and grins at Aiden, who smiles back. I get the distinct impression they've been conspiring about vegetables. But I'm not going to ruin it for them—let them think they're sneaky. Their lack of sneakiness makes it easy to watch out for.

"Oh, also, because of the B&B's history, there are going to be a lot of mounted fish on the walls and nautical-themed items. Just a heads-up."

Cormac frowns. "Why would I need a heads-up?"

"Because you don't like decorations, so I thought it might be good for you to know what you're about to see."

He chuckles. "I don't *dislike* them, Lily."

"Your place is...decoration-free."

“Are you trying to say lifeless?”

Slowly and exaggeratedly, I nod while telling him, “No. I would never say that.”

He laughs hard. “I’m not against the idea of some interior design. It’s just not something I think of. Plus, I like things to be clean and organized. Is that so wrong?”

“No. But would a painting kill you?”

“Maybe.”

I smirk at him. “Okay, no paintings. How about three flower vases, one for the kitchen, the living room, and the downstairs bathroom?”

“Yeah!” Aiden says.

“I’ll go as high as two,” Cormac offers.

“What do you think, kids?”

They both nod while smiling.

“I think you have a deal, sir.”

Franny adds, “Flower vases and burgers.”

He chuckles. “I told you. We’re having dinner with the Olsons tonight.”

She sulks. “Fine. Just flower vases.”

“I think we were sidetracked back there, Lily,” Cormac begins. “You were saying something before about why you were being quiet.”

“Oh, right.” Here goes nothing. “I got a call from Paxton.”

“That’s your business partner, right?”

“That’s the one. There’s a restaurateur who is, according to Paxton, kind of obsessed with my food. He is opening his own restaurant in Manhattan, and he wants me to be the executive chef. I’d have complete control of the place, per Paxton, and I’d also have part ownership.”

Cormac swallows for a beat. “That’s great.”

It is, but by his tone, that’s not all he’s thinking. “I’m—

“Are you thinking of taking the position?”

“Debating it. Yes.”

“I’m really happy. For you.” His posture stiffens as he says the words.

“What is it?”

“What’s what?”

I lower my voice so the kids don’t hear me. “Why do you sound weird?”

“Uh, no reason. I must be hungrier than I thought. I skipped lunch, and—

“Why would you do that to yourself? You know you have to eat.”

He sighs and smiles. “Because I got busy with work, and when that

happens, I'm not good at remembering little details like eating or sleeping."

I chuckle. "I can relate. When I was running my restaurant, sleep felt optional. I had to eat, of course, because bare minimum, I had to taste some food sometimes. But the best part was family meal."

"Family meal?"

"I'd make something special for the employees. Usually it's something simple, like the roast chicken I made for the dinner with Clint, or even something as normal as meatloaf. The one everyone like the best, though, was my chicken orzo soup." I got hungry just thinking about it. "Nothing as good as a scratch made chicken soup."

He's still smiling, but there's a deepening tightness around his eyes. "Maybe you can make it for me the next time I'm sick."

"Count on it."

His hands are locked on the wheel. I can't figure out what's up, but I wonder if he doesn't want me to go back to working in a kitchen or if it's something else. I have told him some pretty salacious stories about what happens in the back of restaurants, so maybe he's worrying about that.

"And just because I have explored my options in the past doesn't mean I would do that now."

"I don't understand."

How do I say this in code so the kids don't pick up on it? "I've mentioned before how, back in the day, I worked with several sausage dealers—

"Huh?"

"But now, I have only one. And I like it that way. So, my dealer doesn't need to worry about anything like that."

He throws the most confused look at me, and I motion with my head toward the kids.

It evidently clicks, because he laughs. "Uh, speaking for him, that's good to know." He keeps chuckling to himself and shaking his head as he parks in the B&B's parking lot.

Lily

As soon as we open the car doors, the scent of grilled meat makes my mouth water. Gray smoke billows from the rear of the property, and I wonder what's on the menu. Whatever it is, I'm in.

Cormac, too. "That smells incredible."

"Let's get them inside." As it turns out, they stock the kitchen with every accoutrement for hamburgers, and Mom is cooking up a batch of fresh-cut fries while Dad grills. I laugh. "How did you know?"

"Know what, dear?"

"Burgers and fries?"

Franny and Aiden gasp excitedly, and Mom says, "Because when you were their age, that was your favorite, too."

I introduce them, and Mom dotes on the kids before telling them to wash up. She gives Cormac a hug. "It's so nice to finally meet you."

"I think Lily enjoys keeping me all to herself."

"She's very secretive. You have to watch out for that," she advises.

I make a face at her. "Thanks, Mom, tell him all my secrets."

She smirks. "It's about damn time you bring someone around her, missy. I have years of good-natured teasing to unload on him."

He chuckles. "And, to be sure we're on the same page, Ellen, the kids don't know about us."

"We know. We'll play along. And I understand it. Smart to tell your ex-wife first. You certainly don't want the kids to be the ones to tell her."

He nods. "Thank you for understanding."

The side door opens just barely, and I see Dad struggling with a tray of

grilled burgers as he tries to slide in. I grab the tray for him. “Hey, Dad.”

“Hey, kiddo. Where are the rugrats?”

“Bathroom. Mom is making them wash their hands.”

“Oh, that’s probably a good thing.” He eyes Cormac. “And you must be their dad.”

Cormac smiles and shakes his hand as I introduce them. “It’s nice to meet you, Geoffrey.”

“Likewise. Ellen, the fries ready?”

“Hot and ready, just like me,” she flirts.

He kisses her cheek while I fight the urge to gag. Cormac sees it and teases, “Hey—they’re into each other, even after all this time. I think that’s great.”

“That’s because they’re not your parents,” I say flatly, and he chuckles, then pulls out my chair for me. The kids join us, digging into every morsel. Conversation is light and breezy, and as nervous as I am about everything, I start to unkink. It’s nice to have the people I care about most together and sharing a meal. With Cormac’s weirdness in the car over—whatever that was—the night goes swimmingly.

After ice cream sundaes, Mom sits the kids in the living room with a Disney movie, and rejoins us. “So, Cormac, how is the progress going on at the resort?”

“Excellent, thanks to Lily.”

I laugh and shake my head, but they exchange a glance, and she asks, “How’s that?”

He explains, “She impressed our biggest investor during a dinner meeting, and he was ready to sign the next day.”

“Impressed him how?” Dad asks.

“She cooked for him and during the meeting, schmoozed better than most people I’ve known in business. Lily could teach a class on how to win friends and influence people.”

I laugh. “You’re making that up—

“No, honey, that was all you. Clint loves you. He asks about you every time we talk.”

I shrug sheepishly. “I just did what I’ve seen other people do in my restaurants. It’s not hard.”

He laughs. “If you call securing a finicky multimillion investor deal *not hard*, then he’s right and I should hire you on at MacMillan Co.”

“No, thank you, please. Corporate life is not for me.” When I sip my water, I can’t help but notice the looks on my parents’ faces. “What is it?”

“Nothing, dear,” Mom says and drinks her decaf.

Cormac can tell something is off, too. “Did I say something wrong? She was amazing with him. I meant no disrespect.”

“No, no, it’s not that,” Dad says.

“Then what?”

“Forget it, Cormac,” Mom dismisses with a nervous shake of her head. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Clearly, it does,” he insists. “I do not wish to be rude, but you have me worried, and with Lily, I’m already worry.”

Mom sighs, and Dad says, “Well, you should be. Or feel guilty, at least.”

“Dad!”

“He should,” he says firmly.

“Why is that, exactly?” Cormac asks.

“Because you’re going to put her parents in the poorhouse.”

“I don’t follow you.”

“Your resort is going to destroy us, Cormac. Pure and simple.”

My heart sinks, and Cormac takes a beat. “I thought this was settled when you spoke your piece at the county commissioner meeting.”

This is news to me. “What?”

“They lodged a protest when we applied for permits. But I thought that was water under the bridge. I thought you had gotten past that, and that’s why you wanted to have us here tonight.”

“How do I not know about this?” I ask the three of them.

Cormac says, “My father was at the meeting. I heard about it through him, months ago. Thought this was old news.”

Mom explains, “We didn’t know who you were working for—and dating—until you mentioned it last week, Lily.”

“Maybe it’s old news to you, Cormac, because you won’t be out on the street when all is said and done,” Dad snaps bitterly.

“Dad!” I bite back. Though I don’t have an argument to go with it. I just want him to be nicer. At least for the first night Cormac is around.

“It’s fine, Lily,” Cormac says, trying to soothe me. “He has every right to his opinions, and we’re in his house.”

“Won’t be mine for long,” Dad mumbles.

“Geoffrey,” Mom says quietly to calm him.

Cormac notes, “The thing is, Geoffrey, we’re in two different markets. Our research shows that the people who look for a resort experience aren’t going to a bed-and-breakfast, and the inverse is true, as well. Lily was right when she said your place is cozy. It’s also charming and has a ton of local history and character. All things my resort will never have. We are not catering to the same clientele. You have nothing to worry about.”

“Are you telling me about my business?” Dad snarls. Mom gives his hand a squeeze, but I can see by the look in his eyes, he’s not over it yet. I doubt he even feels her hand on his. I haven’t seen him this angry since the Somerset Harbor Hotel opened when I was a kid.

Cormac shakes his head. “No, sir, not at all. Only what the market research indicates. Additionally, while the resort’s guests will stay with us, they’ll spend a ton of money downtown and bring people with them. People who want to see Somerset Harbor, people who want a warmer experience than what we offer. We are going to benefit the entire town and bring jobs, too.”

But Dad shakes his head. “That’s what all you types always say. That you’ll bring jobs. And those jobs are always bad paying, long hours—

“We don’t skimp on our employees, Geoffrey. I’m sorry to cut you off there, but I know the reputation of big business in small towns. That we pay peanuts after running everyone else out of town, right?”

Dad folds his arms. “If a small town hardware shop hears that Home Depot is coming to town, do you think they roll out the red carpet for them? Or do you think they see the writing on the wall? Minimum wage, maximum hours, no benefits. You’re all alike.”

To my surprise, Cormac remains cool, but not cold. “I understand the comparison, but that is apples to oranges. What I’m hearing is that you’re scared and worried about your future, and no amount of market research is going to make you feel better about that. Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“I may be wrong about this, but the way I see it is that we have two different customer bases we are looking to attract and there’s no reason we can’t help each other out.”

“How’s that?”

Cormac sits up, but doesn’t crowd forward, and he’s giving Dad a look of respect. Whoever taught him how to negotiate did a good job. “We can feature a link to your website on ours for guests who want a personalized

Somerset Harbor experience. We will highlight your history, your expertise on all things local. You two are a valuable resource for anyone who wants something more authentic, and this place is great. The rooms are the opposite of what the resort will offer.”

“Small?” Dad sneers sardonically.

“Personal. This town and its rich history are in every detail, every nook and cranny. Don’t get me wrong—I am proud of the work my family is doing to create a resort that will bring thousands to Somerset Harbor. But we could never hope to compete with what you have here.”

Mom smiles, then looks at Dad, who hasn’t smiled since the resort talk came up. He gruffly says, “I’m surprised you even needed Lily to schmooze that investor of yours, considering how much ass kissing you just did.”

“Dad!” I bark at him. “That is enough!”

But Cormac merely gives a slight head shake. “Geoffrey, I meant every word.”

Dad sets his napkin on his plate and stands. “I am glad I got to meet your kids, Cormac. Seems my daughter is doing a good job of raising them for you —

“Geoffrey!” Mom hisses at him. “You are speaking to a guest in our home. Please do so with kindness.”

“Hard to do when the guest in question wants to make us homeless, Ellen. Goodnight, everyone.” He leaves the table without another word, and for once, I’m grateful for the silence.

Mom is so upset. “Cormac, I am so sorry for what he said. He’s not normally this disagreeable.”

“As much as I can, I understand, Ellen. He’s scared of losing everything. I don’t fault him for that. I just wish there was something more I could do to make him feel better about things—actually, maybe there is. Lily, we should go. I think he feels invaded by the enemy right about now, and I don’t want to make that worse by overstaying the welcome.”

Nodding, I choke back the urge to hunt my father down and shout at him for all of that. But with that feeling also comes the need to hug him and tell him everything will be alright, even when I can’t promise that. A third feeling hits—this is all my fault. If I hadn’t helped with Clint, then none of this would be happening. I mumble, “Yeah. I’ll get the kids.”

Cormac

A few days after our dinner from hell with her parents, the distance between me and Lily weighs heavy over us. Things were already strained by trying to hide ourselves from the kids, but with this added drama, it's hard to feel anything but doomed. So, I'm taking steps.

I brought home a couple more flower vases, loaded to the brim with color, to cheer her up. She wanly said they looked nice, and that was it. The kids were more excited about them than she was. I delivered dinner for a night so she wouldn't have to cook. She was appreciative and sweet, but that spark in her smile still wasn't there. It felt like I'd done something wrong, even though nothing had changed. The worst part is, it's hard to figure out when we can talk about it without the kids hearing us.

But I don't give up that easily.

Lily sits with the kids on the couch as they watch a movie, and I tab through some work emails at the dining table. Our new Sunday routine. It's been great having her home on the weekends in addition to the week, but with everything tense, I decide to try something and text her about taking a day off together tomorrow before Abigail returns.

She digs her phone out of her pocket—I knew it was on vibrate, and she'd feel it. As she reads the message, she half smiles. Then she sends back, "That sounds nice," and a purple heart.

It's a start. I've played it cool all day, but I'm almost ready to let the cat out of the bag. With Abigail coming back Wednesday, if we go out tonight, it won't matter. She'll be finding out about us soon enough, and even if one of her gossipy friends tells her about us, it won't change anything. We can stop

hiding. This doesn't need to be a secret, which means I'm taking her out to dinner tonight.

I have it all planned—the candlelit restaurant with a string quartet, a romantic walk along the ocean, the works. Lily can go home and get ready while I get ready myself. Marie used to be my go-to babysitter before Lily came on, so I'm not worried about her trustworthiness. She will stay with the kids, I'll pick Lily up, and we can go out like a regular couple. Taking tomorrow off will be the icing on a nice romantic cake. She can even sleep in once I sneak her upstairs.

Just as I notice I'm getting hungry, another text comes in and my heart clenches. Marie is sick. *Shit*. I text her my condolences, and that's that. It's all I can do to hide my disappointment, but she doesn't need to know what we just lost. There's no way to get another babysitter on a Sunday night on such short notice—at least, not one I trust.

Okay, there has to be a way for me to get some Lily time...I'll make lunch. Something the kids won't like.

“Hey, everyone. I am absolutely dying for a salad. Kids, what would you like on your salads?”

Franny's nose wrinkles up, and she asks hopefully, “A peanut butter and jelly sandwich?”

Lily laughs. “I'll make you one—

“I can handle a pb and j, Lily. Aiden, how about you? What do you want in your salad?”

“I'm with Franny.”

“Okay, two pb and j's, coming up. Lily, do you want me to make it three?”

“Honestly, a salad sounds good.”

I smile. “I'm on it.”

She says, “I can make lunch, Cormac.”

“As can I. You sit. Relax. I've got this.”

She smiles. “Okay.”

Mission accomplished. I make the salads first, followed by the sandwiches. When I deliver them into the living room, all three are shocked. “I thought you two might like to eat while you watch your movie.”

“But you never let us watch tv when we eat,” Aiden says.

Franny whispers, “Don't remind him!”

“It's Sunday. Sundays should have fewer rules. Go ahead.” They eat, and

I motion for Lily to follow me to the dining room, where the kids can't really see us unless they sit at the far end of the couch.

Lily's eyes widen when she sees the spread on the table. "Salad, bread, wine...what did I do to deserve all this?"

I pull out her chair for her. "You always deserve all this. I wish I always had the time to do it for you."

She smiles. "Thank you."

As we eat, I speak first. "Things have felt off since the night at your parents' house. Is it that way for you, too?"

She sips her wine and nods. "I'm glad you're bringing it up. Yes, definitely. I'm in my head about all of that. I'm sorry I haven't been more present."

"Are you angry with me?"

"No! Why would I be angry with *you*?"

"I've felt like I did something wrong that night ever since."

But she shakes her head. "Not at all. You handled it beautifully, truth be told."

"Then what is it?"

Lily gets a far off look in her eyes. "I don't want this to come out the wrong way, and I'm pretty sure that it will, but I'm going to say it, anyway. The night I helped with Clint was one of the best nights of my life. I got to help and everything that followed with you was...wonderful."

"But?"

"But now, I can't help but feel like that night was the beginning of the end for my parents, and the memory is muddled with a lot of guilt."

"I see."

Her lips smooth to a flat line. "Understand, I don't regret that night, Cormac. What happened between you and me, and what's happening now with us, I'm very happy. With us."

I sigh. "But I'm the enemy."

"You're not *my* enemy. Dad is very protective of the B&B—

"Understandably so."

She nods. "And with the resort looming, I get why he's so freaked out. It's scary as hell for them. Which makes it scary for me. Now more than ever. Because of us. When it comes to the resort, I am simultaneously incredibly proud of you and absolutely terrified for my parents."

"I'm guessing *conflicted* does not begin to describe how you feel."

She huffs a laugh. “Got anything stronger than wine?”

“I do, but I thought sobriety might be a good thing for the conversation and considering the kids are in the other room.”

“Well, sure. *They* need to be sober.”

Smirking, I pour her another glass of wine. “Will that help?”

“It’s a start.” And there’s the spark in her smile.

It’s a relief. I had come to rely on that spark more than I’d realized. We chat more and I can’t help but hold her hand as we laugh together. It feels like the most natural thing in the world to touch Lily. A little like coming home.

She steals away to wash the dishes, and as much as I enjoy the curve of her ass while she works, I want more. After a quick glance at the kids, I sneak a kiss, and she’s scandalized. “Cormac—

“They’re asleep.”

“Oh. Well then.” She hooks her wet hand around the back of my head and pulls me in for a better kiss.

I have missed this woman more than I can express, and I deepen the kiss until my heart aches to hold her. Pulling back, I murmur, “Let me put them to bed and meet me upstairs?”

Lust fills her eyes as she quickly nods, dries her hands, and sneaks up there. I tuck the kids into bed and close their doors behind me in hopes they won’t hear anything they shouldn’t, before I race to meet Lily.

As soon as I open the door, she’s on me. It’s a full front assault, her lips and hands going everywhere and trying to strip my clothes off. When I grab her ass, I realize she’s naked already and give her a little pat, which makes her whimper. “We have to be quiet.”

“Then don’t make me make noise,” she teases.

I yank the last of my clothes off and ask, “How on earth do I do that?”

She giggles. “I have no idea. But I’ll do my best.”

“And I’ll do my worst.” I drop to my knees and hook her leg over my shoulder to give me better access.

“What are you—oh!” Her voice is cut off by her hand, slapping over her open mouth. She leans on the other hand to prop herself up as I tour her body with my tongue. Lily is wet and hungry, so I stand and lift her up, legs around my waist.

Carrying her to the bed as we kiss, I’m overwhelmed by how much I feel for this woman. It’s never been this way for me before. I’d thought it was a

honeymoon phase thing or something, and it hasn't been that long, so maybe it is that, in part. But every craveable kiss leaves me yearning for the next. Each time I see her, I can't believe she's real. And mine. When I slide into her body, the sensation astounds me every time.

She pulls my hand over her mouth so she can moan quietly, but I merely touch her cheek instead. I want to see her face when I am deep inside of her. She bites her bottom lip, straining not to be loud as she shakes for me. I'm going to make her come, and it's all I ever want to do.

-

Lily

This is the best nightmare.

Being tormented by Cormac is hot as sin, but right now, it is wildly inappropriate. Which only dials up the passion. It's all I can do to keep quiet. Cormac is too fucking good at making me loud. He digs himself up at my G-spot, rolling his hips right at me there while he stares at my face. So intense. Everything is always so powerful between us. It has been since our first time, and somehow, things keep getting crazier.

I don't understand how the sex never gets boring with him. With previous men in my life, it was usually one and done, because most men aren't that great at it. I used to joke with one of my lesbian sous chefs that sexuality has to be something you're born with, because if women had a choice, we'd all be lesbians.

On the rare occasion I went back for seconds, those seconds were almost universally disappointing. Either it wasn't as good as the first time, or he started calling too much after. They were only ever upgraded to boyfriend status if they could a. make me come, and b. didn't hound me. But even then, the rare boyfriends I had always had to keep trying new things to maintain my interest.

But Cormac? He makes me want to be a better lover.

I worry he might get bored with me at some point, that I've been playing in the amateur leagues compared to him. His ex-wife is a beautiful, brilliant woman, and she wasn't enough to keep him. What does that say for my shelf life with Cormac?

But my god. Not only does the sex keep getting hotter between us, but he

seems to want me more every day. I catch him staring at me when he thinks I'm not paying attention, and it's lust and something else in his steely blue eyes. When we're sitting together at dinner with the kids, his knees graze mine on purpose and every once in a while, his hand disappears under the table to caress my thigh. It sets us both at ease when he does it, and at the same time, I'm terrified the kids will notice. We constantly walk this line between lust and propriety, and there's a certain amount of thrill to the danger. But the thrill is not what keeps me captivated by Cormac.

There's a palpable tension whenever we're not touching each other. Our bodies belong together. He feels like my other half that I just found. It's hot and a relief and undeniable. As undeniable as my feelings for him.

I am in love with Cormac MacMillan, and I don't care who knows it. Not anymore. Once I figured out that Aria was right, or rather, once I accepted she was right, I wanted the entire world to know it. That I'm his and he's mine. Let Abigail be mad, let her fire me. I'll bounce back. Let my parents be mad, too. I'll show them this is real, and it's deep and there is nothing they can do to stop us. Nothing will stop us.

The only person I can't tell about how much I love him is Cormac.

He leans close and whispers against the shell of my ear, "You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen."

I want to say something sweet back, but he cocks his hips just right and my eyes roll back as my breath catches in my throat.

"Especially when I do that to you," he says, all arrogant and male.

I adore when he gets like this normally—when he knows he's playing my body just right and keeping me on that edge. But at the moment, there's too much on the line for me to play along. My emotions are riding my orgasm as much as my body is. One wrong move, and I could ruin everything.

His cock swells inside of me, and hope blossoms. Maybe he will come faster than usual, and I won't come and accidentally blurt the words I can't let myself say. I squeeze on him, egging him on. His eyes flutter for a moment, and I'm sure he's about to. But then he gets a hold of himself, diving deeper with that determined look in his eyes. He's not going anywhere. He is going to make me come first.

Fuck.

I wish I could say the words. But if I say it this soon, I worry he'll back off. Or he will think I'm crazy. I don't know how soon people say those words under normal circumstances. Our relationship has been anything but

normal. It's been one secret encounter after another. Hell, we've never even had dinner outside of his house.

The other part is that I've never said it to anyone, so I don't have a good gauge on when to say it. Guys have said it to me, and it was always awkward because I never felt it back. When they said it to me, the words, like a lot of the guys, came way too early to make me happy. So, I don't have a concept of normal when it comes to these things.

Does normal even matter? I'm not sure. It's not like I've ever had normal, so my past skews my judgement all to hell. But if I tell him too soon and he doesn't say it back, I might actually die. Or at the very least, I'll wish I was dead.

So, I keep my lips pressed together, trying to stop from declaring my feelings and stop myself from coming, because this is so intense that I'm ready to lose myself completely to Cormac. Each thrust hits my G-spot and steals my breath. As he studies my face, the look in his eyes tells me so much and yet, not enough. Does he feel the same way about me? I can't tell.

I want to tell him. I'm on the verge of telling him. To be that vulnerable with him. The thought makes me clench around him, tightening against that hard shaft. I hiss, "Baby, please!"

"Please what?" he teases, knowing exactly what he's doing to me.

"You said quiet."

"Did I?"

I pant, "Dangerous game."

He smiles. "Always." Then he works himself against me there, and I'm lost to it.

Blood rushes to my face, and I'm fighting this orgasm so hard, while he's doing everything he can to make that impossible. He has me trembling on his cock, and as much as I love that, my orgasm is not the only thing to consider. If I'm not careful, I might say the wrong thing right now, and that could ruin everything. "I can't...stay quiet."

A proud smirk hints on his lips. "I know."

"You're being bad," I breathe.

"But you like it." He drives in all the way and pauses.

"I know, but—"

He retracts, then slams back in and holds still, while he locks his eyes on mine. "There is nothing I want more than to feel you come for me." He starts up again, this time pounding into me.

I'm at the edge, and I know this is going to get loud or I might blurt out my feelings, so I grab a pillow and hold it over my face. But he yanks the pillow away and flings it somewhere, before he kisses me and keeps going. It's like he stole my last defenses against telling him everything.

It's a sign. I should tell him. I'm going to tell him. Can't stop if I tried. As my orgasm rises, so do the words. Those three little words that scare the hell out of me. But they also feel like the right words. Now feels like the right time. My body takes over from there, tensing as pleasure and heat soars inside, ready to break me.

"What in the fuck?" a woman shouts behind Cormac.

He's on his feet in a blink, and I yank the sheet up and over myself while I crane around him to see who the hell it is. He growls, "Abigail, what the fuck are you doing in here?"

Oh. That's who it is. My nightmare.

She leans around him as he pulls on his gray sweatpants. "Lily?"

I try to smooth my hair down as though I have any dignity left and ignore the pulsing between my thighs. "Um. Hi."

The three of us are quiet for a beat before he says, "So. You came back earlier than we anticipated."

She laughs flatly. "I can see that."

"Why are you up here?" Cormac asks.

"Because my children have been left unsupervised, and I wanted to know why."

He snaps, "Have you heard of knocking? And the kids are napping—"

A scream stabs the air, making the three of us jump. They race downstairs, while I wrap a sheet around myself. The scream had come from outside, so I look out the bedroom window. Franny is on the ground, clutching her ankle and crying, while Aiden is on top of the trampoline, screaming for his father.

My worst nightmare.

Cormac

The bright hospital lights burn the image of Aiden's teary face into my soul. To my surprise, he's been quiet since they took Franny back for the X-rays. Abigail went with her for it, so she wouldn't be scared, and Aiden stayed with me in the pediatric waiting area.

There's brightly colored murals of children playing on the walls, but he won't look at them. He just stares at the tv, eyes welling and occasionally spilling over. When I tried to comfort him, he barely said a word. So I let him have some quiet time for now.

Upon Abigail's return, though, he rushes to her and throws his arms around her waist. She pets his head and tells him, "Franny's going to be alright, little man."

I'm on my feet fast. "What did they say?"

"Nothing yet. It was just the radiology tech in there with me. I'm still hoping it's just sprained, but I doubt it. She says she landed on a rock and her ankle snapped when it twisted."

My knotted stomach flips. "Where is she now?"

"Uh—

The tech wheels Franny out to the hallway with us, and a nurse comes by immediately. He squats in front of Franny and asks, "Would you like to see your room?"

Her frail, cracking voice does me in. "Yes, please."

He smiles at her, then says, "If you'll follow me," before wheeling her down the hall a few doors to her room.

I'm grateful it's a single occupancy room—I do not know how long she'll

be here, but the thought of sharing a room right now is dreadful. The nurse transfers her to the bed and after getting her comfortable, he asks if he can bring her anything.

“Can I have a juice?”

“Cranberry, apple, grape—

“Yes, please.”

He chuckles. “I’ll bring a variety.” Then he leaves us with her.

Aiden takes her hand in his. “I’m sorry, Franny.”

But she’s as confused as we are and asks, “Why?”

That question breaks him, and he blubbers. I kneel next to him. “Buddy, what’s wrong? You didn’t push her, right?”

“No!” he squeaks. Between snuffles, he says, “It’s my fault. I was the last one on the trampoline. I know I’m supposed to close the Velcro door behind me, but I wanted to play and I didn’t think it was gonna be bad if I left it. It’s all my fault!” He throws himself against me, sobbing.

I pat his back. “It was an accident, Aiden. You screwed up, but it was still an accident.”

Abigail quietly simmers out the words, “*You’re* not at fault, Aiden. You’re not an adult.” Her glare could cut me if I let it.

Franny asks, “Daddy, can you pick him up? I can’t talk to him like that.”

I hoist him onto my hip and he does everything he can to avoid her, like the guilt is eating him alive. But I coax him with, “If you were in the hospital bed, wouldn’t you want to see Franny? Even if she made a mistake?”

Slowly, he nods and turns around. “I’m sorry, Franny.”

The nurse brings her juice assortment, along with a cup and some ice. “Do you want to mix them all together?”

She brightens. “Okay.”

He opens each one and pours them together for her. “Give it a try.”

She does and smiles. “That’s really good.”

“I’m glad you like it. Can I get you anything else?”

“No, thank you.”

“How about something for you, sir?” he asks Aiden.

But he just shakes his head.

“Anyone else?”

“We’re fine, thank you,” Abigail answers for us.

“Alright then. If you need anything at all, there’s the call button. I’ll be here in a jiffy.” He leaves once more.

Franny tells Aiden, “You should try it.”

I pick up the cup for him and he does. “That’s gross.”

She giggles. “I know. I love it.” They laugh together, and I know they’re going to be okay. Then she tells him, “I knew the door was open, Aiden. I could have shut it, too. But I wanted to play. So, it’s both our fault.”

His eyebrows bunch hopefully. “Really?”

“Yeah. It was dumb.”

I set him down, and the pair gab about what happened. Knowing now how it went down, I feel a little less guilty about it. But when Abigail keeps shooting hate out of her eyes, I’m reminded that this happened on my watch.

I nod toward the couch by the window, and she joins me there. Quietly, I tell her, “Just say it. You’ll feel better.”

She murmurs, “Don’t do that, Cormac. Do not condescend to me, today of all days.”

“This could have happened to either of us—

“Not me. I don’t keep a death trap for my kids at my house.”

Closing my eyes and counting to ten is just not going to cut it today. “You know as well as I do that kids get hurt. It happens.” At least, that’s what I keep trying to tell myself. The truth is, guilt threatens to shut me down completely. But if I don’t fight her on this, I’ll stop fighting that, too.

“Is that what you’re telling yourself? That you’re not to blame?”

“No! I—

But then I don’t hear the kids’ chatter anymore. When I look back at them, they’re staring at us.

I smile as best I can. “Sorry, kids. We’ll keep it down. In fact, promise me you’re not going to try to get off that bed, Franny.”

“I promise.”

“And Aiden, don’t climb anything, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Abigail, can we talk in the hall?”

She nods once, and we head out there. A window in the door lets us monitor them, so I’m not completely out of my mind with worry about leaving them in there. Normally, I’d be shy about arguing with Abigail in public, but I imagine these halls have seen plenty of parents arguing in them over the years.

“Today is a hard day for all of us. There is no reason to make it worse.”

But she’s not about to let this go. “No reason? You were too busy

diddling the nanny to pay attention to my children!”

A woman walking past gives us enormous eyes while she scurries by.

“We’re divorced,” I tell her. Not that I owe her an explanation.

“None of my business,” she says as she darts around the corner.

“Thanks for that one.”

Her sadistic smile comes out. “You have that and a whole lot more coming, Cormac. It’s bad enough that you keep that death trap around my babies, but this? What the hell were you thinking? Oh wait. Let me guess.” She imitates me with a growl and says, “Here’s an available woman. I guess I’ll put my dick in—

“Hello,” a woman in a white lab coat says as she approaches us. “Are you the MacMillans?”

“I am,” I say, stepping up. “This is my ex-wife, Abigail.”

“I’m Doctor Pines. I’ve reviewed the X-rays, and I’m afraid Franny has a type one break in the tibia at the ankle.”

“Oh my god,” Abigail says, eyes glistening.

My throat and chest are tight. “Type one, is that the worst one?”

“No. As breaks go, it’s potentially one of the best ones to have. We will fit her with a boot. She will have to be exceedingly careful for around four to six weeks. After that, she should be good to go, provided she is actually careful. No activity beyond walking for her, and let’s keep that to a minimum.”

“Really?” My ex-wife voice cracks. “What about her growth plates?”

“Should be fine. It’s rare for this kind of injury to be anything permanent, but it can happen if she’s not careful.”

“So, no surgery?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “Not at all. Again, so long as she takes precautions. There will be several follow-ups, and I’d like her to do a few rounds of physical therapy to make sure she won’t need surgery. I understand she was jumping on a trampoline and landed on a rock, turning her ankle. Is that correct?”

I nod. “That’s how we understand it. They snuck out during nap time.”

“I’m not one to preach about how parents should do their job, but reconsider the trampoline for kids so young.”

“It’ll be taken down tonight, and I’ll get it hauled off my property this week.” I look at Abigail. “You’re right, okay?” The guilt makes my voice crack, and I’m about to lose it.

But she relents a little, sensing I'm on the edge, too. "I don't give a shit about being right, Cormac. I am angry, but I didn't mean anything by what I said before about the trampoline."

The doctor smiles. "I'll be back in a few for the boot. Excuse me." She leaves us in the hall.

We peek through the window and the kids are giggling about something, as though my baby girl doesn't have a broken bone in her leg. I sigh. "God. This could have been so much worse."

"Believe me, I fucking know."

"Abigail—

"We hired a nanny to keep them safe. To watch them for us. *That's* what we pay Lily for. Not to sleep with you."

I sigh again. "She's not just a nanny, Abigail."

"No. She's your whore."

My head whips around at her. "Do not say that about Lily. Not ever again. We are a couple."

"A couple of people who should have been watching my babies."

I close my eyes. There's no good way to appease her right now. She's too angry. And I get it. I'm angry with myself. For having the trampoline in the first place. For thinking the kids would know better than to do what they did—hell, it never even occurred to me they would do something like this. But it should have. And that's the worst part.

I should have seen this coming from a mile away. Should have been more vigilant, like Abigail is with them. As I watch my children combine more juices and spill most of them, I realize things are going to have to change.

Lily

I'm at the bar and two drinks in when Aria shows up. "Hey."

She sighs and rubs my back for a moment. "Are you okay?"

"No."

She flags down the bartender and orders a bellini for her and a whiskey for me, which makes me make a sour face at her. "You need it."

I shrug. She's not wrong.

"What happened, honey? Franny says she fell off the trampoline, but that doesn't explain why you haven't been picking them up for two weeks, and you've been dodging my texts—

"It's a mess, Aria. It's all one colossal mess."

"Tell me what happened."

I sigh and when the water comes, I drink half of it. "Franny fell off the trampoline—

"Right."

"While Cormac and I were screwing."

"Oh, shit."

I nod and go back to my whiskey. I don't like it. Never have. But it tastes like the punishment I deserve. "And it happened seconds after Abigail walked in on us."

"While you were—

"Yep."

In response, she chugs her bellini. "That's awful."

"Understatement."

She slowly nods. "I mean, I cannot imagine anything more humiliating

and tragic—

“I was about to tell him I love him. For the first time.”

She finishes the bellini and asks for another. “My god, Lily.”

“Yep.”

“How...how is everything now?”

I laugh once, bitterly. “Not great. Um, in fact, I’m mostly sure we’re going to break up.”

“Fuck.”

“Pretty much. I’ve never been so mortified and scared in my life, Aria. It was like, one minute, I’m embarrassed and I know I’m about to be fired, which—fine, I’ll be okay as far as work goes, but it still bothers me. And then the next minute, I’m wrapped in a sheet at Cormac’s window, watching on as the twins’ little red-faced screams shatter me. Cormac and Abigail both had clothes on, so they raced out there to be with them and zipped out the door before I could even get dressed. God...” I can’t help it. Tears puddle in my eyes and make the bar wavey.

“I’m so sorry, Lily.”

“And you know the weirdest part? It’s not that they abandoned me naked in his bedroom—considering the circumstances, I’d have been mad if they *hadn’t* run out the door with the kids.”

“Of course.”

“But the weirdest part is, while I was watching them scoop the kids up and take them to the hospital, this absolute horror of a situation unfolding...I realized that this was my greatest fear.”

She frowns prettily. “Well sure, sweetie. A hurt child is every...wait. You’re not their parent.”

“Exactly.”

“Oh.”

We’re quiet for a few minutes as that sets in for her, too. Then I add, “Months ago, I thought seeing my restaurant burn down was the worst thing that could ever happen to me. All my hopes and dreams going up in smoke without a thing I could do to stop it. Now, when I look back at it, I realize how naïve that was.”

“It sounds like you are a little too attached to them.”

“I’m not a professional nanny. I don’t know how to keep myself from feeling like this, Aria. It’s all a fucking nightmare.”

She nods. “My therapist calls it enmeshment.”

“Hmm?”

“You know how my mom has no boundaries and always wants to be the cool mom or the cool grandma?”

“I still remember when you caught her wearing your cheerleader uniform and saying she could totally be another high school student if she just dressed the part.”

Aria rolls her eyes and laughs. “Yep. Well, the lack of boundaries isn’t good for anyone except my therapist, who helps me to disentangle our relationship at eighty dollars an hour. Thank god for health insurance.”

“Yikes.”

“My point is, you’re right. You don’t have the training most nannies have, so you don’t know how not to keep yourself from enmeshing yourself with the family and into the mother dynamic, since Abigail wasn’t around. Given that you’re dating their father, I’m sure that makes it even easier to cross those emotional boundaries.”

“Sounds about right. You’re therapist is smart.”

She nods. “So, what now?”

“I have no idea.”

“Well, what have you been up to?”

I blow out a deep breath. “Not a lot, to be honest. I’ve been trying to process what happened. Figure out where we went wrong, over and over. I mean, the kids were already asleep in the living room before he tucked them in for a nap. We were...doing what we were doing, and then Abigail barged in. Seconds later, the scream that will forever haunt my dreams.”

“Wait—why did Abigail barge in?”

“She came to see them and I guess went up to Cormac’s room. But my car was there. That makes it weird that she barged into his bedroom, right?”

“I don’t know their dynamic, Lily. Lots of exes have keys to each other’s places, especially the amicable ones. It’s probably not the first time she’s traipsed all over his place.”

I sigh. “Maybe I don’t know him as well as I thought I did.”

“How do you mean?”

“What if...what if they aren’t done with each other?”

But she shakes her head. “I don’t think so. At all. Abigail and Cormac are amicable, but I’ve never gotten that kind of vibe from them. Besides, she’s remarried.”

“I’m in my head about the whole thing.” I shrug. “Just being stupid and

paranoid because I know this is about to be over.”

“Do you want it to be?”

“I don’t know. I mean, no, I don’t. But I don’t know any other way for this to go.”

“What’s he say about it?”

Shaking my head, I admit, “Not much. He’s been focused on Franny and making sure she doesn’t re-injure the break and cause a growth deformity. God, I’m going to be sick again.”

“Again?”

“Every time I think about it, my stomach flips. It’s been great for keeping the breakup depression pounds off,” I joke.

But she isn’t in a joking mood. “Sweetie, is there a chance you could be pregnant?”

“My IUD and my period last week say no.”

“Thank god.”

“It’s guilt and fear. Guilt for what happened and the fear of getting dumped.” I shrug. “But at least I have some good news.”

“What’s that?”

“Paxton seems to be getting his act together.”

“The burnout?”

I nod. “The very same. He’s gotten clean, and it seems to be real this time. Also, he hooked me up with a guy who wants to hire me.”

“For...?”

“An executive chef.”

“Oh my god, what happened?”

I try to smile, but I can’t get myself into it. Comes out more like a grimace. “The boss’ name is Carl Raines. He’s a restaurateur, and he’s a little obsessed with me.”

“Um, maybe don’t work for another guy who is into you?”

I laugh. “No, not like that. Gay, actually. It’s my food he’s into. Said I didn’t even need to interview, but I insisted on it, just to get a feel for the place.”

“And?”

“The job is mine, if I want it.”

“That’s amazing!”

I sigh.

“It’s amazing, right? Wait—is the pay not good enough or something?”

“It’s more than I made owning my own restaurant, plus part ownership.”

“Then what’s wrong?”

“With the job? Nothing at all. With me? Everything that matters.”

She rubs my shoulder. “It sounds like this is the springboard you need to get out of this mess, Lily.”

“What do you mean?”

“That the universe may be sending you a sign. Cormac isn’t the only future available to you. I don’t say this lightly. I know how much you love him. But it might be time to officially break things off with him.”

“I don’t know.”

“Me either. All I’m saying is, this feels like one of those moments when fate shuts a door and opens a window. It’s up to you to climb through the window or keep banging on that door.”

Drumming my fingers on the bar top, I wonder aloud, “Can’t I just stick my fingers in my ears and say la, la, la, while fate decides for me?”

She smiles. “You could. But that’s never been who you are, Lily.”

I hate that she’s right.

Cormac

Turning the wheel on the car is a challenge. My hands are too sweaty to grip it properly when I angle into the parking space at Hydrangea. It's a downtown restaurant that serves nice enough food that I don't feel bad meeting Lily there, but not so nice that I worry about seeing any of Abigail's friends. They all know what went down, and I am not ready to deal with their judgement and snide comments.

The storefront is all glass, and I don't see her inside, which is why I arrived twenty minutes early. I need time to think. Going in, I give my name and the hostess seats me. But when the server asks what to drink, my mind goes blank. She smiles kindly. "Something from the bar?"

"Water, thanks."

"I'll be right back."

Waiting on the water, I take in the surroundings. Dark red tile floors, white table clothes, and a corner view of Main Street with low lighting. Nothing too fancy and none of Abigail's friends. Thank God.

The water comes and I drink half while perusing the menu, as though I could eat something right now. Maybe something to settle my stomach...I settle on bread and consommé, in hopes that will do the trick. But I'm not sure if it's wise.

Given Lily's tone, I think she's going to dump me. Given what has transpired, I'm not even sure if that's a bad thing. Other than the soul-gnawing ache in my chest.

When she walks in, my heart leaps into my throat. I want to tell her we aren't over, but as she walks to me with that tentative, lip-biting nervous

energy, I can't say the words. I don't want to make this hard on her.

Her little blue dress *is* making it hard on me, however. I can't recall if I'd ever seen her in this.

She gives me a brief hug before sitting down. The server takes her order, and it's black coffee. That's the first sign that something is wrong.

"So..." she says, cutting my thoughts in two.

I sigh. "So."

"How is everything?"

"I want to get this out of the way first. Abigail doesn't want you around the kids anymore."

She gulps and her lips wriggle tightly, like she's fighting back tears. It makes the ache in my chest burn hot. She mutters, "I thought something like that might be coming."

"I'm sorry, Lily. I'm working on her."

Her coffee comes and she orders a green salad. Something to pick at while she figures out what to do? Or something to make it look like she's eating. Hard to say.

After the server leaves, she shakes her head. "Abigail is their mother, Cormac. I don't blame her for hating me. I'd expected her to after she found out about us."

"It's not fair," I blurt with too much volume. A nearby couple glances our way, so I tone it down. "It's not. I was just as much to blame—"

"It wasn't your job to be watching them. It was mine."

I huff. "Except that they were sleeping. At home. With their father present. Hell, you're not even hired to work on the weekends. You were there to see me."

"I was there to see all of you," she counters. Her smile is sad and faded, and it crushes me. "I love the crap out of your kids. Maybe that's not how I'm supposed to feel, since this is just supposed to be a job, but I do." Her gaze drifts away. "I'm not great at boundaries. And I fucked up." Her eyes return to me, and they shine more than before. "I fell in love with all of you."

I swallow against the hard knot in my throat. "How could I see that as anything but wonderful?"

She laughs once and bitterly. "Because that is not what a nanny is supposed to do. At what point did I morph from a nanny to something else... the dad's girlfriend? I can't say, but it happened. And it wasn't supposed to happen. Not to me."

“What do you mean by that?”

“I’m not...I have never been a kid person. That’s a part of why I thought a temporary nanny gig would be a good transition time for me between jobs—no chance of getting attached to anyone. But then you were the client. And Franny and Aiden were the kids. How could anyone not get attached to you all?”

I huff a laugh. “You’d be surprised.”

“How do you mean?”

“Pretty sure one of the previous nannies thought they were the spawn of Satan.”

She laughs fully at that, and I fear it will be the last time I hear such a thing. “Wow. She was nuts, then. They’re wonderful.”

“I always think so, but I’m biased.”

“And now, so am I.” She pauses. “I know I texted about it this morning, but I want an update—how is Franny feeling?”

“She’s doing good. She gets around on her walking boot like nothing will ever slow her down. I wish she was a little more careful, of course, but even her doctor says her progress is better than average, so I’ll take it.”

It’s then that Lily takes a full breath, as though she had been waiting for that reassurance for a long time. “I’m so relieved to hear that.” Suddenly, she takes my hand in hers. “I am so sorry, Cormac. For what happened to her.”

“You have no reason to—

“Yes, I do. I might be new to the gig, but I was still the professional in the situation. Her well-being was my responsibility. And I failed. And I’m sorry.”

I shake my head. “Stop. Please.”

She gives my hand a squeeze before taking it back when our food arrives. We poke at it more than eat it. The consommé is fine, but my stomach is determined not to care. The moment it hits, everything inside lurches. I am too nervous and upset to eat. I knew better than to try. But it’s still better than the stilted conversation of pointless apologies and thorny topics, so I take another sip.

“How are things with the resort?”

“Good. Moving along.” I’m not sure what else to say. How do I ask her not to break up with me? To have patience with Abigail? To stay when she’s so obviously done with all of this? I cannot imagine what the past couple of weeks have been like for her. How much she must have beaten herself up

over all of this.

Years of being with my children have taught me that accidents *will* happen. Kids are accident magnets. I do my best with them, and even while doing my best, things will go wrong.

But Lily hasn't had years of learning this lesson. This is all new for her. So even if Abigail wasn't being awful about it, she still would be freaked out. Since Abigail has been awful, there is no way for me to talk Lily out of her guilt.

Guilt is like resentment. Relationship poison.

I clear my throat of bile and ask, "How are things for you, Lily? Whatever happened to the restaurant you told me about?"

She takes another deep breath.

I will not like this. Whatever it is.

She puts on a polite smile, and I know I'm right. Lily doesn't do polite smiles with me. "I'm taking the job. It will be best for everyone."

There it is. She knows she's never seeing them again. Which means that she's done with me, too. That knowledge lances through my heart, and I fight the urge to argue. It's in my nature, and right now, my nature doesn't matter. "I understand."

Again, her mouth tightens like she's fighting words or tears or both. She pushes her plate away. "I'm sorry to do this, but I need to go."

"It's fine."

She gives a single nod and hurries out of the restaurant, taking my happiness with her.

I should have argued. Should have told her I love her and that we belong together and that I have never been happier in my life than when I was with her.

All the shoulds in the world don't change a thing, though.

Lily is gone.

Cormac

I hate my office. No, that's not true. I love it, from the Italian leather desk chair to the mahogany desk to the view of the ocean. But in the past few days, it's felt more like a prison than an office. My own personal Elba.

A perfectly nice place to be exiled to.

That's what this breakup has felt like. As they forced Napoleon to abdicate his role, so was I forced to give up. I had no choice in any of it. Not really. Abigail decided to keep Lily from the kids. Lily decided to take the job in Manhattan. And I...can't stop either of them.

When did my life get so far out of my control? Oh right. When I had kids.

So, my office has become my new sanctuary. Just like during my divorce. Perhaps I shouldn't think of it that way, but it's impossible not to. When I go home, it's so hard to think of anything but Lily's absence. Especially when Abigail has the kids. Because then, I am truly alone.

But at the office, I have Linda. She buzzes the intercom. "Beau is here for you. Should I send him away or—

"Hey!" he objects.

Her voice is muffled, like she put her hand on the speaker. "You are a distraction and you know it, young man. Keep your hey to yourself."

I snicker. "It's alright, Linda. Send him in."

Beau opens the door and teases, "You know I like a woman who can keep me in line, Linda. Keep flirting, and I'll have to take you home with me."

"Like you could handle me."

He closes the door behind himself and sits in my guest chair. "I need a Linda on my staff."

“There is only one Linda, and she is mine until retirement.”

“Selfish.”

I sit back and notice the haggard look in his eyes. “What’s up, Beau?”

“We have a problem.”

“I assumed that. You don’t show up here for chitchat.”

“I could,” he says defensively. Then he gives up with a shrug. “You’re right. I don’t.”

“Stop stalling and tell—

“The architect is out.”

“What?”

He huffs. “At least, that’s the rumor.”

Beau, for all his flaws, was not one to be sucked in by a conjecture. For him to be this worried, it confirms my suspicions. He’s spiraling. I have to remind him who he is and what he’s capable of, or it will get worse. I give him my most reassuring smile. “You’re going to be upset by a mere rumor? Since when? That’s not the Beau I know.”

“Yes well, the Beau you know is dead. Long live Paranoid Beau.”

I snort a laugh. “What are you going on about?”

“I should have been more prepared. I should have gotten Pavel Cerny on board months ago. Thought I had more time—

“Tell me the rumor.”

He huffs. “Do you know Barbara Tanner?”

The name rings a bell. “Socialite, right? Involved in a few Manhattan charities?”

He nods. “I’m friends with Barbara, and she’s friends with Pavel Cerny’s ex-wife, Angelica. According to Barbara, Angelica was complaining about Pavel getting headhunted for a huge hotel project in Dubai because he won’t be around to see their kids as much for the next two years. Two years, Cormac!”

“Ex-wives are not known for their reliable information, Beau.”

His eyes flash for a moment. “I’ll try to remember that. But whatever the case, I know in my gut the architecture firm is going to try to screw me out of Pavel Cerny. They’re going to want to substitute in some woman I’ve never heard of.”

“How do you even know that?”

He blows out a breath. “I checked with the firm about Pavel and Dubai. They gave me a little song and dance about how, even if Pavel wasn’t

available—and they reassured me he is—but if he wasn't, then they are still capable of handling the project, and this woman he's worked with for years is just as good as Pavel." A heavy eye roll follows. "I don't care about her. She's not Pavel."

"She could be great."

"She's not Pavel—

"I heard you the first time," I interrupt and open my laptop. "What's her name?"

"Elsie Braudel."

Googling her, I find many things. But mostly, I find her social. "Have you bothered to look her up?"

"Why would I? She's not—

"Yeah, I know. You may want to rethink not working with her, Beau."

"Why is that?"

"Impressive credentials, for one. For two," I turn my laptop to face him, "that's her."

He huffs a laugh. "You think I'll change my mind for a pretty face? This is the biggest thing I have ever done in my life, Cormac. I want the best." But he says all of this while checking out her vacation pic. I don't blame him—that bikini is scandalous. "You think she's in Brazil there? It would explain the attire."

"And the mountains in the beach's background. I'd say it's a fair guess."

He turns it back around. "Pretty or not, it makes no difference to me."

I fight the urge to call him out on that. He'll dig his heels in, if I do. "If—

"I take that back. It does make a difference."

"So, you'll work with her?"

He laughs. "Before I knew what she looked like, I debated it. But knowing how pretty sure is? Hell no."

"It's not like you're seeing anyone, so why is that a problem?"

"Because girls like her can get jobs like hers without really trying."

"You think she slept her way to the top?"

He pauses. "I'm not saying that. But I'm not *not* saying that, either."

"I can't tell if you're being sexist or savvy or both right now."

"Admittedly, probably both. But you know I'm right about this."

I shake my head. "Look her up. Her portfolio should put your mind to rest on the matter."

"Sure, but how much of it is her work and how much of it is the work of

some nerd who she took advantage of?”

“Speaking from experience?”

He levels a glare at me. “That’s hitting below the belt.”

“Not my fault that you were the resident nerd in your private school—

“We don’t need to rehash old times. I came here to figure out a solution.”

“And you know what to do. Call her. Set up a meeting. Get a feel for her. If she doesn’t fit the project, we hire someone else. Easy enough.” *Which he already knew I’d tell him...* “Why are you really here, Beau?”

He sighs. He knows I’m onto him. “I heard about Lily.”

Reality sinks its fangs into my jugular. “You’re here to discuss my love life? Since when?”

“Since I heard the *whole* story about Franny from Abigail in the grocery store. I don’t know why I had to hear it from her instead of my own brother, other than Lily must have ripped out his heart and stomped it flat, leaving him catatonic and incapable of using his phone. Maybe I’m assuming too much—

“No. You’re not.”

He sighs again. “I was afraid so. How are you holding up?”

“I’m sorry you had to hear it from her.”

“That’s not an answer to my question, but apology accepted.”

“It’s...I don’t know.”

His eyebrows furrow. “You sound way more upset than needed for a mere fling.”

“It wasn’t a fling, Beau. This wasn’t just a case of a man diddling the nanny. I am—I *was*—in love with her.”

“Oh.”

“And now...I’m regretting everything.”

He nods knowingly. “Well sure. I mean, Franny—

But I raise my hand to stop him. “Of course, I regret what happened to her. What I mean is, I regret how things went down between me and Lily. The breakup.”

“How so?”

“I should have fought her on it. Should have fought for us. Instead, I just...I don’t want her to feel worse than she already did. She feels especially responsible for what happened to Franny—

“She should. She was her nanny.”

I shake my head. “Lily wasn’t on duty at the time, Beau. It was the

weekend, and she was only scheduled to work for the week. She was there to spend time with us. Not to work.”

He takes a beat. “It must be hard to work out when a nanny is on and off. I never really thought about it before, but unless they live with you, then they have off times.”

Nodding, I go on, “And I was home. I feel like everyone forgets that part. Abigail wants to blame it all on Lily for distracting me with sex and so does Lily, but I am just as much to blame in this, if not more. They’re my kids.”

“Well, how did it go down?”

I explain the details. “...and they were supposed to be asleep, to boot. So the whole thing is really just a bunch of things that lined up to lead to a dangerous situation.”

“Plus, Abigail was there when it happened.”

I pause as a fraction of guilt is lifted. “You know something? I hadn’t thought of that.”

He shrugs. “Seems to me that everyone had a role in her accident. What I don’t understand is why you haven’t tried to straighten things out with Lily.”

“It feels like it’s been too long, you know? Like trying to scrape the mold off the cheese left in the back of the refrigerator. You know it’s past its time and trying will only make things worse.”

He smirks. “That was a hell of a line of bullshit. What’s the real reason?”

I don’t want to say it, because it feels like she found something better to do with her life. “Because she took a fabulous new job in Manhattan. She’s moving back to the city, and there’s nothing I can do to stop her. And Abigail hates her, which won’t help anything. Not to mention the fact our resort could put her parents’ B&B out of business, so they hate me. It’s probably for the best that we stay apart.”

“That’s a line of bullshit you sound like you believe, and that’s a pity, Cormac.”

I frown. “It’s not bullshit, Beau.”

He stands. “I have to go. Meetings to have and all that. Think outside the box and call Lily and fix this. You love her.”

I glare up at him. “Call Elsie and try not to sleep with her.”

He huffs a laugh. “You’re only this defensive when you think you can’t get what you want, which means I’m right. Take a chance, Cormac.” He shuts the door behind himself.

I hate Beau knows me so well.

Cormac

Saturday afternoon, and I'm home with the kids. For some reason, I keep expecting to see Lily peek out from the kitchen with snacks she made for them. It's stupid, really. As much as Beau was right about me, I couldn't make myself call her. Or text her. There is little worse than feeling like a pest, and I'd feel like an intruder or an instigator if I bother her now. Neither barging my way into her life when I'm not wanted, or restarting something everyone else doesn't want, has any appeal whatsoever.

This just sucks, and there's nothing I can do about it. I hate this feeling.

"Here," Aiden says, handing me a drawing.

It's not bad, but it's confusing. "Are those...mice?"

He huffs. "Elephants. Franny said it's good."

"It *is* good," she insists. "But if you don't have something with them to show how big they are, it's hard to tell if it's mice or elephants. Mom says it's suspicious."

"*Perspective, sweetie.*"

"Like I said."

But Aiden crumples it up. "Doesn't matter. It's ruined."

I snatch it away and straighten it out. "It's not ruined yet. Why don't you add some trees that are the same size as the elephants?"

"Okay." He lays back down on the living room floor, set on adding the trees.

Franny passes him the brown crayon, then looks up at me. "Daddy?"

"Yes, sweetie?"

She studies me for a moment before she gets up. "Can we have a dance

party?”

I smile at her. “I think dance parties will have to wait until your leg is better.”

But she grins and shakes her head. “I made up a dance to cheer you up.” She swings her arms and shakes her body in a way that makes me snatch her off the floor so she doesn’t hurt her leg further.

I set her on the couch beside me. “Sorry, but the cheer-up dance will have to wait until your leg is better.”

“It feels fine and you’re not fine, so I thought it would help.”

“What do you mean? I’m perfectly fine.”

Her lips smooth into a line, just like when Abigail was disapproving of something I did. It’s eerie in the extreme to see that face on my daughter.

“No, you’re not.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Because you’re...Aiden, what did Mom call it when you acted up after she took away your Spiderman doll?”

He has a tone. “Moping. And he’s not a doll. He’s an action figure.”

“Yeah, Daddy, you’re moping.”

I sigh. There is no hiding my mood from these two. “It’s nothing for you to worry about, sweetie. I need you to worry about your leg and not re-injure it. You want out of your boot, don’t you?”

“I don’t know. It smells funny, so when Aiden annoys me, I can just kick him with it.”

He snorts a laugh. “You’ll get in trouble if you do, Franny. Mommy already warned you.”

She sticks her tongue out at him, but he doesn’t see it. Too focused on his trees. Franny turns her attention to me and huffs upon discovering the use of her weapon has too high a cost. “I guess I want out of the boot. It’s kinda itchy.”

“Okay, then no dancing. It’s settled.”

She sighs and curls up with her head on my shoulder. I contemplate how many times I’ll get this with her, and the thought is salt on my wounded heart. Best to just enjoy it while I have it. She asks, “Why are you moping?”

“I have a lot on my mind right now.” Time to whip out my father’s old excuse. Work. How many times did he use that with us when we were kids with questions about him? He knew better than to burden us with adult problems, but I suspect he used it for minor things too, like when we got on

his nerves. I won't use that excuse when she's older and can handle the truth. I won't be him. "Work has been busy."

Franny nods. "School is busy, too."

I almost laugh out loud, but I don't want her to think I don't take it seriously, or she might not. "I remember those days. There's a lot to learn and do at school. All of it is important."

"Yeah. But also, I wanna tell you something."

"What's that?"

"It's a secret." She motions for me to duck down to her ear.

And of course, I oblige. "What is it?"

"I know Mommy said we won't see Lily anymore, and I know why she's gone."

I frown and hope neither of them notice. *If Abigail told them anything about me and Lily, then my ex and I will have a hideous conversation about boundaries, and it will not go well for her.* I clear my throat. Struggling to keep my tone level, I ask, "And why is that, sweetie?"

"Mommy is back from the Liar Valley."

I keep the laugh in. "Loire Valley."

"Right, so now we don't need Lily."

If only that were true. "Right."

She gives me big eyes like when she wants something, and I wonder how long it'll be before that stops working. "But I miss her, and I want her to pick us up from school again." This kid is killing me.

"Remember when before she came to us and I explained the situation was temporary?"

"Yeah."

"That means it doesn't last. That she was only going to do the job until your mom came back. Since she's back, Lily is going to work somewhere else."

There is so much conflict in her eyes that I don't know where it all comes from. She's too young to look this pensive. "But I love her, and this isn't her fault." The pain in her voice makes me want to move mountains.

"What are you talking about?"

"I was playing when I was supposed to be napping. I'm the one who woke Aiden up to go play on the trampoline. And I knew the flap was open, Daddy. But I wanted to play. It's all my fault." She fidgets with her hair for a moment. "That means it's not Lily's fault, right? She can come back?"

I want to say yes and give into Franny's hopes. And mine. But I hesitate, and before I speak, it hits me. *Why the hell am I hesitating?*

Abigail hates Lily. But ex-wives hate new girlfriends all the time. Lily's dad hates me. But, again, it's common for fathers hate their daughter's boyfriends. Lily took a new job...so what? People can commute from Somerset Harbor to the city. Half the population does already.

There is no real reason for us not to be together unless she is done with me. That would be insurmountable, and if she tells me that's the reason, then I'll back off. But I will be damned if I'm not going to give this another shot. There is too much good between us not to try again.

I smile and kiss my daughter on the top of her head. "We can talk about Lily later. Can you draw me a picture? One that'll go with Aiden's elephants?"

"Okay." She climbs back to the floor.

I need the space to think. First things first, a babysitter. And then, I am going to get my girl back.

Lily

“Are you sure that’s everything you want to take with you?” Mom asks. “What about those pillows?”

I smile at her, not wanting to insult her taste. “They aren’t mine, and they won’t fit in the rental with everything else.”

“Oh. Okay.” Her shoulders slump.

“What is it?”

“Don’t worry about—

“Mom. What is it?”

Still, she hesitates. “It’s been nice having you home.”

“But you could rent this room.”

Her laugh is more like a cackle. “Are you joking right now? Please tell me you’re joking.”

“No—

“I would rather have you home any day, Lily.”

I sigh. “It’s just...with the resort coming, I figure you could use the money.”

“Is that why you’re leaving? It better not—

I shake my head. “It’s not the reason. It’s like I told you. The restaurant is an amazing opportunity for me. I can’t pass it up.” I also can’t pass up a fabulous excuse to get the hell out of Somerset Harbor. Not when I almost bumped into Abigail downtown the other day. Seeing her is my nightmare right now. I have never been so hated as to be persona non grata around kids, and that stings way more than I thought it could.

“As long as that’s not the reason. I don’t want you worried about us, Lily.

We will be fine. No matter what your father said to Cormac.”

It’s times like today that Mom mystifies me. “How can you be so confident? That resort is going to be a monster.”

“You know how in horror movies monsters are defeated by a final girl?”

“Yeah.”

“Our B&B is going to be a final girl.”

I chuckle. “Is that right?”

“We’re scrappy, inventive. Hell, your dad almost never drinks. Isn’t that in the rules for final girls?”

“Where does all this confidence come from and can I bottle some to take with me?”

She giggles. “Nervous about your first day?”

“Only a lot.”

Mom sits on the bed and pats it for me to sit next to her, so I do. “I am confident because in all the decades this place has been open, doing what comes naturally to us is what’s seen us through. We’ve had lean times and busy times, and no matter what, as long as we stay true to ourselves, we come out ahead. It’ll be a challenge. And your dad and I will face it together.”

My heart is lead in my chest. Weighty and black and unmoving. At a time like this, uncertain and potentially devastating, she knows she has Dad to walk through this with her, and her faith in their future is unshakable. And I am so jealous of her. It’s not her fault that I am dying on the inside.

“I’m glad you two have each other, Mom.”

“It’ll get better, Lily.”

“What?”

She smiles. “It’ll get better. I know it’s hard now. But you’ll get back on your feet and find someone new and—

“Nope. We are not doing that. Not again.”

“Fine.” She mimics buttoning her lip. “But it’s true.”

“Mom. I told you—he’s over me.”

But she elbows me. “As if you’re that easy to get over.”

I huff a laugh. “He hasn’t even texted me since that disaster dinner I told you about.”

“He’s probably too embarrassed for ordering consommé in front of a chef, which, to be fair, you did spend a good portion of the night mocking him for after you came home.”

“That’s only because I didn’t want to focus on the rest of the

conversation.”

“And that was why I let you get away with it for so long. Since you’re obviously done with that, do you want to talk about it?”

I shake my head. “It’s too much to think about. I just need to move forward.”

“Sure. But did you ask yourself why he ordered that soup?”

“Because his palate never evolved, even though he dated a chef?”

“Why does anyone ever order consommé? It’s not a *palate* thing. It’s a *feeling bad* thing. Which means Cormac—

“Mom,” I cut her off. “Please. I can’t spend another minute on this. It’s time to move on. My regrets don’t change that and there is no way to fix things. I’ve been beating myself up about how I handled things, and if I have to hear his name one more time, I’ll scream.”

“Cormac MacMillan,” Dad says too loudly from down the hall. “Fancy seeing you here.”

Mom and I exchange a look before dashing to my open doorway to listen. From there, we can see Dad, but not Cormac, at the front door.

Dad asks, “What brings you by?”

“It’s nice to see you, Geoffrey,” Cormac begins and stops my heart. Just hearing his voice is enough to make me off-kilter. “I’d like to apologize for how I handled things the night I had dinner here. You were a gracious host, and I acted like I knew more about your business than you do. I was an asshole. And I’m sorry for that.”

“Has it been bothering you this whole time, or are you trying to butter me up to make things better with Lily?”

I almost hiss, “Dad!” but I keep my mouth shut.

Cormac laughs, and I have missed that sound. “It’s been bothering me this whole time, and I know Lily well enough to know that no matter how you feel about me, she will always make her own choices about her life, so making nice with you won’t do me any favors with her.”

Mom whispers, “He’s very smart.”

I stifle a smile.

“Well, that is true. She has a mind of her own when it comes to everything. Always has. I accept your apology, but now you owe me one for lying.”

“Lying?”

“I was not a gracious host that night, and I’m sorry for that, Cormac.”

“Forgiven,” Cormac says. “I think we might be a pair of stubborn old goats.”

Dad laughs. “That seems likely.”

“Would it be possible to see Lily?”

“I’m afraid not. She’s not here, and even if she were, she told us she doesn’t want to see you.” All the while Dad tells Cormac this, he is pointing down the hallway. At this point, I’m pretty sure he has no idea we’re watching him. He continues, “It’s a shame, too. I think she’d like to hear an apology or two out of you. I heard about your last dinner date, and it sounds like you have some explaining to do.”

“I’d love the chance to explain everything to her. When will she be back?”

Quietly, Dad says, “Son, I’m trying to tell you she’s here right now. She told us she didn’t want to see you, but that’s just because she’s stubborn like me. She *wants* to talk you. I know my daughter well enough to know that.”

Just as quietly, Cormac tells him, “I figured that out. But I thought I should stall. She probably knows I’m here, right?”

“Seems likely.”

“So, I thought it might be better to give her a chance to call or text if she’s not up to seeing me yet.”

“You’re a good kid. I’ll be right back.” Dad turns, so me and Mom dart back into my room.

Mom says, “You know you have to hear him out, right?”

My heart and head feel fuzzy. “Yeah, I guess.”

Dad pops in. “Hey, kiddo. Not sure if you heard—

“We heard everything, Dad.”

“Well, are you going to talk to him?”

But then Cormac calls out, “Lily, it’s okay if you don’t want to talk. But if you could text me when you get to Manhattan—

“I just...wait a minute.” Throwing looks at both my parents, I spit, “I’m going, I’m going.”

When I come down the hallway and find him at their door, it’s like the world stops spinning. Or it’s spinning too fast.

He’s too pretty, too well groomed, too handsome, too much. God, it’s all too much. But I can’t stop myself from longing for him. I have ever since everything had gone wrong. There’s just so much to say and so much to fix, and I don’t know if I have it in me to say and fix all of that. So many words

come to mind all at once, and I blurt the first thing that comes to mind.

“Hi.”

“Hi.” He smiles and lights up the world.

Lily

It isn't fair. No one should look this good while being anxious. His blue eyes are usually steely and determined. Not wide and tense like now.

Jaw clenched, lips tight.

He shoved his hands into his jean pockets. I am mostly sure that's to keep from fidgeting, because his fingers twitch in there. His fitted white tee clings to his muscular body like I used to.

I should not be jealous of a shirt, but alas, here we are.

Before I can say much of anything, though, I realize we are not alone. Both the weight of their presences and Cormac's darting gaze tell me so. I clear my throat to give them the hint, and they don't take it. So, I have to be explicit. "Mom, Dad, can you give us some privacy?"

Dad sulks, "Fine."

Mom leans to my ear, as if she needed to. "Think before you speak, Lily."

"Gee, thanks."

Dad takes Mom's arm. "Come on, Ellen. They have this under control. Let the kids sort it out themselves."

"I just want what's best for both of them."

"They know that." His voice echoes down the hall. "And it won't happen with us telling Lily what to say."

"I could fix this in ten seconds flat."

He chuckles. "I'm sure you could." And then, we can't hear them anymore.

Cormac smirks. "They are a pair of characters. I can see where you get it from."

“I—

“And I don’t mean that as an insult. In fact...it’s a part of your charm.”

I smile.

But just as I take a breath, he says, “I need to get some things out without any interruptions. Is that okay?”

I nod.

He takes a big breath and lets it out for a minute, almost like Lamaze breathing it’s so deep. “First, thank you for agreeing to talk to me. I know it’s not a good time—I saw how loaded down the car is outside. Which means you’re about to leave for Manhattan, right?”

Again, I nod.

“Don’t.”

I arch an eyebrow at him.

“Lily, I am sorry I have been such a fool when it comes to you. I haven’t stopped thinking about you and us and everything since our breakup. I love you more than I knew was possible, and I want you back more than anything.”

Gulping stops me from responding out loud. These are the words I wanted to hear. Hearing them makes me warm all over, and I want to believe them and say them back to him. But the hurt of him not calling or texting is still there. As much as I’d like to forget about that, I can’t.

Plus, it feels like he has more to say, and if I get ahead of him and tell him I love him too, only to have him tell me something horrible to undercut what he just said, I will actually die. Right in the doorway to my parents’ B&B. I can’t do that to them. So, I remain silent.

He reiterates, “Don’t go to New York.”

I fold my arms impatiently.

“Right. I know you don’t like being told what to do. That’s why you’re a chef. But that’s also a part of why I’m here. What if you could work in a top restaurant right here on the island? What if it belonged to you?”

Okay. Time to interject, because now I’m lost. “What are you talking about, Cormac? There aren’t any restaurants like that in Somerset Harbor. That’s why I had to go to Manhattan in the first place. That kind of thing doesn’t exist outside of the city.”

“But it could,” he says in a way that makes his eyes light up. Whatever he is thinking, he’s excited about it, and that makes me nervous. He goes on, “Beau—that’s my brother—said I needed to think outside the box when it

came to you. He's right. You're not like anyone else I've been with, so I've been brainstorming, trying to come up with something that makes everything fit. I think I have. But if you hate the idea, we can come up with something else that will work for you. For *us*."

I like hearing *us*. But we are miles from okay. "What idea?"

He explains, "I want to open a high-end restaurant here. Not just in Somerset Harbor, but here in your parents' bed-and-breakfast."

I laugh once. "How? Every space here is spoken for. We cannot sacrifice the bedrooms for a kitchen. Even if you could—

"We will build an addition for the restaurant. That'll make cooking for the B&B guests easier, right? Your parents were practically on top of each other, just cooking for us. They could use a proper kitchen. There is plenty of parking, and I know the permitting process after dealing with it for the resort. We can secure the financing easily enough and anything that you would need."

He's really thought all the basics through. "But the resort will have restaurants, right? Wouldn't that put us in even more competition with you?"

"It would be a way to differentiate the B&B from the resort. A high-end place that uses local ingredients to celebrate all that Somerset Harbor offers. You have been cooking amazing food from Gifford's, and almost all they sell is local, so I know you have more than enough skill to pull it off."

I blink back tears. If this is a real offer, it's more than I could have hoped for. If it isn't, I'll kill him. "Is this a joke?"

"Not at all."

"Is this just a business proposition?"

He gulps uncertainly, and it's cute as hell. "Do you want it to be just a business proposition?"

Now, it's my turn to gulp. "No."

He smiles, and the glimmer of hope in his eyes sets my soul on fire. "Good."

Still, my inner skeptic is loud. "Why would you do this?"

"As much as I'd like to say, it's all for you, it's not entirely. I was serious when I said the resort won't have what this place has. We don't have the local history or the ambience or the soul, and many people want those things when they travel. It would boost the hell out of the B&B, and we can also send people from the resort who are interested in tasting local fare. You could be the one setting up the menu and doing everything else. Run it how you see

fit, and help your parents at the same time. If I do that for you and for your family, would you stay?"

I can't help myself anymore. The tears spill down my cheeks. "Yes."

He smiles, but his muscles strain under his shirt. He's holding himself back from kissing me. Even now, even after all of this, he's worried I'll reject him. "Really?"

I lasso my arms around his neck and kiss him, and it's all I can do not to ravish him at the door. When his tongue brushes against mine, I go boneless and melt against him. He holds me tight. I pray he won't let go of me ever again.

But then a flash of panic makes me pull back. Not out of his arms. Just enough to be able to speak. "On one condition."

"Name it."

"I'll handle the insurance. Forever."

He grins. "Done."

I kiss him again, and my world comes back together, piece by piece. I don't know what the future will hold. But as long as I'm holding Cormac, nothing else matters.

Lily

I'm still smiling as I close Cormac's door behind Abigail. Smiling out of shock, that is. The kids have gone to play in the living room after their mom left, so me and Cormac sit at the dining room table and talk. "I can't believe it."

He shrugs. "I did say she's a reasonable person, but even I'm surprised she made this turnaround as fast as she has."

I take a deep breath to say what's on my mind. "Pretty sure she still hates me a little."

He laughs. "She might. But she's doing a good job of reining that in, don't you think?"

"Definitely. I just...I'm surprised she's been cool about me being with the kids. I thought for sure she'd have a harder time about it."

"It took her a few weeks—

"Yeah, but still. I thought it might be a few *years*."

"I think it helped to know that you aren't going anywhere. That this isn't just some fling. For her, I think it was one thing if you were some flighty chef on her way back to Manhattan—the kids would have gotten over it eventually and moved on. But—

"Just the kids?" I smirk at him.

"Well, yes. You think I'd ever get over you?" He gives a playful smile and kisses me. It's novel to do that now with other people around, and I'm not sure I'll ever get used to it. I don't want to. It makes me happy every time.

"Go on."

“Since she knows you’re going to stay in Somerset Harbor and that we’re building a business together, she knows this isn’t temporary. That you’re going to be a fixture in my life. So, eventually, she had to get past her own issues.” He sits with that for a beat and his eyes flicker with a thought. “Also, even though she knows she had to go to France, I think she had some mommy guilt about the whole thing, which likely contributed to her overreaction.”

I give his hand a squeeze. “I’m just glad she came over for lunch, and that it went as well as it did. Abigail is a smart, fun woman, and I’d love it if we could be friends one day. I think that would be good for the kids, too. Seeing us get along.”

“I’d really like that, Lily. Don’t do it for my sake or theirs, though. If you want to be friends with her, it should be for you.”

“Can’t it be for everyone?”

He smiles. “I guess so.”

“Okay. Time for me to tackle those dishes—

“Don’t you dare. You cooked. I’ll clean.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want you to feel you have to.”

He huffs a laugh. “You made a three-course lunch for me, my kids, and my ex-wife. You deserve to relax.” Then he heads to the kitchen.

“Oh, okay. If you insist.” As he sidles up to the sink, I fit myself behind him and kiss his shoulder. “Thank you for being such a wonderful boyfriend.”

He chuckles. “Aren’t I too old to be a boyfriend?”

“Hardly. I plan to have boyfriends until I’m dead. Of course, when I’m eighty and they’re twenty-five—

He flings soapy dishwater at me. “Hey!”

I giggle and splash some back at him. “You monster! How dare you!”

He laughs, then takes me in his arms, getting his wet hands all over my back and ass right before he kisses me.

“Ooo,” Aiden taunts us from the dining room. Franny joins in.

We turn, still giggling. Cormac says, “When you’re old and have a girlfriend, you can kiss her in the kitchen, too.”

“No, I want to play splash fight!” Aiden says.

I glance at Cormac. It’s been a while since Franny has been in the pool, and since she got the boot off, I hope he says yes.

He relents. “Go get your swimsuits on and wait—

“Okay!” They run to their rooms to change.

“For us,” he finishes. “Perhaps we can work on listening this week.”

“Maybe. I’m going to go change so I can get out there with them while you keep cleaning.”

“That little black bikini? The one with the shorts?”

“Yeah. Is that—

“I like that one.” His eyes glimmer with *that look* when he says it.

“Then I will definitely wear that one.”

“And I will look forward to removing it with my teeth.”

When he says stuff like that, my knees go weak. I hope it’s always that way for us. “Same here.” I dart upstairs to his room and change, then meet the kids by the pool. They did well and hadn’t jumped in until I arrived, but only just.

We splash fight in the pool for a while, when I hear the doorbell. Without expecting guests, I’m a little confused by it, but if it’s important, Cormac will come get me. Being with Franny and Aiden is freeing. They have no self-consciousness, so they try things like no one ever made fun of them or told them no.

“Can you do a handstand in the water?” I ask them.

“How?” Franny asks back.

I smile, then flip in the water, bringing my hands as flat as I can to the bottom with my feet out, before the waves knock me off balance. “Like that.”

“I wanna try!” She ducks under and is back up in a hurry, sputtering and wiping water from her eyes. “That’s hard.”

“Nuh uh,” Aiden says, before he tries. He tries a few times before giving up. “Okay. It’s hard.”

“You’ll never accomplish anything awesome without making an effort. Try again. I’ll help.” I guide them both to hold their bodies up from the bottom, and after a few tries, they both get it. “Great job! When your dad comes out, you can show him.”

Franny claps her hands excitedly, shooting water at us all. Then the splash fight gets going, and it’s all I can do to hear Cormac when he comes out, carrying a manila envelope. So, I climb the stairs. “What is it?”

“Daddy!” Aiden shouts and then handstands, with Franny following suit.

He laughs. “Wow. Your handiwork, I take it?”

I nod, as they both pop up. “Good job, you two!”

“I am so proud of you!” Cormac says.

The kids beam from the praise and try to outdo each other on the next few handstands.

He does that parent thing, where his eyes are on the kids as he speaks to me. It was weird the first couple of times he did it, but I get it now. Eyes should always be on them, especially when they're in the pool. "Dry your hands and take a look."

"Just tell me—

"Nope."

I roll my eyes and dry my hands. "Good?"

He smiles and passes me the envelope. Inside are the proofs for my menus. This is really happening. And they're perfect. And I'm speechless. I ring his neck and pull him in for a kiss.

He chuckles. "You like?"

"I love them. And I love you."

"In that order?"

I laugh. "No. Maybe."

He laughs haughtily. "Oh, be that way."

But I can't keep it up. "No, baby. I love you more than the menus."

"Be still my heart. I outrank paper."

I giggle. "You outrank everything, Cormac."

"You got me soaked, you know."

"I'll make it up to you later."

"Oh, yeah?" He asks as he belts my waist with his arms from behind so we can both watch the kids. "How will you do that?"

I murmur, "How would you like me to?"

"I'm sure I'll think of something."

"Get your suit on and join us?"

"Actually, I just thought of how I want you to make it up to me."

I chuckle. "Pretty sure whatever you're about to say is not appropriate in front of—

But he picks me up and throws me into the pool, then jumps in wearing his polo and shorts. As soon as we're both up for air, he kisses me, and the kids splash us for splashing them. He laughs and splashes them back.

This isn't the life I had planned, and I can't imagine a better one. Leaning onto him as we watch the kids, I tell him, "I love you, Cormac."

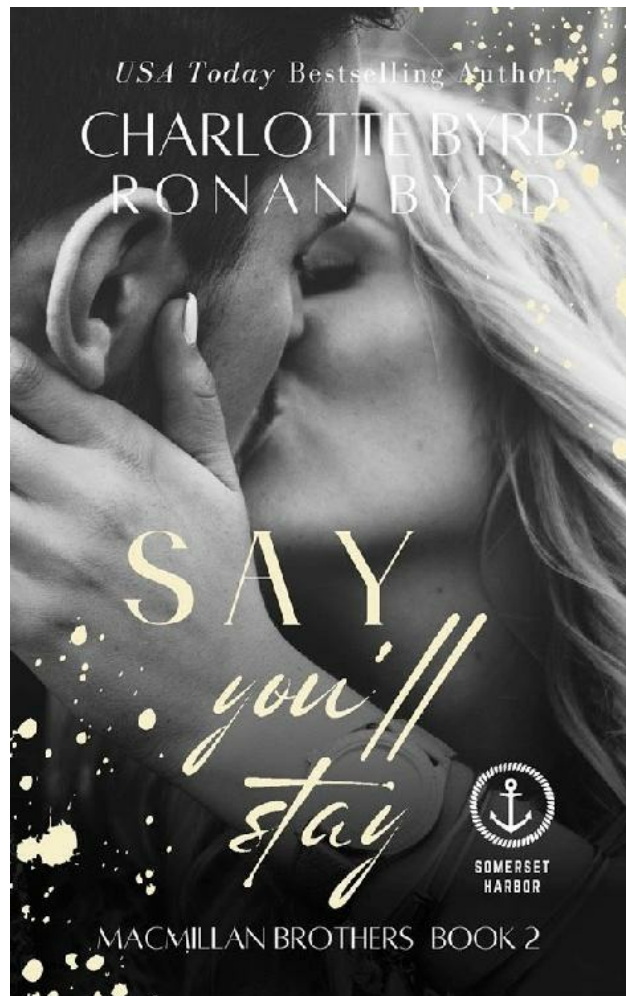
"I love you, too, Lily."

"I don't think I'll ever get tired of hearing that."

“That’s good. Because I don’t think I’ll ever get tired of saying it.”



Thank you for reading *Kiss Me Again!* I hope you enjoyed Lily and Cormac’s story. Do you want to dive back in to another Somerset Harbor romance? Check out Cormac’s younger brother Beau and his fiery romance with brilliant architect Elsie in [Say You’ll Stay](#). [Get it here!](#)



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