



my
Hot enemy

A **SECRET BABY** ROMANCE

NATASHA L. BLACK

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ROMANCE

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CONTENTS

[Introduction](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[My Hot Neighbor \(Sample\)](#)

[A Note from the Author](#)

[Books by Natasha L. Black](#)

[Connect with Natasha L. Black](#)

INTRODUCTION

Worst birthday ever...

The plan was to turn thirty and inherit my grandpa's store,
Not for the board to sell controlling interest right out from
under me.

Victor, the new owner, is handsome as sin and twice as
arrogant.

He's determined to be hands-on with my business.

The problem is, I want his hands on me.

A tornado rages. Passion flares.

Huddled in the storm shelter together, Victor and I give in to
our attraction.

My family's legacy takes a direct hit, and I'm devastated.

Now the business we fought over may be damaged beyond
repair,

And my heart is on the line.

Not to mention, there's a little secret I'm carrying,

That could change everything.

VICTOR

“That’ll be all, sir?”

I snapped out of the daydream and tried to refocus on the man in front of me. He was tall and gangly. Yet, he looked thirty-five and sixteen at the same time, and I couldn’t tell which.

“Huh? Oh, yeah. Yeah, this is it. Oh, and sixty on pump number eight,” I said, stumbling over my words as I tried to regain control over my own mind.

“You okay, sir?” he asked, a note of squeak in his voice making me lean toward the sixteen scale.

“Yeah, fine,” I said. “Just a long drive.”

“Oh, where you headed?” he asked.

“Texas,” I said. “Little town called Murdock.”

“That’s a long way, mister,” he said. “Drive safe.”

“It’s why I got these,” I said, shaking the twelve pack of energy drinks.

He laughed, and I smiled as best I could manage and headed out of the door. I knew the energy drinks were bad for me, but for a couple of years, I had been banned from drinking them by my now ex-wife, who refused to believe that anything that wasn’t her own personal favorite items should be inside the house.

For the first several years, she had been quite amiable and even funny. We’d spent lots of time joking about how people

took life far too seriously, even when we were, in fact, working like people who took life way too seriously. When we got married, we both seemed to think life would just follow a pattern, a script almost. Assuming that one day we would be rich and successful and have two kids and a white picket fence and a dog and live the life you saw in magazines.

This was not how it worked out.

Instead of a marriage full of laughter, it had been a laughable excuse for a marriage for quite some time. We both worked constantly, rarely ever seeing one another except at the office or in bed. And bed was just a place we slept. For almost a decade, the two of us, both investment bankers, competed for clients at a consulting firm that we'd started, egging each other on to drive our mutual incomes higher and higher.

At first, it was fun. We were young and making a lot of money and had no responsibilities to anyone but ourselves. We moved to Baltimore and bought a giant house and fancy cars and spent every day building a company that we thought we'd be able to retire from at fifty and be multi-millionaires, ready to see the world and vacation on pink sand beaches until we croaked.

But the competition never seemed to stop. Neither did the grind. And when the going got tough, well, it just got tougher. We fought, usually over stupid things that we wouldn't have fought about if we'd spent more time together. We stopped enjoying things together, preferring to spend our time apart instead of being forced to be together. Then we started sleeping separately. Always blaming late night work, I slept on the couch while she took the bed. I rationalized it as a hiccup we would overcome.

Eventually, I started seeing signs that she might have found a lover on the side, but I didn't have time to confront her before she sat me down and told me she was unhappy. That had been a long night. She'd told me there was no one else, but I knew that if there was no one particular person, there might have been a few that just weren't regulars. God knew I had the opportunity myself, but I just never took advantage it.

Maybe she never did either. but the constant text messages and the way she would hide away all the time got me suspicious. I was tempted to breach the marital trust and go through her phone or her email, but by the time I felt like I should, I realized it didn't matter. If I didn't trust her enough to think she was cheating on me, the marriage was already done.

So, when she told me she was unhappy, I agreed. So was I. I just didn't really internalize how unhappy I was until I got away from her. I volunteered to take the vacation house we had bought the year before and sleep there. It was in Ocean City, Maryland, a good distance away from Baltimore, but I was willing to travel back and forth.

I was also willing to work things out if she wanted to try.

However after a week, she claimed that she thought I was only staying in Ocean City, so I could have women there that she didn't know about. I told her she could watch the surveillance footage on an app at any time, showing the cameras at both doors, but her mind was made up. She didn't trust me, and she didn't think things were going to work out. Just a week of trying to live separate was enough to convince her that we should just end things.

There was a problem, though. We had done everything together. The business, the properties, the loans. Everything was in both of our names.

That led to a messy divorce which lasted for a year and left me giving almost everything up just so I could be done with it. My lawyer's advice was to sell her the rest of my stake in the company, get the hell out of town, and forget she even existed, as if that was possible. The money I would make from the sale would ensure that I could do anything I wanted, and she would be happy to take it if it meant a quick and final end to the marriage.

I'd called my friends back home and solicited their advice before I made a decision. Then I called all the investors that had worked with me and told them that I was leaving the firm, and that their portfolios would be exclusively Sarah's. They all seemed to know what that meant. Some of them seemed like

they had even been expecting it. I hadn't known it was that obvious.

I took my lawyer's advice and sold everything I'd spent a decade building to Sarah, letting her take it all, including the house and most of the cars, while I took cold, hard cash and my pickup. She hated the pickup anyway. She often said that there was no reason for it, since we lived in Baltimore, and it was just me 'cosplaying as a cowboy.' There was no playing. I was a Texas boy through and through, no matter how long I'd lived in the Northeast suburbs.

She didn't bother to go through the possessions I packed in the back and in the trailer attached to it, though. She knew I wouldn't take anything she wanted to keep. I was a minimalist in a lot of ways, and I had no desire to continue any fights with her, so I wouldn't be tempted to take anything that she would argue with me about. Plus, she hated most of the things that were 'my' possessions anyway, calling them tacky or low-class.

At least I still had my friends in Texas. As a matter of fact, now I had *all* my friends in Texas. Camden never left, but in the last few years, Graham, Ryan, and Mark had moved back. Mark was the most recent to come back, ending up hooking up with Camden's sister Carmela, which I thought was hilarious. She had been doe-eyed over him since she was in pigtails.

Ryan and Graham had found partners, too, leaving Camden and me as the only bachelors of the group now. I had no intention of changing my status for a while. After a decade of marriage, I was quite content to spend a little time answering to no one but myself.

On the rare occasions that I had gotten away from work over the years, I went back to Murdock to visit. Granted, the last time I had been down there was a bit ago, but with everything going on in my life, I figured at least a semi-permanent living arrangement in my old hometown might be just what the doctor ordered.

Plus, I had a good lead on a business venture down there that I had already put a move on. By the time I got back into town,

not only was I going to be a Murdock resident once again, but I was going to be a business owner, a pillar of the community, and a person who was 'making a difference.' Plus, all those other platitudes the local paper was likely to throw on me for spending as much cash as I was in the local economy and providing a bunch of jobs.

I filled up the gas tank and then checked on the trailer. The last time I stopped at Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, right outside of Knoxville, I had found that my recliner had turned sideways. If I hadn't figured it out when I did, it would have likely crushed the collection of baseball cards I'd had since I was a kid and a lamp my father had given me that was my grandfather's from the forties.

Thankfully everything was still intact back there, and I sighed with relief. I had a long way to go from here. I was just past Little Rock, Arkansas, and about eight hours left to go with stops. As it was getting dark already, I had half a mind to stop at a hotel once I crossed into Texas and crash for the night, but I wanted to get it all done as fast as possible. I had already stopped for the night in Tennessee. I didn't want to extend this trip any longer.

As I got back into the driver's seat of my truck, I checked my phone. A message had come in from Ryan. He had been keeping tabs on me while I drove, offering to come get me if I needed any assistance. That was classic Ryan. Always the Boy Scout. He made sure he was always looking out for all of us.

Hey bud, where are you? his text read. Are you stopping again before you get to Murdock?

Don't know yet, I responded. Still an AK. Will let you know once I'm in Texas.

It only took a moment before he responded.

Roger that. Just be safe.

I sent him a thumbs-up emoji and put the phone back on the cradle attached to the dashboard. Scrolling through until I found my streaming music app, I clicked it and set the station back to the tunes of Ronnie James Dio. Another thing I hadn't

been allowed to do in my own house if I wanted to keep the peace with Sarah: metal music of any kind.

Cranking the volume, I put the car in gear and took back to the road, heading southwest and onward to a new, and hopefully much less stressful life.

MELANIE

For me, turning thirty was supposed to be something I enjoyed. I knew this flew in the face of popular culture and was wildly out of line for a single woman, especially in small-town Texas, but it was true. I looked forward to finally kicking off the shackles of my twenties and being recognized as a real, honest-to-God, true adult.

Most of my friends were petrified of it. Losing their youth was the primary worry, even above sagging tits or wrinkles. Just the fact that they no longer could say they were in their twenties was enough to send shivers down their spines.

But for me, turning thirty was a joyful thing to look forward to. I could be free of the restrictions of my twenties and some of the heartbreak, failure and general frustration that came with it, looking forward to the adulthood and seniority that came with being a bit older. It was refreshing.

It also meant I had finally inherited the title of owner and the deed to the grocery store my great-grandfather had opened and my family had run for generations.

Brewer's Grocery was our family legacy, and as one of the founding families of Murdock, Texas, our roots were the roots of the city itself. Back when Austin was still just a speck on the map and San Antonio still had a third of its people speaking German, my grandparents of the multiple great variety were settling in this area and calling it their own. By the time my great-grandfather founded Brewer's Grocery, our

family had been known for running markets, and of course, selling beer.

But times had changed and running a local grocery store wasn't as easy anymore. Not with superstores springing up on the edge of town and pulling away not just the customers but the workforce too. It was tough to compete, and in order to keep your head above water, you needed gimmicks and sales and a strong connection to the community.

Two out of three wasn't bad.

A connection to the community was there, no problem. With me at the helm, we had developed a number of strategies to keep things moving. Unfortunately for us, however, the gimmick portion was failing. We didn't have a draw. The store was old and in need of repairs, and a good paint job probably would go a long way. We were directly located in the center of town, which was nice, but in the last couple of years, it felt like the town was expanding and leaving its main streets behind.

I had ideas, though. I was brimming with ideas. I just needed people to listen. That was always my problem.

As a kid, my first job was janitorial duties. I swept and mopped and did the dirty work of cleaning the restrooms at fourteen while my friends were either still at home doing nothing or running paper routes. Then I graduated to gathering carts and bagging groceries. Then stocking. Then running registers. Finally, I moved into management, and no one said boo. I had earned my way there, and I was under the thumb of a stern grocery manager who had no issue telling my parents I was an idiot.

For that matter, she would tell anyone they were an idiot, to their faces, in front of their mamas. Mrs. Bashears was a fearless woman. I learned a lot from her.

When she retired, I got the job of manager. I ran the store doing everything from ordering to inventory, running registers on busy days and setting the budget. Sometimes I showed up before dawn and went home as the sun rose the next day, and

during Thanksgiving, I was at the store until we closed at dusk and right back at it as soon as dawn came on Black Friday.

I did it all, and I did it with a smile. Because one day, it would all be mine.

It was my connection with my family. Both my parents had died when I was sixteen, victims of a terrible car accident that had prompted the city of Murdock to finally put up a light at the corner of Patterson and Main.

Before my parents died, they'd had the foresight to set up a trust that controlled what little fortune they had left, including the ownership of the grocery store. When I turned thirty, I would inherit the store and everything that went with it, assuming the small group of investors my parents had brought in in case anything happened to them voted on my competency and faith in my abilities. I felt like I had done everything possible to make that happen.

Thus, I was sitting in the meeting room of the local library, having come in prepared to sign a bunch of forms and get the formalities over with so I could celebrate. It would be the day that I was able to feel like a connection had been made with my parents and do what they always wanted me to do, as well giving my life the purpose and meaning that I had been chasing for a long time.

Shaking with anger, I looked down at the paper in front of me. I had been staring at it for a few minutes now and had felt my entire body go numb.

"Melanie," a voice said from some far-off distant planet away from where my thoughts were. "Melanie, I hope you can understand this. We did this with you in mind."

The words started coming out of my mouth without bothering to check in with my brain. They were coming straight from my gut. From my heart. They were words that I was barely able to form as they passed through a tsunami of anger and bitterness and betrayal inside my throat. Words that dripped with the hatred of bureaucracy and the not-so-subtle misogyny that I had dealt with my entire adult life from these people. These people I trusted to do the right thing. The *easy* thing.

How wrong I had been.

“You did this with *me* in mind, Harry?” I said, my voice low and gravely. I wasn’t going to shout. Yet. “You did this, what, to protect me? Is that what you are saying?”

“Melanie,” he said, using his most condescending tone. He had been using it on me since I was eighteen and had started attending these meetings. “You must understand that we have been watching you and how you ran things for years. It just wasn’t what we thought were in the best interests of the trust as it was laid out to us.”

“Not in the best...” I began, unable to believe what I was hearing. “It is *my* fucking store, Harry.”

“Melanie, language,” another board member, Frank, said.

“Fuck you, Frank,” I shot back. “Fuck all of you, in fact. You did this to me on the day before my birthday. The day before. You didn’t do this just because you were worried about anything involving me other than your own financial interests. You did this because your financial interests are all you care about, and you don’t give a shit about me.”

“Melanie, that is enough,” Harry said. “You want the facts? I’ll give you the facts. The store has lost growth by an average of two percent every year for three years, an average of one point three over five and one point one over ten. Do you know what else coincides with that slow drive into the ground? You becoming manager.”

“Oh please,” I said. “It also coincides with Walmart opening up at the edge of town on one side and Costco on the other. You know that Hank. Don’t try to bullshit me. Look at the numbers of any other local grocer in a town where that has happened. Tell me the percentage of loss was even close to what I had.

“And if you look at the month-by-month numbers, we had an absolute crap first quarter, that’s true. But everything after that has been going up. Last year was the same, and we almost broke even. This year we are on pace to break even and go into the black.”

“You’re wrong,” Harry said. “That’s not accounting for vendor contracts.”

“You’re right, it’s not,” I snapped. “But I have already negotiated with the vendors to come back at their same rate. Which with the growth we had means we will actually have a higher profit than what I predicted in the forms I sent you *two weeks ago*.”

“I don’t remember that,” Hank said, looking unsure of himself for the first time. “But be that as it may, the board has serious concerns about your preparedness to run the store profitably and responsibly. Your attitude here today proves it. You’re hot-headed and not capable of keeping your emotions in check.”

“What the hell did you think I would do, Hank? Lay down and take it like a good girl?” I yelled. Hank visibly squirmed at that one. Good. “I’m not a child, Hank. This good old boys’ club bullshit is ridiculous. You seem to think that me being a woman prevents me from being able to run my own business, but I assure you that it doesn’t. I know what I am doing. It’s my family’s company, and I should be the one to run it by all rights just as my parents intended.”

“Well, that’s not a possibility now, Melanie,” Chuck interrupted. “The sale is final. We finished the paperwork two days ago. The new stakeholder owns fifty-one percent of the company and all its holdings and will be in town tomorrow to have a meeting with the board. At that time, the future of the board itself will be in discussion, and if you would like to bring up your opinion on that matter to the new owner, feel free to do so. Tomorrow. At the store.”

“Are you dismissing me, Chuck?” I asked, venom seeping from my voice.

“At this time, yes. There’s nothing else to be discussed,” Chuck said.

“No, you don’t dismiss me like I’m a child. I’m a grown goddamn woman whose family has owned and run that store for nearly eighty goddamn years. Mark my words you deceitful assholes, I will get it back and you’ll be sorry you ever crossed me.” I turned on my heel and slammed the door

behind me as I left, earning a stern look from the librarian for the noise. I ignored her and headed back to my car, angrier than I'd ever been in my life.

VICTOR

Hello, Mr. McLaren, this is Chuck from the board. Could you give us a call when you can?

I read the text and saved the phone number under the name ‘Chuck-Board’ before sticking the phone on the charger in my bedroom. I would respond to that in a minute, once I was done getting ready. I had just gotten out of the shower and was still dripping wet, a towel wrapped around my waist.

All of my clothes, what little there was, were in the closet on hangers still wrapped in black plastic bags or stuffed in the duffel bag at the end of my bed. Picking up the duffel, I opened it up and went through it to find my underwear and socks and sort them out. I was going to need to wear something presentable, though, since it was going to be my first day going into the store since purchasing it. I wanted to look nice.

I had memories of the store going back to childhood and had always loved it. It wasn’t just a grocery store. It was the kind of grocery store that maintained the small-town Texas feel, perfectly divided up into aisles containing pantry staples.

There had been a video store in one corner that rented out VHS tapes and old video games along with DVDs, though I assumed that was gone by now. There was a section that sold seasonal clothes behind that, selling winter jackets and mittens and scarves in the winter and shorts and sunscreen and hats in the summer. No matter the season, one wall always sported cowboy hats and Dallas Cowboys merch for sale.

As a kid, I thought it was the greatest place in the world. We would go once a week to stock up on groceries and whatever we couldn't get at the little five-and-dime at the end of our street. Brewer's Grocery always had the best selection of produce as well, and Mom always wanted to go by and get fruits to make pies. She wouldn't buy fruit from any other store, preferring either Brewer's or the stands by the side of the road that seemed to always occupy the stretches between Murdock, Houston, or Austin.

It was popular, too, at least when I was a kid. For a long time, it kept the scepter of superstores away by being so uniquely Murdock that it engendered a sense of community and loyalty. But as the town started to struggle in the late nineties, and younger folks started to move out to make their lives elsewhere, it had apparently fallen on some hard times.

All that led to a phone call four months ago. An investor who had gone to school with me and had been in passing contact over investments in Texas before I moved to Maryland emailed me out of the blue. The board was looking for someone who was local and willing to invest. I saw a chance to make a move and started the discussions. It didn't take much convincing.

The owners of the store had died years back, and the board was left in control of what to do with the company until such time as the owners' only daughter was thirty and decided if she wanted to run it. From what I gathered, a combination of distrust of the daughter's abilities to run the company as well as a bylaw that allowed the trust to sell the company in the event that she wasn't capable of or willing to take over led them to seek outside investment.

I was more than happy to be that investment. I was suddenly flush with cash and looking for something to do. Considering that my instant thought was to move home to Murdock and get my feet under me where I was able to hang out with my best friends, owning a store in Murdock itself would be ideal. It would give me a project to focus on and tie me back to the community and who I had been before I even met Sarah. It seemed like the best possible situation.

I bought it sight unseen for the most part. It was hugely risky and something I never would have suggested to any of the people I advised in a million years. But considering I knew Murdock and its traditions and pull for nostalgia and the fact that even if the building had to be completely torn down and rebuilt, I figured the worst that would happen was it would take a few years to recoup my investment.

Good thing I didn't have any major plans for the next few years.

I picked up my phone once I had boxers and socks on and took it with me to the closet while I unwrapped the small selection of suits, slacks, and dress shirts I had brought with me. The rest I told Sarah to donate to the Goodwill. I didn't have room on the trailer and certainly didn't want to come back again for them.

Hitting the button to call Chuck, I put the phone on speaker as I went through my suits.

"Mr. McLaren," Chuck said. "Glad I could reach you."

"Hey, Chuck, just call me Vic, all right? Mr. McLaren was my dad," I said.

"Sure, sure, Vic. Well, I wanted to give you a heads-up about coming into the store today. The minority stake holder will be meeting you up there, and she is... rather upset about the sale," he said.

"Upset? Why would she be upset?" I asked. "I thought she was on board."

"Well, she was aware on paper that it was a possibility, but it seems that perhaps we didn't quite convey it in a manner in which she was aware of the reality of the situation," he said as diplomatically as possible.

"Ah, so in other words, she had no clue," I said.

"Correct."

"Well, it's a bit too late now," I replied. "Papers are signed, inks dry, all that. Besides, the numbers you and I were going over were pretty clear. The store has been struggling the last

few years, and while it has a ton of potential, it clearly needs the perspective of someone from the outside to unlock it.”

“This is how the board feels as well,” Chuck said. “We were placed in control of the future and prosperity of the store, not just for the Brewer family but the community of Murdock as well. All those employees and customers who rely on the store being open and functional and profitable. We simply felt taking a gamble with her in full control was a non-starter. You understand.”

“I suppose,” I said. “I have to say I would have liked to have known she wasn’t clued in before now, though. It feels a little shitty to just drop this on her, Chuck.”

“I understand,” he said. “Alas, what’s done is done. Her name is Melanie, and she will be most likely at the store by the time you get there. I would suggest that you inform her of your lack of knowledge about her understanding of the agreement and allow us to take the heat for that.”

“Thank you, Chuck, I’ll take you up on that,” I said, wondering if he really thought I was just going to let this woman blame me in the first place.

“Good, good. We are awfully sorry to put you in this position, Mr... Vic,” he said, correcting himself at the last second. “Hank would like to know if you would like him to be there when you meet her, but he unfortunately has an appointment until four this afternoon, and I know you were planning on being there earlier than that.”

“Tee time, eh?” I joked.

Chuck laughed in the mirthless way of someone who can’t lie but doesn’t want to tell the truth either.

“So should I tell Hank to come after his appointment, sir?”

“No, it’s fine,” I said. “I’m sure I can handle Miss... Mrs.... is it Miss or Mrs., Chuck?”

“Miss,” he said. “She has never married.”

“Ahh, well, I’m sure I can handle Miss Brewer. Melanie, you said?”

“Yes, sir.”

“All right, Chuck,” I said. “I’m going to get off here and head over. I’ll call you if I need anything.”

I got off the phone and tossed it onto the bed as I finished getting dressed. The bedroom was essentially the only room with my stuff in it, since I rented the small home furnished and only had enough room for what I could stuff in the trailer. I wanted some time to get settled before I bought a place of my own.

My parents had moved, long ago, to Fort Worth. My childhood home was now occupied by a young couple with no intention of selling, meaning I had to find somewhere else to live, and the rental home was the first place available.

Finally dressed and ready, I headed to the store. It was funny how easily driving in Murdock came back to me. For a split second, I felt like I might need my GPS, then suddenly, it all clicked. I knew where to turn and when. Even new buildings and roads didn’t throw me off, I knew how to get downtown the quickest way for early afternoon traffic.

I pulled into Brewer’s Grocery and parked the truck near the back. The store was moderately busy, which gave me a little hope, since it was mid-day on a weekday. If it stayed this busy, recouping my investment wouldn’t take that long at all.

The front door was as far as I got before an employee rushed over and introduced herself.

“Mr. McLaren?” she asked. “I’m Amy, the shift manager.”

“Hi, Amy,” I said, shaking her hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise,” she said. “Umm. Miss Brewer is waiting for you in her office.”

“Her office?” I asked. “I wasn’t aware this place was big enough to have offices for everyone.”

“Oh, it doesn’t,” she said. “There’s just the two. She shares it with the other managers, I guess, but I always think of it as hers, you know?”

“Other managers?” I asked. “Wait, does Miss Brewer *work* here?”

Amy blinked at me for a moment and slowly nodded her head.

“Yes,” she said. “Usually the afternoon shift. Right this way.”

Add that to the list of things I didn’t know about this place. A list that grew so much larger when the door opened, and my eyes widened.

Being five years younger than me, we hadn’t been in school at the same time, so while I knew the Brewer name, I didn’t know Melanie. I was not prepared for what I saw. In front of me was a perfectly made up, gorgeous, capable-looking woman. A woman who was also clearly angry as a hornet.

MELANIE

Pacing back and forth in the office for a half an hour was probably not good for me. Being on the floor with customers who had some exceptionally dumb questions today was *also* not good for me, though, and at least locked away in the office, there was less of a chance that I would start throwing things and dropping more f-bombs.

But being locked away in a small room and not know exactly when this Victor McLaren guy was going to show up was way worse it felt like. I was like a caged tiger, full of rage and frustration and indignation, and every time the door opened because Amy had to get something or the safe needed to be opened, I already had my mouth open ready to launch into him. I was edging myself emotionally, and it was exhausting.

So, when the door finally did open and it wasn't Amy or another cashier, it was almost a relief. I could finally blow up the way I had been waiting to do all damn morning. There was only one problem.

He was stupidly hot.

Like, really, way, way hotter than anyone had any right to be.

He was tall and handsome, and his jaw looked like you could break ice with it. He had big, wide shoulders, and the way his suit fit tightly over his biceps gave the impression that he was deliciously cut underneath those clothes. He had bright blue eyes and dark hair, parted smartly to one side. I half expected him to tear the buttons off his dress shirt exposing a giant red S to be underneath.

My brain short-circuited. All the words that had been building up at the back of my throat like cannonballs were suddenly gone, leaving nothing more than an empty, dry feeling in my mouth and a blank brain. I literally was stupefied.

Then I rallied.

All the anger flooded back, and I felt my blood warm almost to boiling. The fact that he was stunning and somehow only a handful of years older looking than me made it worse. I expected a balding, middle-aged man in an ill-fitting suit and a bunch of belly fat. This guy was the opposite of all of that.

When I spoke, instead of the shouting anger that I felt radiating out of my soul, my words came out cool, even, and low, grumbling like a motorbike launching out of hell. Covered in the knives of vengeful assassins.

“What you did was really low.”

He blinked at me and stood there in the doorway for a moment before holding up one finger and then turning his back to me as he closed the door. On top of everything else, I hated that gesture. I hated having someone tell me to wait with a finger. Like I was some child.

“Now,” he said as he turned back toward me. “Hello. My name is Victor McLaren. I presume you are Melanie Brewer?”

“You presume right,” I said, feeling like it sounded smarmy and full of the well-deserved indignant rage I felt.

“Well, good then. It’s nice to meet you.”

He held out his hand for a shake, and I just looked at it. Awkwardly, he pulled it back and motioned to my chair.

“Would you like to sit and talk?” he asked.

I cocked my head to one side, completely blown away.

“You come into my store, the store my family has owned for nearly eighty years, after having bought it out from under me, while I’m at work in my own office, and *offer me a seat?*”

“I just meant—” he began, but I was on a roll. Whatever short circuit had happened earlier, and I was past it now.

“No, I know what you meant,” I said. “You think you can just walk in here and start ordering people around, including me, because you sweet-talked the board into selling you the shares that were supposed to go to me. You ripped this company out of the hands of the family that it belongs to, and you just think you can tell me to shut up and sit down and learn how ‘it’s all just business’ and ‘clearly, I don’t understand how these things work.’ Well, let me tell *you* something, Mr. McLaren. I have absolutely no intention of just lying down and taking this.”

There was a moment of silence as I breathed deeply, my eyes bulging with fury as he sat there stone-faced, letting me talk. I realized that he was altogether too calm. It somehow made me even angrier.

“Miss Brewer,” he said calmly, “may I have a moment to speak?”

“Sure,” I said, throwing myself into the chair. “Let me hear it.”

“Thank you,” he said, taking a seat across from me in the tiny office.

He had a folder in his hands, and he opened it up, flipping through a couple of pages before settling on one and looking back up at me brightly, as if I hadn’t just unloaded venom on him. It was unnerving in a professional sort of way, like he was just so used to people being upset that it wasn’t worthy of a bigger response than to wait for his turn to speak.

“Now, according to the documents I was sent, the basis of my decision to purchase this businesses’ majority share, as things have been steadily declining for years. Yet,” he said, seeming to suspect the interjection I was about to give him before I could even work the words up, “there is more behind these numbers than meets the eye. What I am seeing is some temporary losses that could be mitigated with a bit of a reimagining of the model and perhaps some simple sprucing up of the place.”

“Oh?” I said, the word falling out of me in place of all the anger-filled ones that had lined up.

“Now, when companies need to restructure or regroup, they benefit greatly from past experience and loyalty in management, this is true. But they also tend to need someone to guide them. With Brewer’s Grocery’s name value and reputation, I see a chance for expansion and acquisition, not the other way around. And when a business wants to expand and invest in their future, well, that’s what I do.”

“I see,” I said, my eyes narrowing as I tried to make sense of him. Was he just telling me things I wanted to hear? It was possible. Someone who looked like he did could probably make a living telling people what they wanted to hear, and the combination of platitudes and his jawline would make it very easy to fall for it.

“When I made the purchase, I admit, I didn’t do the amount of legwork I tend to do when making investments. I mostly purchased out of nostalgia and opportunity,” he said. “I grew up here in Murdock, and I’ve just moved back. I have every intention of preserving the history and legacy of the Brewer family and have no intention of pushing you off to the side. I want you to know that.”

“Good,” I said. “And I want you to know I will run this store how I see fit. This is my store. Mine. And I will go to court and prove how the board screwed me over. You might know about acquisitions and expansions, but you don’t know how to run a grocery store. I do. I’ve been doing this since I was a kid, and I know what the hell I am talking about. So why don’t you stay out of my way? Go do something else and collect the money I’ll earn for you. I can do it myself and you can just be a silent partner until the court tells you to hand your shares back over where they belong. To me.”

Victor McLaren blinked again and then very slightly leaned forward in his chair. He had a small, polite smile on his face. There was no smarm in it. It was the smile of confidence. I hated it.

I also hated that a loud voice in my mind that wouldn’t shut up was also incredibly turned on by it.

“It won’t work like that, Melanie,” he said. “That’s not how I do business, or how business works in general.”

“Excuse me?” I began, but he interrupted me again with another hand in the air. I felt like ripping it off.

“I have no interest in bossing you around, either,” he said. “You are correct. I know about business acquisitions and expansions and investments, and you know how to run a grocery store. I understand this. It would be a disaster for you to leave and for me to try to put on a nametag and figure out how to make this place more successful.”

“Heh,” I said, openly laughing at the image of Mr. Business Clark Kent putting on a green apron and a nametag and wandering around the store aimlessly. He looked incredibly successful, and the way he carried himself seemed to solidify it. I wondered if he had even bought his own groceries in twenty years or if he had a personal shopper to do it for him.

Or a wife.

I didn’t see a ring though. Not that I was looking. Certainly not looking.

“I will be an active owner,” he said. “But I think you got a raw deal. If you have been working here this entire time and you actively wanted the ownership, then it is my opinion that the board not only sold you out, but also sold me a false bill of goods. I was coming into this investment with the belief that I was going to be received as a partner, not an enemy. I am just as angry at the board as you are.”

“You have no earthly idea how angry I am at the board,” I countered. “You couldn’t. It’s impossible. They betrayed me and my family in a way that can never be quantified by the English language. And forgive me if I have a hard time believing a successful businessman like yourself would have no idea what he was getting into by buying this place. You mean to tell me you didn’t talk to the board about me? That you didn’t scout the location or talk to customers or anything like that? Because just the bare modicum of research would have told you that I have been here for years, and I planned on staying here until I could pass it down to *my* children as

everyone who's come before me has done. This is my legacy. My family. My reputation. And you can go to hell."

I wasn't entirely sure what I said made complete sense, but at that moment, I didn't care. It felt good.

As I stormed to the door, Amy appeared in my vision. She was such a sweet girl that I hated the thought of her getting caught in the crossfire. But she was stepping in the path of a dragon. She was bound to get burned.

"Mel, I have a customer at register four, he—" she began.

"I'm off," I said, cutting her off. "Let Mr. McLaren handle it. Sink or swim."

I didn't even pause my stride as I headed right out of the front door. I left my purse inside the office, but I had my keys in my pocket, thankfully. I could come back for the purse. Making the point was far more important.

I got in my car, revved the engine, and pulled out onto Patterson, heading for home.

VICTOR

Well, that was... something.

First off, I was angry that apparently the board had pulled a fast one on not only Melanie but me too. They'd put me into a hostile situation, and it was wildly unethical. But for that, as she so eloquently pointed out, I had only myself to blame. I should have done the kind of research and investigation that I would have done for any of my clients that were looking to invest. The fact that I didn't was an embarrassment that I could only chalk up to the fog of divorce and my desire to have something fall into place that was easy.

Though the person who got screwed over the most was Melanie. It was hard not to feel bad for her. She had every right to be angry, and I planned on taking that up with Chuck the next time I talked to him.

She had brought up some good points. As a person who had been working at the store for years, she knew far more about how it operates, and no suit nor any board member could deny that. She was a wealth of information about what would need to be done to help the store as well as what works well as of currently. If only someone would listen to her and be willing to do something about it.

I had heard this refrain time and time again in fledgling and failing businesses. The people on the ground knew what needed to be done but were hamstrung by people who worked at a corporate office and thought all things should fit in the

same size boxes. An idea was only worth implementing if it was something that could be done company wide.

And in my experience, every time that top-down philosophy was held on to by middle management and executives who knew their only contribution was exerting power for the sake of power's exertion, those companies suffered. It was the workers who had the ideas that helped, every time. I had no intention of pretending my ideas were better than Melanie's or anyone else who worked at Brewer's Grocery just on the merit that they were mine.

But she still had to understand the situation she was in. Whether she liked it or not, I owned a controlling stake in the company. She could go to the courts all she wanted, but the most she would get would be a temporary injunction. Everything we did in the purchase, while unkind to her, was one hundred percent legal.

In a perfect world, today would have gone differently. I would have come in, and we would have had a frank and productive discussion, much like I'd had with investments I made in the past.

Unfortunately for me, Melanie hated my guts. And while I could see why and didn't really blame her that much, I had to do what was best for me and my investment. That meant deciding not to care that she hated me. I put a major investment of what cash I had into buying the majority stake of this company and setting aside money for expansion, development, and restructuring including remodeling. I wasn't going to pull any of that money back just because Melanie was directing her anger at me. At the end of the day, it was my choice to do what I wanted, and as a minority owner, all she could do was complain.

"Sir?" a voice said as I sat on the desk and went through the phone, trying to pull up Chuck's number so I could tell him how this all had gone.

"Yes?"

"Umm, I was going to have Melanie help me, but there is a minor issue with a customer," she said. "He wants to speak to

a manager.”

“Aren’t you a manager?” I asked.

“He said ‘a real manager,’” she said, using air quotes. Over her shoulder, I could see the man in question. He was older, a beer belly falling over top of a visible and very large belt buckle. A ten-gallon hat sat on top of his white-haired head, and his face was crumpled up like he’d just tasted a bitter beer.

“Ah,” I said. “Well, here goes nothing, I guess.”

* * *

It was an hour later before I finally got out of the store. The angry cowboy was only appeased when I authorized Amy to discount all of his cans because they were ‘dented’ and then walked his groceries out to his car for him. In my suit.

When I got in the car to head home, I had a new appreciation for the people who had to put up with that every day, including Melanie. It wasn’t fun. And it wasn’t easy.

I got in the car and put the phone on the dock, not remembering that I had planned on calling Chuck until I was halfway down the road. I reached for the phone at a stoplight to pull up his number when a text message came in. I clicked it and sighed.

“Shit,” I said.

Movers will be at the address you forwarded at five. I have loaded up all the furniture I didn’t want and sent it to you. You can decide what to do with it. Also, you left that godawful eyesore of a recliner in the basement. It’s on the truck too.

The text was from Sarah, and it had all the warmth and love of a fish on ice. Just like everything she did these days. Oh well. At least I’d gotten the recliner that I had intentionally put in the basement so it would be hard to lug out into the yard and burn. I didn’t have room in the trailer for it, but I couldn’t bear the thought of her destroying it either.

She would have probably taken pictures. And then sent them to me.

She had no clue that I moved into an apartment furnished circa 1988. As far as she knew, I was crashing on the sleeping bag that I took camping all the time and sitting cross-legged in the center of a bare living room floor.

Now I had to figure out how to either fit the furniture into the rental or pay the movers to move all the old stuff to the storage shed along with moving my stuff in. I'd signed a year lease and planned on checking in on the kids at my parents' house during the year. Maybe if I pestered them and offered above value for it, I could buy it back. Then I could fit all the furniture I wanted inside.

I got to the house and went inside, thankful that I at least had stopped to get a bunch of fresh towels and toiletries. I had showered before heading to the Brewer's Grocery, but I felt like I needed to wash the bad juju away immediately. I went inside, ran the shower, and rinsed off, changing into jeans and a T-shirt when I got out, so I at least felt like a normal person again.

The movers showed up about a half an hour later, and by then I had already taken the initiative and moved some of the furniture to the storage shed. As the truck opened up and I peered inside, I realized I was going to have a lot more work to do.

"Did she keep anything?" I asked.

The mover shrugged. His name was embroidered to his shirt, along with the logo of the mover's company.

"Dunno," Gary said. "She kept pointing and pointing and pointing, and we moved it all out. If there's something you don't want, I can take it to the Goodwill for a fee."

"Well, let's take a look first," I said, wondering if Gary's definition of 'Goodwill' was his house.

Not that it mattered. If he wanted it, he could have it as far as I was concerned. I didn't have a need for a bureau or a doll cabinet.

Slowly, we went through the contents of the truck, pulling off the big pieces I certainly wanted to keep and putting them out

by the front door.

A couple of hours later, everything was inside, and I paid a tip to the movers, partly for being as good as they were at their job and partly because they were going to be taking at least half that stuff away. Once they left, I went back inside and looked at my time-warping house.

Some of the items were clearly mine, dark oak and chestnut furniture Sarah and I had picked out together in the good days of our marriage. The guest room bed was now in the bedroom, taking the spot of the queen-sized one that had been there which was now mostly in the shed and partially sitting against the wall. My television stand was in the living room now, which was nice since it was somewhere for the Xbox to sit.

But the real change, the one that mattered, was the recliner sitting in the middle of the living room. Battered, torn, beaten up, and stained, it represented ten years of gameday television watching, movie marathons, and video games. It was my favorite piece of furniture, and it had pained me to stick it in the basement, so that it wouldn't get tossed.

Settling down in the most comfortable seat I had ever been in, I pulled out my phone, ordered a pizza, and cracked open a beer. I deserved a night off.

MELANIE

Blowing past Amy was probably the meanest thing I had done in a long time. Amy was a sweet girl and didn't deserve me being rude to her. I just couldn't stick around, though. Amy was good at her job, and I had every confidence that she would be able to handle any situation that came by until Norma showed up to take the late afternoon shift.

Norma was not a woman to take bullshit either. I'd leaned on her often when I first got into management because she had been there forever. The only reason she wasn't the store manager herself was because she had a very specific schedule she was willing to work and nothing else. Instead, she'd trained me and had been my backbone for years.

It made me feel pretty shitty to keep ignoring her calls like this.

I had to be careful how I responded. It could be a pretty explosive situation, honestly. If I caused enough of a stink about it, it was possible some of the employees that the business depended on would quit. While that would be emotionally gratifying, it was extremely short-sighted if I planned on continuing my bid to get it back. As much as I wanted to flip tables and burn my uniform, I was still fighting for my rights, and that would certainly not help.

But I was too emotional to talk just yet. So, Norma would have to wait. My guess was she came in, heard the story from Amy, and figured she would give me a call and get to the bottom of it.

She was a particular kind of bulldog when she wanted to be.

Deciding to put the phone on silent, I sat in my car and stared at the park where I had ended up. When I left, I had all the intentions in the world of going home, starting a bubble bath, and possibly drinking the rest of the bottle of wine that I'd opened last night for dinner. Instead, I made it about six blocks and pulled off.

The park overlooking a playground and a large grassy area was a special place for me. Dad used to take me there at least once a week, usually on Saturday mornings when Mom would work the afternoon shift. Dad would work the mornings while Mom stayed home, then Mom would take me to the store, switch with Dad, and then go to the park. Then, Grandma would pick me up, and Dad would go back for the evening shift with Mom.

I spent so many good days there that when they died, I used to come and do exactly what I was doing now, sitting in my car and just breathing in the air of the freshly cut grass. I also bawled my eyes out. Back then, it was for the loss of my parents, and right now, it was for the loss of the one thing that kept us connected.

Grandma had passed just six years after my parents, leaving me alone by the time I was twenty-two. If it weren't for people like Norma, I didn't think I would have made it, really. Norma treated me like any other employee, but then would take me into the back and show me how things worked. Just in case I was curious. I always was. And learning the ins and outs of the store helped me feel more connected to the parents I was still grieving.

The main part of downtown was just beyond the park, a street over. Figuring I could do with some fresh air, I got out of the car and locked it up, heading down the sidewalk toward Main Street. When I got to the corner, I stopped and looked both ways before heading east. West would have the store five blocks away. East would eventually lead back through town and out the other side.

I wandered for a while, looking in various shops and kind of meandering. I had plenty of time before sundown, and since I was avoiding anyone and everyone from work, I had nothing much to do. It was kind of sad when I thought about it. I didn't really have many hobbies. My only options for downtime seemed to be bubble baths and trashy TV. Maybe I should take up crochet? Or racquetball?

As I was wandering aimlessly through town, I ended up at a diner. It was a casual place, but not one I went to often. It had changed ownership since I was a little kid, and since it had been a place I occasionally went to with my parents, I'd lost the appeal of going there once the place changed too much. The only time I could remember even going inside was a couple of years before when it was still a place called 'Maude's.'

"Afternoon," a waitress said as I sat down at one of the booths just inside. The place was empty, and I had barely gotten my ass in the seat before she was on me with a menu and silverware rolled up in a paper napkin.

"Afternoon," I said.

"What can I get for you?" she asked, and I glanced at her nametag. *Suzette* was written in pink glittery marker, surrounded by a host of smiling faces and hearts.

"Just a water for right now," I said.

"All right, I'll grab that and be right back," she said.

As she moved out of the way, I saw a familiar face coming in the front door of the diner. I stuck my hand up and waved and caught her attention, and she bounced over, smiling.

"Carmela," I said, standing and offering a hug.

"Hey, Mel," she said. "If I had known you were coming here, I would have planned ahead and made a date out of it."

"I didn't know I'd be here either," I admitted. "I was supposed to be working."

"Taking a mental health day?" she asked.

"Something like that," I said. "Hey, where's Cassie?"

“She’s with Mark,” she said. “Mark told me I had been cooped up around the house too much in the last week and I needed to get out and do something without worrying about the baby.”

“That’s awful nice of him,” I said, only feeling a little jealous.

Carmela had been a good friend to me since high school. Since I didn’t have many friends that had stayed in town, she was a rare breed. Most everyone else had jumped on the Wine Mom train, and that got old fast. But Carmela was something else. She was smart and fierce and would bend over backward to help someone she just met. It made her very good at her job as a family lawyer, and in fact, she had been the first person I’d thought about calling when everything went down with the board.

“Yeah, he’s kind of perfect,” she said. “But I told him I had no idea what I was going to do. I didn’t want to go into the office. I’ve gotten so used to working from home that putting on pants to work is... weird.”

I laughed.

“Sounds like a good problem to have,” I said.

“You would think so,” she said. “But when you work from home, everything tends to blend together, and suddenly you can’t remember what time of day it is or what day it is at all, actually.”

“The baby probably doesn’t help with that,” I said.

“Sort of. Sometimes Cassie cries at specific times for specific things. One cry she has I recognize as her ten-twenty feeding time. When I hear it, I know what time it is.”

“That’s crazy,” I said. “You’ve got it down to a science, though. That’s pretty cool.”

“I suppose. Anyway, enough about me. What’s up with you? I heard something about your family’s store being bought? Did you sell?”

I sighed. “It’s why I’m avoiding work, actually,” I said.

“Hello,” Suzette said, suddenly appearing at the end of the table. “What can I get you to drink, hon?”

“Water, please,” Carmela said. “But I know what I want to eat if you’re ready, Mel.”

“I’ll figure it out while you order,” I said, hurriedly picking up the menu. I scrolled down it for the usual suspect meals while she rattled off an impressively large order that ended in a cup of coffee and a sweet tea.

“And you?” Suzette asked.

“I’ll have the number four,” I said.

“Coming up,” Suzette said, disappearing again.

“As you were saying,” Carmela prompted, taking off her jacket and tossing it in the corner of the booth. I couldn’t help but notice her chest was enormous. Having a baby had apparently turned what was already a fairly large-chested woman into someone that looked like she could sing mezzo-soprano when the traveling opera came back into town.

“Right,” I said, shaking myself back into function. “Well, it turns out the board thought they had the authority to sell if they didn’t think I could properly take care of the business. So, they did. Some guy named Victor bought the shares and now thinks he owns the place.”

“Wait, Victor?” she asked. “Not Victor McLaren.”

“Yeah, that’s his name,” I said, pointing to her with the straw that I was unwrapping. “He came into the office this morning telling me how he didn’t want to step on my toes or whatever. All while clearly stepping on my toes.”

“Victor is one of Mark’s best friends,” Carmela said. “I heard he moved back to town and was making an investment, but I didn’t know in what. It’s what he does, investing. I just figured he was buying some business that was hitting the skids, so he could rehab it while he was in town.”

“While he’s in town?” I asked, hope rising in my chest despite my best efforts. “Has he said when he was going to leave?”

“No,” she said. “Not to my knowledge. All I know is Mark and Camden both are beyond ecstatic he’s back. They keep

saying the band is back together. God help me if they start playing any sort of music.”

“That would be ugly,” I said.

“You’re telling me,” she laughed. “Anyway, if it’s Victor, maybe I can help,” she said. “I’ll talk to Camden and Mark tonight and see what they think about him buying the store. How serious he is and whatnot. And if they think he’s making an investment just to make an investment in general, maybe we can find a way for him to get out of it and get you your store back.”

“Oh, could you?” I asked. “That would be so helpful.”

“Of course,” she said. “Anything for a friend. Now, what’s on the number four?”

“I... don’t know,” I said. “I ordered it because I was flustered, and then I handed her my menu.”

“Shit,” she said. “I swear I eat constantly now, and all I’ve been thinking about all morning was coming here and ordering everything on the menu.”

“Well, you can have some of mine when it comes,” I said. “I don’t mind sharing.”

“Yes, you do,” she said, giggling. “Otherwise, this situation with Victor wouldn’t bug you so much.”

“Not the same,” I laughed. “Not the same.”

VICTOR

“That... can't be right,” I muttered to myself.

I was sitting on the floor of the empty garage, surrounded by parts of what used to be my home gym, beginning to believe that Sarah had kept a few small, key pieces that kept things from being able to be held together.

I took the Phillips head screwdriver and put a couple pieces together, and after some mild cursing and frustration, I found a missing piece that could at least put my weight bench together properly. Once it was up, I pushed everything else out of the way, put together enough to do some chess presses, and decided to be okay with that being enough.

Lying down on the bench, I took an hour to just work up a sweat and make my muscles sore. It felt good to finally have the chance to do that. I hadn't had a good workout since before I'd left Maryland. And frankly, it was starting to wear on me. Aside from jogging, I had barely exercised at all.

It wasn't much of a sweat, but at least it was something.

Getting up from the bench, I checked my phone for the time. It was nearly six.

A television I had mounted on the wall was playing a sports replay package, and I reached for the tiny cooler to grab a cold bottle of water.

I sat on the bench and drank my water, cooling down while I watched TV for a bit. When I tossed the bottle into the recycling bin, I headed back inside.

The living room at least looked like a real human being who wasn't around during the Nixon administration lived there. A couple of walls had been painted, some vinyl flooring had been added in a room that used to have carpet, and the furniture had gotten a big update. Now that everything had a look more clearly suited my tastes, I felt like I could breathe in it. It also helped that the place didn't smell like mothballs anymore.

The last couple of days had been stressful to say the least, but after a workout and a shower, I figured I would be seeing things a lot clearer. Grabbing some clothes, I turned on the hot water and prepared to let my now sore muscles relax.

I closed my eyes under the stream a few minutes later. One of the major upsides of this house was the water pressure and I sighed as the heat loosened my muscles and some of the stress faded away. I had no idea how long I was in there with my eyes shut, my head leaning against the wall, when I heard my phone ringing somewhere in the distance.

Aggravated at whoever was calling because it meant I had to leave the warm cocoon of the shower, I stepped out and wrapped a towel around myself. There was no use getting dressed first. I made my way through the room to the living room where I had left the phone on the coffee table.

It was at that moment that I realized several things all at once. The sun was beginning to go down, meaning it was lighter inside my living room than it was outside. My blinds were wide open. And Mrs. Coffee from next door was standing on her porch, mail in her hand and a wry smile on her face as she stared inside my window, apparently stopped mid-stride.

Awkwardly, I waved and grabbed my phone, heading to the bedroom, feeling embarrassed. I answered it on my way without even looking at who it was.

"Hello?" I asked.

"Vic, what's going on, man?" Mark's voice came over the line.

"I'm fine, dude," I said. "Just got out of the shower. What's up?"

“You got plans for tonight?” he asked.

“Other than a couple beers, no.”

“Well, why don’t you have those couple beers with me?” he asked.

“Hell yeah, you name the time and place,” I said, excited to hang out with my buddy.

“Good deal,” he said. “Carmela has been saying she wanted to make you a welcome home dinner and have you over. That sound good?”

“A homemade meal? Yeah, I think I can handle that,” I chuckled. “Anything I need to bring? Beer?”

“Nah,” Mark said. “I got everything we would need. You just head out here.”

“Right on, what time?” I asked.

“Say around seven?” he asked. “Oh, before I forget. Carmela said something about you bought Brewer’s Grocery?”

“Yeah,” I said, excitedly. “A controlling interest anyway.”

“Wow,” he said. “Yeah, she ran into Melanie Brewer today. She said something about you buying it out from under her?”

“It’s a long story,” I said on a sigh. “Trust me, the last twenty-four hours have been a bit rough, not the least of which is because Melanie didn’t react to me buying up part of her company in a way that was conducive to us developing a working relationship.”

“Damn,” Mark said. “Well, hey, we can talk about all that when you get here. I’d love to know the whole story.”

“Absolutely,” I said. “Maybe you have some clue as to what I should do about this whole thing that might help.”

“I’ll give it a whack,” he said. “So, I’ll see you in about an hour. If I’m not mistaken, it’s going to be a pasta kind of night.”

“You know my weakness for useless carbs,” I laughed.

“I do,” he said, chuckling. “See you soon.”

Hanging up, I excitedly headed to my closet. Getting a chance to have a nice, homecooked meal was probably the most enticing part of all of it. I hadn't eaten anything homemade that wasn't my own in quite a long time. Even when I had, it had been Sarah's shockingly terrible cooking.

Sarah had put on the appearance of a woman who was adept at all things. Always dressed to the nines in expensive clothes and shoes, she looked the part. She talked the part too, and to anyone who listened, she seemed like the perfect woman. Smart, sexy, and somewhat traditional while still being ambitious and capable of bringing in a huge income on her own.

Of course, no one else knew what she was like when she was home. How she turned into the ice queen the second the door was shut and how she rarely ever made any attempt to try.

But I would rather be alone than be unhappy. Or be with someone who was unhappy.

Grabbing my phone and stuffing it in my pocket, I went into the living room and found my keys and wallet before heading out the door. As I shut it behind me, I heard someone clear their throat and looked up. Mrs. Coffee was still standing on her porch, looking over at me over the smoke from a cigarette. The ashes looked like they were about six inches long.

She waved, a crooked smile on her face.

Not sure of what else to do, I waved back and continued on to my car. Mrs. Coffee was going to prove a difficult neighbor to have, I feared. Maybe another phone call to the kids living in my parents' old house was in order.

Getting to Mark's only took about ten minutes from where the rental was, and as I pulled in, I saw that there were a couple of cars in the driveway. One of them looked familiar, but I couldn't quite place it, thinking maybe it was one of the ones Mark had bought to fix up.

I realized I was wrong when after I knocked, the door opened, and I saw Melanie Brewer sitting in the living room.

MELANIE

“What’s the worst that could happen?”

When Carmela asked it, it seemed so simple. Not really a dismissal of all potential bad results, but more like a recognition that any potential bad results would be better than the current state anyway. When she said it, it felt right. I believed it. I was even gung-ho about it.

Then I hung up the phone, stared at my wall for a moment, and wondered what the hell I was thinking.

Saying I was unsure about the plan was an understatement. Part of me wanted to call her back and call it all off. But I couldn’t. I needed her help on this. I needed someone’s help, at least. Carmela was a lawyer and a good person and a friend. My initial thought was I could give it a shot, and like she said, what was the worst that could happen? Would I have a contentious relationship with the new majority owner? I’d pretty much sealed that up on my own already when I stomped out of the store.

The worst that would happen was that nothing changed. Right?

I was going to hold on to that, praying that I was right as I got ready to head over.

With not much time to get ready, I hopped in the shower and got clean before standing in my bedroom, looking at three outfits on my bed while wrapped in a towel. The carpet below me started to get damp from where I stood, debating on the three options. By the time I picked one, I was going to be dry.

Finally settling on the one that ranged in the center from sexy to hiding myself in a sweatshirt and pajama pants, I blew out my hair and did my makeup. It felt silly in a way. I wasn't going 'out.' I rarely did a full-face makeup anymore unless it was before work, which I washed off the second I got home. But here I was putting on eyeshadow and lipstick and mascara. Why?

Because he was stupid hot, that was why. And even if I kind of hated his guts, I wasn't about to be intimidated by a guy who looked like that without at least a little bit of warpaint on. With that mindset, I also grabbed the good bra, the one that I never wore because I never wanted the attention, but I liked specifically because if I *did* want attention, I was most certainly going to get it. The girls pushed to my chin, I got dressed and headed for the door.

Carmela and Mark lived fairly close, just down the street from where Mark's family practice was and where the office park where Carmela worked when she went in.

"Hey," Carmela said as she answered the door, looking as fresh as a daisy.

I wondered how she did that. I knew for a fact that she worked full time and took care of Cassie, but she never seemed flustered. It was impressive.

"Hey," I said. "Am I early?"

"Not at all," she said. "I've got some food going, and Victor isn't here yet, so you're good. Want to come help me in the kitchen for a bit?"

"Sure," I said.

I followed her inside and saw baby Cassie sitting in one of those bouncing swings. She seemed delighted by the weightlessness and extraordinarily curious about the toys sitting in front of her. Particularly in how they tasted.

"Say hi, Cassie," Carmela said, dipping down to kiss her head before continuing on to the stove.

"Hi, baby," I said in the overly high, exaggerated voice one uses with babies. "Do you like your toys? Do they taste

good?”

“Oh, she’s at that age now,” Carmela said from where she was stirring a pot on the stove. “Everything goes in her mouth. I have to be careful what I leave anywhere near her.”

“I bet,” I said. “So, what’s for dinner?”

“Mark’s favorite,” she said. “A full pasta dish with sausage sauce. He says it’s the unhealthiest thing he could eat, but it always puts him in a good mood. He figured Victor might need some pushing to get in a good place for our plan to work.”

“About that,” I said. “What exactly is the plan?”

She turned and smiled. “Mel, you know you have the power in this situation, don’t you?”

“How?” I asked. “It seems like I have no power whatsoever.”

Carmela shook her head and went back to the pan on the stove where she was browning the meat.

“Victor is a recent divorcee,” she said. “A headstrong man who just wanted to come home and have something to do while he was here figuring himself out. Buying the grocery store was just the first thing that came along. It was kind of a whim.”

“Are you sure?” I asked. “He seemed awfully insistent on it when I talked to him.”

“Well, we will see, won’t we?” Carmela said. “We will get him here, get him some good food, talk a bit, and see if we can push him toward the most reasonable solution. If he says no, he says no, but from a lawyer’s perspective, I can see where he would rather do this than deal with an extended situation where he might have to go to court *and* learn an entirely new business *and* deal with the other owner being hostile.”

When she put it like that, it sounded reasonable. I nodded and motioned toward the vegetables lying on the counter by the cutting board.

“Need some help chopping?” I asked.

“If you don’t mind,” she replied.

I picked up the knife and went to work, calling on every skill my mother had taught me about prepping meals before she passed. The onions were threatening to make me tear up and ruin my makeup, and I was about to drop the knife and go dab them, when the doorbell rang. I froze and turned to Carmela. She smiled and wiped off her hands on a kitchen towel.

“Here we go,” she said.

She crossed to the door, touching her baby’s cheek as she passed, and opened it up. I had followed behind and was standing in the living room over her shoulder as he looked up, saw her, then saw me. His face dropped and his eyes darted back to Carmela.

“Is this a set-up?” he asked suspiciously. “Do I need my lawyer?”

“No,” Carmela laughed. “Come on in. I thought we could all have dinner together.”

“Wait, you two know each other?” he asked, coming inside but still eyeing both of us suspiciously.

“Yup,” she said. “Known each other a long time.”

“Ahh,” he said. “It *is* a set-up.”

“Not quite,” Mark chimed in, coming out of a room behind the kitchen that I assumed was an office. He held out a hand, and Victor shook it before glancing back over at me.

I couldn’t help but notice how attractive he was, again. This time though, he was wearing jeans and a tight, white T-shirt, showing off his incredible physique. He was muscular and cut, and it was clear through his clothes that he took very good care of himself. I had a hard time not staring at the way the muscles moved in his forearms. They just looked so... delicious.

“Besides, Carmela *is* a lawyer, remember?” Mark said. “You don’t think I would let her railroad you, do you?”

“Depends on how mad you are about the fantasy football results last year,” Victor said with a grin.

Something about that grin made my stomach feel fluttery.

“Come on,” Mark said. “I’m past that. Besides I’ll just kick your ass this year.”

“All right, boys, enough of that,” Carmela said. “Will you come on in? We can have drinks while dinner finishes up.”

“Fine,” Victor said, still looking a bit unsure.

“Come on,” Mark said. “I’ll get you a beer.”

Mark left for the kitchen, coming back with three beers, one for Mark, one for Victor, and a third for me. He popped the tops and handed them off as we stood in the dining room. Mark held his bottle out, and we all clinked them together.

“To friendship,” Mark said.

Victor made a noncommittal sound, and I simply nodded, taking a sip of the surprisingly good beer and then sitting down.

“All right,” Victor said. “What do you want to know?”

Mark looked at me, raising his eyebrows and sitting back in his chair.

“Well, the biggest issue here is that the company you bought shouldn’t have been for sale in the first place,” I said.

“As I have been informed,” he replied.

“The board had no right to do what they did, a belief that I feel like would be seconded by a judge if I were to bring this to court. So, with that in mind, the question becomes how willing are you to go to court to fight for something that you will likely lose, but will also cause untold damage to the investment you have made and to other people’s lives in the meantime?”

“I was set to inherit this company. I have spent years and years sacrificing what kind of life I could have had to learn every aspect of it. I didn’t do that so I could be someone else’s employee and make an allowance. I want the ownership powers and duties that I have been preparing myself for since my parents passed away.”

“I have heard all of this already,” he said.

“I’m not done,” I continued. “The board sold it out from under me, and that part is easy for you to see. What isn’t as easy is that they have exerted power they shouldn’t have really had for a long time. They have kept me from making upgrades and tackling some of the bigger problems the store has for a long time as well. They have put any hard or big decisions on the backburner, making it extremely difficult for me to address since any funds had to be approved by the board. As owner, I could have addressed them all by now, and I think I have paid my dues and deserve that chance.”

“And?” he asked.

“And I think there is a simple solution here that is staring us both in the face. You just wanted an investment, which I have no problem with, and even have no problem with you investing in my company. But having a bigger share than I do is crap, and you know it. So, my suggestion is to fix that imbalance.”

“Fix the imbalance?” he repeated.

“Yes,” I said, taking a deep breath. Here it was. All or nothing. The worst he could say was no. All the other options Carmela had given ran through my brain at lightning speed. “The easiest way possible would be for you to sell some or all of your shares to me.”

VICTOR

“Sell you, my stake?” I asked, making sure I’d heard her correctly. Rather than respond verbally, she simply nodded, a nervous smile on her face. Not for the first time, I found myself charmed by that smile. She really was a beautiful woman.

“Yes,” she finally eked out.

I glanced over at Mark, who was peeling at the label of his beer. He glanced up and met my gaze before looking back at the bottle and going back to work with his thumbnail, delicately getting under the paper.

“Look, I can understand your point of view,” I said. “I get it, really. I do. But selling my share of the company to you right now is simply not reasonable. I invested with good intentions. I invested because I believe there is a lot more that can be done to help the store and the community. I think we could work together to build something special here, to make the store as successful as possible. But I am not just willing to sell it to you.”

“Maybe,” Carmela said, interjecting herself back into the conversation as she came around the corner from the kitchen with a stack of plates, “you two should have dinner. Get to know each other a little bit before you talk business again.”

“I just remembered I have something I have to do tonight,” Melanie said. “So, I’m afraid I have to get going.”

“What about tomorrow?” Carmela asked, not missing a beat. “Perhaps you could go grab a bite to eat downtown. There are

a couple of new places open down there.”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Vic, give it a shot,” Mark said. “You two have to figure out how to work together on this. Don’t you always talk about all these dinners you take your business partners to?”

Sighing with a bit of frustration, I looked at Mark, who was grinning. He was enjoying this. Whether it was to rib me or to entertain his wife, I wasn’t sure, but either way, it was getting annoying.

“Fine,” Melanie said, surprising me. “There’s a place down the street from the store I’ve been meaning to go to anyway.”

“Mero’s?” Carmela asked.

Melanie nodded.

“Really nice place,” Mark said. “What about it, Vic?”

I was being put on the spot, and I hated it. That said, the idea of being out for dinner with the woman was enticing, no matter what the circumstances. It had been almost a year since I was alone at a restaurant with anyone other than myself or my divorce lawyer. Considering he was seventy and resembled Andy Griffith in *Matlock*, this would have to be seen as a step up even if she hated my guts.

“All right,” I said. “Mero’s. Seven?”

“Eight,” she said. “I work at the store until six.”

“Eight it is. I’ll make the reservation,” I said.

“Good,” she said awkwardly. “Carmela, it’s been lovely, but I need to go. Mark, nice to see you. Kiss Cassie for me.” She turned to me, nodding curtly. “Victor.”

“Melanie,” I said, nodding at her.

As she left, I let out a big breath and turned to Mark.

“What?” he said defensively.

“She might be gone, but you owe me dinner after that,” I said.

“Why do you think I had Carmela make pasta?” he said. “Nobody can be mad at anyone after pasta.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

* * *

When I got back home from Mark and Carmela’s, I was still thinking about Melanie. She’d looked amazing and I couldn’t stop staring at her the entire time she talked. It was almost hard to concentrate on what she was saying she was so distracting. But the problem was what she was saying was ridiculous. Sure, I might have had an idea that possibly we could work something out down the road, but not right now. I hadn’t even begun yet.

Telling her that I had that thought would only weaken my ability to negotiate and my authority to get anything done. I had to play that close to the vest.

I had ideas for what I wanted to do, and I’d come back to Murdock with the express purpose of doing them. I’d moved here and settled into the rental house, restarting my life in my hometown because I felt like this could be not just a short-term deal but a long-term commitment. I wasn’t just going to give it up because she got screwed over.

I felt bad for her, though. She was right about how the board had sold the company out from under her, and it was entirely possible that if she did take it to court, I might have a problem. But at the end of the day, I wasn’t just going to give up, so if that was the route she took, I would just have to take my chances.

I walked in the door and tossed my keys in the bowl on the buffet table, one of the few pieces of furniture that had ended up staying from the pre-furnished stuff. Kicking my shoes off, I padded over to the bedroom and undressed, getting into a pair of loose shorts. My phone dinged from where I’d tossed it on the bed, and I checked it to see a notification. An email.

From Sarah.

I opened it up against my better judgment.

I read the letter and then tossed the phone back on the bed. I couldn’t believe the gall of that woman. The presumptuousness. She expected to be able to email me and

ask me questions about clients and aspects of the business that she now owned after taking it from me in the divorce. She really expected me to just open up and tell her whatever she wanted to know and be at her beck and call.

She even had the balls to state at the bottom of the email that she needed to hear from me “immediately.” As if it was my fault, she had to suddenly take the responsibilities of the business that she fought so hard to take from me. I was disgusted. And angry.

I checked the time. It was after seven.

I went into the garage and got back to my weights. I pumped iron for at least two hours, pushing my body past where I knew I should stop and working every last bit of aggression and anger out of my system. It took a while.

Every time I felt myself calming down, Sarah’s face popped into my head, and I would get angry again. But then a curious thing would happen. As the endorphins started to flood my system and my arms turned to jelly, the anger seeping out of me like a sieve, Sarah’s face would fade. Another would take its place.

Melanie’s.

I envisioned her dressed not how I had seen her at the store or at Mark and Carmela’s, but in a dress. A floor-length gown, black and glittering. The proportions were all there, the same body that I’d seen stretching out the tight shirt sitting across from me in Mark’s dining room. But her hair was down, brushed over one bare shoulder.

My stomach would tighten, and I had to put the bar down. I had worked up a hell of a sweat, and begrudgingly had to get a shower. There was no way I could get in bed like that. After wiping the bench down, I headed inside, stripped off my clothes, and turned on the water.

As I waited for the water to get to the right temperature, I glanced back at the mirror. The vision of Melanie returned, only this time, she was beside me, undressing herself by pulling the zipper down her back of the long gown my mind

had put her in. Underneath, she wore a red lace bra and thong panties that showed off her perfectly round ass. An ass I had admittedly gotten a few good glances at in her tight pants at Mark's.

In the mirror, I saw my cock harden, rising from its flaccid state to full-strength. I rolled my eyes and opened the curtains, stepping into the water. I couldn't think about Melanie like that. She was my colleague. Sort of.

Really, she was a fellow owner and employee at the same time. The taboo nature of a relationship between us only seemed to complicate my feelings. And the fact that I knew I was going to see her the next night complicated it further.

But as the hot water started to relax my sore muscles and I made my body slick with soap, I let my eyes close, and the vision of Melanie returned again and again. Enough that I couldn't ignore it anymore, or how my body was responding to it. Her bickering with me had only added to the attraction. I could imagine the two of us, full-throated yelling in the back of the office at the store, in a way the yelling fights with Sarah had never been. There was a tension in them. A desire.

My hand slid down to my shaft, and I stroked it. There was no going back now.

I imagined our lips crushing together in that tiny office, tongues sliding into each other's mouths. She would taste like peaches and cream, and her body would be hot and soft in my hands. I could rip the clothes from her and toss them on the ground while she jerked my belt open and unzipped my pants.

I would sweep everything off the desk, letting it crash to the floor while she reached behind her to lock the door. Even if they came knocking, there would be no answer. She would flip the light and return to embrace me again as I reached behind her and undid her bra, letting it fall between us as I cupped her breast.

Slowly making my way down her neck, I would take one breast into my mouth and let my tongue flick her nipple. She would pull my cock out of my pants and stroke it, moaning as I let my hand slide under her panties to her warm mound,

sliding my middle finger between her lips and swirling over her clit. She would raise up on her toes as she nearly came on my hand before I pushed her onto the desk, bent over so her ass was pushed out toward me.

I wouldn't even remove her panties, just push them aside as I would mount her, driving my cock deep inside her until she moaned and clenched the desktop. My hips would rock back and forth as she begged me to fuck her harder. Sweat would pour from our bodies as we jockeyed for control, changing positions over and over until I had moans pouring from her as I slammed my cock inside her wet, throbbing pussy.

She would come, toes curling as I felt myself losing control. She could feel it. She knew I was on the edge, and she would pull herself off me, dropping to her knees. Stroking me into her lips, she would moan as I came in her mouth. When I was finished, she would look up at me with those glittering blue eyes and a smile that could tempt the devil and let her tongue slide out to lick me one last time, cleaning me off and not wasting a single drop.

I came hard in the shower, my knees buckling under me. It took a few moments to get the strength to stand again and rinse off, wondering how in the hell I was going to get through tomorrow now.

MELANIE

“Amy, will you please go tell Chris and Tom that if they aren’t finished sorting that truck in fifteen minutes that I won’t let them play their boom box back there anymore?”

“Sure,” Amy said, smirking. “And if I catch them on another ‘smoke break’?”

“Tell them I will personally remove their lungs. It’s almost five. I have things to do, and I can’t leave until that truck is unloaded and sorted,” I said.

After that making threat, I shut the door of the office and marched over to the chair to throw myself in it. Of course, fate would have it that the one day I had something I needed to go take care of I was going to be stuck here late. Nine times out of ten, if I wanted to be out of there at any specific time, I could make it happen, no problem. This might not have been a great thing, considering it was generally because we were only so busy, but today was just nuts.

To add to it all, the news about a possible purchase of the store had made its way around town. Customers were coming in and asking about it, and my employees were starting to ask about it too. I really didn’t have anything to tell them yet. I didn’t know how it was all going to work. All I knew is I’d gotten screwed and was trying to figure it out. That wasn’t going to be much comfort to the employees who were worried that a new owner might cause job changes.

I pinched the bridge of my nose and shut my eyes, the sting causing tears to leak out of the corners. I was tired and frustrated and nervous about the dinner with Victor. Part of me wanted to call him and cancel. Part of me wanted to just throw my apron off and head home to get dolled up for it right that second. Part of me wanted to run away with the circus and never come back.

I could make for a hell of a trapeze artist, I thought. Just give me a few months' training.

The phone rang, and I ignored it, even though I was sitting right next to it. Someone else could get it.

“Melanie, you have a call on line one. Melanie, you have a call on line one,” the PA speaker boomed, and I instantly regretted not getting the call when it came in. The PA was a million times worse and made me nearly jump out of my seat.

I picked up the phone and hit the button for line one before putting the ancient receiver to my ear, thinking that we really should invest in phones that couldn't be used as set pieces in a period drama from the nineties.

“Melanie,” I said. “How can I help you?”

“Hey Mel,” Carmela's voice said on the other end. “How are you doing?”

“Poorly,” I said. “Busy day, and I'm just not here for it.”

“Too excited about your date tonight?” Carmela teased.

“Har har,” I said. “It's not a date.”

“Calm down,” Carmela said. “It was just a joke.”

She was laughing, apparently having a hard time keeping herself from cracking up, but I was having none of it. In fact, I was kind of fuming at the idea that she would even joke about it.

“Seriously,” I said. “It's not a date. It's not even funny to joke that it's a date. He is a man who tried to take my family store away from me and now is refusing to make it right. I wouldn't date him if he were the last man on earth.”

“Oh, come on,” Carmela said. “You know that’s not true. Not entirely. You’re just nervous.”

“Yeah. Nervous,” I said. “Nervous I might throw him through a window.”

“Have you seen his arms? Good luck throwing him through any windows,” she said.

She had a point. I had seen his arms. I had seen a lot of them. In fact, I could barely stop looking at them long enough to notice his barrel chest, his flat stomach, and his insanely cut jawline. He looked like he was about to put on a cape and parade around the city saving busloads of children.

“Yeah, well, I’ll figure it out if I have to,” I said.

“Just don’t do anything crazy,” Carmela said. “And call me tomorrow. I want details.”

“Of my non-date?”

“Of your non-date,” she confirmed. “Which most certainly could actually be a date.”

“It’s not.”

“But it could be.”

“But it’s not.”

“Bye, Melanie.”

“Bye, Carmela,” I said, hanging up the phone.

Sighing and leaning back in the chair, I closed my eyes again. I was still stewing, and I wondered why. Probably it was at least partially because I *did* in fact find him incredibly attractive. And because aside from buying my store, he seemed really nice too.

“Mel?” Amy’s voice said as the door creaked open.

“Yeah?”

“They’re done emptying and sorting the truck,” she said.

“Oh good,” I replied.

“But we have another problem,” she continued.

“What?”

“There might be a very, very small, uhh... fire. In the bakery. Right now.”

“The oven?” I asked, defeated.

“The oven.” She nodded.

I sighed. It was the fourth time this year.

“I’m coming.”

* * *

For the second time in two days, I was standing at the edge of my bed, naked as a jaybird, staring at options for what to wear that evening. This time, though, I only had about ten minutes to decide. Thankfully, I had already done my hair and makeup, so I sort of looked like the world’s most awkward pinup model when I caught my reflection in the mirror.

I wanted to wear something that would be okay in a professional setting, but I also wanted to wear something really hot. Whether that was because I wanted to look hot when I saw Victor or because I wanted to use my feminine wiles to distract him and smooth the idea of selling the company back over to me, I wasn’t entirely sure of.

The one thing I knew I was going to wear, just for me, was the red underwear. A lacy red bra and thong, it made me feel sexy and powerful. I was going to need all the help I could get. I slipped them on while I debated between the dress and the skirt. I wanted to show off my legs a little, but the dress was decidedly on the sexy side, while the skirt could be sexy but was much more on the professional side of things.

Deciding on the skirt with a red blouse that matched the underwear and had a convenient plunging neckline, I looked in the mirror and sighed. This was as dressed up as I had gotten in years. I simply never had the chance or reason to get dressed up like this.

I shook my head and sighed again. At least I was making the best of it now.

I went into the bathroom and sprayed on perfume, and then grabbed the purse that matched the blouse and headed for the door. Mero's was only a few minutes' drive away, but it was nearly eight. I had to get a move on.

Mero's had only opened up a couple of months ago, sitting in a spot where an old Greek restaurant used to be that had closed down years before. Mero's was a franchise in southern Texas, making its way north, and they'd decided putting one in Murdock of all places was a good idea. I had a feeling Mero's wasn't going to be able to expand too far with decisions like that.

Then again, it might drive some business into town, which would be good for the grocery store. Especially if people stayed in town, like at the bed and breakfast that had opened not long ago. I thought Carmela had said something about that place being owned by one of Mark and Victor's friends too, but I couldn't remember off the top of my head.

I arrived at the parking lot and took in the look of the place first, gauging whether or not I wanted to just turn around and leave. I still had that option, right up until Victor saw me. I could just get back in my car, call the whole thing off, and go home. I even had leftover Chinese in the fridge. I could make a night of it.

A black truck pulled in behind me, and I turned to look at it. A man inside waved, and my hand was halfway up before I realized it wasn't just a friendly customer who recognized me as was often the case. It was Victor. He pulled into the spot a couple down from me and got out. I didn't move from where I was at the end of my own car. The desire to leave had never been stronger.

Then I saw him. He was walking toward me, dressed in a smart suit that looked very different from the one he wore to the store the other day. It was designed to impress. It worked.

His broad shoulders filled the suit out and as he walked toward me with a swagger and a grin, I felt butterflies of an entirely different type fill my stomach.

“Hello princess,” he said as he neared me. He was looking me up and down with an appreciative look.

“Princess?” I repeated, attitude suddenly snapping back into my voice.

“I’m teasing you,” he said. “You look amazing, though. You could pass for one, easily.”

“Oh, well, thank you,” I said, knocked a bit off kilter.

“Shall we?” he asked.

He poked out his elbow, and even though a part of me still wanted to tear out his throat and offer that to the board on the next meeting, I was drawn to it like a magnet, slipping my hand inside the crook and walking alongside him.

He broke off to hold the door open for me, and as we got inside, the smell of the delicious food filled my senses. We went up to the hostess table, and Victor mentioned his name. They quickly ushered us to a booth, secluded away in a dark corner of the restaurant with a spectacular view of the street. My store was in the distance, it’s yellow light like a beacon.

But my attention wasn’t on that. It was on the boyish, charming grin across from me at the table. And at the way I found myself grinning back.

VICTOR

Well, this was going to be difficult.

Melanie looked absolutely stunning. The red blouse hugged the curve of her breasts tightly, and the neckline went down far enough to show a level of cleavage that was delightfully sinful.

It could have been a herculean struggle not to let my eyes wander, but there was something else occupying my attention. Her eyes. Bright almond-shaped eyes, blue like the sea on a gray morning, sharp and alert, stared back at me over the table as we sat down. She was magnificent. In every respect, in every shallow description of her appearance, she was magnificent.

I found myself at a loss for words, which was an exceedingly rare thing. But I felt hushed by her beauty. Silenced by the magic of her eyes. Doubled back on my heels by the way her skirt held tightly around her backside and how enticing her smooth legs looked.

I hadn't felt this way in years.

"Nice place, isn't it?" I asked as I pulled the menu toward me.

"It is," she agreed. "I can see the store from here."

Shit. She routed the conversation back already. I wasn't prepared to let go of our good time just yet.

"Can you? Oh, hey, before I forget, are you all right with me ordering a bottle of wine for the table?"

She looked at me with an expression that I couldn't quite read. Perhaps it was because she was trying to read *me*. My intentions were pure enough. I simply did want a bottle of wine for the table, but I could see where she might think there were ulterior motives to it.

"That's fine," she said. "Whatever you want on your bill."

"My bill?" I asked.

"I assumed we were splitting this?" she asked.

There was a playfulness in her voice that suggested she knew full well that I didn't intend that at all, but she wanted to make me say it. She wanted me to tell her that I was treating her to this meal. I smiled.

"No," I said. "This is my treat. An olive branch, if you will."

"Ah," she said. "Good. Then something red, please."

I laughed.

"Of course," I said. "Whatever the lady would like."

A smirk pushed up one side of her face before she disappeared behind the menu. I thought I caught a slight trace of red on her cheeks too.

The waiter came by and took our drink orders, including the bottle of rather expensive wine. I rarely drank anymore, aside from the occasional beer in my easy chair, but this was increasingly becoming a special occasion. The way she glanced at me over the menu, there was a duality to her. It was as if at once she wanted to flirt with me while at the same time make sure I understood just how much disdain she had for me.

It was extremely enthralling.

Once the waiter came back to take our orders and pour the wine, I settled into the seat and took a sip. It was dark and delicious. Dry with a hint of blackberry. Succulent and mysterious. Just like Melanie.

"So, before we get onto any other subject," I said, "I would like to know about you. Melanie Brewer. The person. Tell me about you."

“What is it you want to know?” she asked, taking a deep sip of her wine. “I figured you would have done at least some research on me by now.”

“A little,” I said. “But what a person can find in old newspaper clippings is a shell of who the person actually is. What’s your favorite color?”

“Red, you?”

“Red,” I answered immediately. It took all my willpower for my eyes not to flicker down to her blouse and her pillowy breasts inside it. “How about your favorite hobby?”

“I crochet,” she said. “It’s silly, but it’s something that connects me to my mother. You?”

“Weight-lifting,” I said. “Nothing competitive, just something I enjoy for myself.”

“Figures,” she said, grinning as she took another sip.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re a jock,” she said. “It’s why you wear tight shirts all the time.”

Now we were getting somewhere.

“My shirts aren’t tight,” I said with a grin. “Not on purpose.” She shrugged and looked away innocently. “I’m not a jock, by the way. I played baseball, but that was because my best friend played, and I enjoyed the game with him. Otherwise, I didn’t play sports. I barely follow anything anymore.”

“I see,” she said. “What about you? What’s your story?”

“We haven’t even begun yours,” I countered.

“Yet here I am asking. Where do you come from? I mean recently. I know you were born here.”

“Baltimore, most recently,” I said.

“And what made you leave there?” she asked.

It was an innocent enough question, but one I had a hard time answering. Her playful yet slightly combative attitude was

something I didn't want to ruin. I was having fun. But it was hard to have fun and think about Sarah at the same time.

"It's personal," I said. "I'll tell you some time. Just not now."

"Fair enough," she said.

"Do you watch TV? Or are you one of those insufferable people who claim they never watch anything and don't even own one?"

I laughed.

"No, I watch TV. To be honest, I really enjoy reality cooking shows."

"Do you cook?"

"Terribly," I admitted. "It's like watching sports. I can watch it, appreciate the talent involved, theoretically know how to copy what I see, but then when I go to try, my hands are too dumb to do it."

"But you try?" she asked.

"I do. I make a half-decent pancake," I said.

She giggled, and the sound seemed to fill my entire world. I loved how musical it was. So light and joyful, like a balloon that flies away up a flight of stairs and then tumbles back down.

"Pancakes are important," she said. "Very fine meal, pancakes."

"Sturdy," I said. "Salt of the earth type meal."

"What's your vice?"

"My vice?" I asked.

"Everyone has one. Some people smoke, some people drink more than they should. Some people eat loads of chocolate. What's yours?"

"Can I ask yours first?"

"Sure." She nodded.

I blinked a few times and then motioned at her questioningly.

“Well?”

“I said you could ask. I didn’t say I would answer.”

“Very funny,” I said. “But that isn’t how this game works. You have to answer.”

“Look at you, telling me again how things work,” she said. A little of the playful edge was sharper that time.

“Just following protocol. You can refuse to answer I suppose.”

“No,” she said, finally after taking another sip of the wine. “I’ll spill. I would guess my vice is chocolate. There’s nothing more satisfying than sinking into a hot bubble bath after work and eating chocolate.”

My cock shifted in my pants, and I felt the need to move around to give it some room. Just the words ‘bubble bath’ coming from her lips was enough to conjure images in my mind that I was going to have to work very hard to suppress.

“Chocolate,” I said after a moment of trying to keep my breathing even. “Got it.”

“And you?” she asked.

“Easy, bread.”

“Bread?” she asked indignantly. “Bread can’t be a vice. Bread is a food.”

“So is chocolate,” I said. “I don’t mean like a loaf of sandwich bread, Melanie. I’m talking good, deli-baked, thick bread. Where the flour or cornmeal dust is all over it and it sticks to your hands. Bread that you want to hollow out and put soup in, but then you want to eat the stuff you hollowed first. Breadsticks covered in butter and salt and cheese. The pie the rest of the pizza sits on. Bread. I love bread. I love bread way more than a person should love empty carbohydrates.”

“Wow,” she said. “I don’t think I have ever heard a man talk about bread like he wanted to make love to it.”

I swallowed hard. She laughed. What black magic did this woman have? What spell was she was casting on me?

Did I want it to stop?

The food arrived a moment later, breaking some of the intensity. Talk slowly morphed back to more casual things, and then to the store itself. I poured her another glass of wine as she told me of a few ideas she had for expanding the business. Things that would improve the appeal in the age of superstores without losing the small-town flavor. And ways to do it cheaply at that.

I marveled at her. Her ideas were extraordinary, and the more we talked about them, sharing ideas I had with her and going back and forth, we began to refine our ideas to ones that worked even better than what we had thought of on our own. We were editing each other, and it was working splendidly. Every time one of us thought of something to add to the other's idea, our eyes would meet, and a smile would take over my lips.

She was charming and sexy and brilliant. The more we spoke, the more I realized that she could have done this without me. She could have made the store something magnificent without anyone's help at all. I really might be the bad guy here. And in any other circumstance...

I wanted to shake the feeling. This should be about business. It should be about getting to know each other in a way that would allow us to work together. To make our shared investment the best it could possibly be. But the more we spoke, and the more we ate, and the more the bottle of wine emptied, the more I wanted to take her hand and discuss things of a more intimate nature.

The more I wanted to kiss her.

It felt like that feeling was returned with every batted eye and flirty laugh. She was responding to me in ways Sarah never had, even when we first started dating. There was a connection there, a powerful one. One that sparked with electricity and possibility. Our fingers brushed against each other briefly when I finished the bottle, topping off her glass and handing it back to her, and I felt like the first touch of many. At least I hoped it would be.

We finished the meal and stayed for a short while, still talking about our plans. When the waiter came by with the receipt for me to sign, Melanie was already grabbing her purse and scooting to the end of the booth to stand. Reluctantly, I stood too.

I had to try. Just for the sake of my own sanity, I had to try. Perhaps this was one moment, the only one I would have, where this would be a possibility. What if tomorrow, she went right back to being the combative co-owner of the business? It was now or never.

“So,” I said, mustering up every bit of charm I felt like I could grasp, “would you like to continue this conversation? Maybe come back to my place for a bit and go over some actual concrete plans?”

She smiled, and it seemed like she was so close to saying yes before she looked away, her cheeks and neck glowing red. When she looked back, there was a sadness in her eyes, and my heart fell.

“I shouldn’t,” she said.

“I understand,” I said. “Do you need a ride home?”

“No,” she said. “I’ll be fine. Will you?”

“Of course,” I said. “Well, then, I guess I will see you later then.”

“Yes,” she said.

I held the door open for her as we walked out onto the sidewalk. Sure enough, the light from the store glowed in the distance, just a few blocks away.

“Goodnight, Melanie,” I said.

“Goodnight, Victor,” she echoed.

With that, she turned and walked back to her car. I watched her as she drove off and sighed before getting in my own.

MELANIE

The next morning, I was up fairly early, no surer of what had happened the night before than I was when I went to bed.

What *happened* last night? Was that a date?

It had felt like a date. It had all the hallmarks of a date, aside from me driving myself to and from it. He had been dressed in a nice suit, and I'd worn something that showed off a bit of skin. We ate at a new restaurant, drank wine, and talked about things we enjoyed. At the end of the night, he even asked if I would go home with him to 'keep talking.'

I declined. Part of me wondered if I only declined because I didn't trust myself in that situation. I didn't trust myself that I wouldn't throw myself at him and complicate this whole situation way more.

Was last night just a strange circumstance of two people who in another situation would have dated? Would I be interested in him and pursue that feeling if it weren't for the fact that he bought my company out from under me and part of me hated his guts?

All of this was running through my mind as I sat up and instantly lay back down. I knew it was early, but not crazy early. I had a little bit of time to lie there and hope that the headache that suddenly made itself apparent would die down before I had to get out of the bed.

It wasn't debilitating, but it was enough to make me close my eyes and groan a little. Wine always did that to me. Even if I didn't get drunk, sometimes just having a glass of wine was

enough to make my head thump the next morning if I didn't drink a bunch of water before bed. Of course, in my haze of confusion following the sort of date, I kind of crashed without doing my normal hydration routine.

Or taking my makeup off.

Dammit.

Swaying a little with the headache, I made my way to the bathroom and started running the sink so I could get the crud out of my eyelids. Going to bed directly had led to some pretty spectacular dreams, though they had been fleeting and I couldn't remember much of them when I woke up. All I could remember was that they had been hot, and I woke up a little warmer than the weather would otherwise indicate.

Once my face was clean, I went into the living room and poured a bowl of cereal before sitting down at my table and popping a couple acetaminophen. In an hour or so, the headache would be gone, and I would be on my way to work.

Strictly speaking, my shift didn't start until four, but I had some paperwork I needed to catch up on anyway. Plus, a new hire was starting today, and I wanted to be there to do her orientation and make sure she was comfortable. I hated not being there at the start of new hires' shifts, but Norma was there. She might be a little gruffer, but she made sure anyone we took on knew that they were in safe hands with us.

I flipped the TV on for background noise as I ate my cereal, adding a banana to the mix out of a meek attempt at making it healthier.

As I sat with my back to the sun, letting it warm me up and gently ease me into my day, I heard something on the TV about a weather emergency. I didn't pay it much attention, just noted it somewhere in my mind that the store would likely be busier today because of it. Texas didn't often get any kind of snow, but people still went insane for milk and bread when heavy rains or storms were forecast. I was going to have to be ready for fussy customers who would be angry about settling for almond milk in their panic buy.

My mind wandered to what I should do about Victor. Part of me wanted to text him and see if he wanted to meet up again today. I wanted to know if the sparks would keep flying now that we weren't dressed up like a date, at a restaurant like a date and otherwise doing all the normal date-like things. Would we still be attracted to each other the way we seemingly had been the night before if I was wearing my hoodie and apron and we met in the parking lot of the store?

The phone rang in my hand, and I saw that it was Carmela. Smiling, I swiped it open, knowing full well she was calling to pry about last night. She had set the whole thing up, after all. I wondered how much she saw between Victor and me, and how much of our night was designed to get us to know each other for business and how much was because she was playing matchmaker.

"Hey," I said. "Good morning."

"Good morning," Carmela replied, wildly chipper. "I hope I didn't wake you up."

"No, not at all," I said. "I'm up. Going to head up to the store in a bit."

"Oh, I bet," she said. "It's going to be a madhouse today, I would think."

"Yeah, probably," I agreed.

"Well, I wanted to call and ask how last night went," she said, cutting straight to the point. "Did you bury the hatchet?"

"Maybe?" I said. "I don't know. He was very nice. I tried to be very nice back. We had a good time."

"Did you talk about the store?" she asked, and I could tell there was another question in that, hidden away between the words. She wanted to know if there was a lot of non-store conversation too.

"We talked about it," I said. "We actually have some surprisingly similar ideas on what to do."

"See, I knew you two would hit it off," she said. "Are you seeing each other again any time soon?"

“I’m sure we will,” I said. “We kind of have to see each other now.”

“Why?” she asked excitedly. “Did something happen?”

There it was. The guess that something happened. Something illicit.

“He owns half my store, Carmela,” I said.

“Oh. Right,” she sounded disappointed.

“We might be able to work something out, though,” I said. “We started talking about things, and honestly, a lot of his ideas are good. Like, really good. I thought that maybe we could make an effective team if we did it right. And maybe we can work out some kind of arrangement where I will run things on the floor level, and he can handle the big financial stuff and we can slowly work our way back to me owning it again. I still want my store back, you know? I just don’t foresee him selling anything soon, and I don’t know how that will all work out.”

“Well, keep plugging away at it,” she said. “Victor is a good man. He will work with you. You two will figure something out that will make both of you happy, I’m sure.”

The phone beeped in my ear, and I pulled it away to see what it was. It was another call. One from Victor himself.

“Hey, Carmela, can I call you back later?” I asked. “I’ve got a call on the other line, and I should take it.”

“Is it Victor?” she asked, a hint of delight in her voice.

“Yes,” I said.

“Couldn’t get enough last night, I bet,” she said. “Bye, hon.”

I decided not to dignify the first part of that with a response.

“Bye,” I said.

I clicked the button and put the phone to my ear, exhaling slowly. I didn’t understand why I was so nervous. It was just a phone call. Not even a video one. He couldn’t see me with my no makeup and leopard print pajamas and wet hair. For all he

knew, I wandered around my house in heels and an apron all the time.

For some reason, I had a feeling he thought exactly that at least once.

“Hello?” I asked.

“Melanie.” Victor’s voice came through on the other end. “Good morning. Hope I didn’t call too early.”

What was it with people thinking I slept in forever? Did I wear a sign that said ‘lazy slob’ on my apron and no one had told me?

“No, you’re fine,” I said. “What can I do for you, Victor?”

“Good, good,” he said. “Well, I’ve been thinking a lot about last night. We had a really good conversation. I thought maybe we could keep that conversation going today before the ideas all run away. Would you like to come over for lunch to finish up and jot some ideas down for posterity?”

“To your place?” I asked.

I didn’t know if apprehension was the right word, but there was something that was making me feel a little strange about going to his house. It wasn’t danger or anything like that. I just felt like going through his front door and putting myself within distance of his bed was... tempting fate. Last night had been pretty intense. I knew how I felt when I left and how hard I had to push myself to actually go. If I was already there, would I have that willpower again?

Worse, was I misreading all the signals and then I could make a fool of myself by throwing myself at him at his home, only to find out that I was wrong all along? It was possible.

“Yeah,” he said casually. “My treat on lunch. I told you I make a mean pancake, but I omitted my sandwich making skills. I make damn fine sandwiches.”

“Well, how can a girl turn down sandwiches?” I asked. “I’ll be over there in just a little bit.”

“Cool, I’ll see you when you get here,” he said.

As I hung up, I made a beeline for my bedroom. Leopard print pajamas wasn't going to work, but now I had to figure out what would.

This one should be easier, though, I thought. This one is strictly business. Sure, it's in his apartment, near his bed and around all his stuff. But it was still just business. Just two people talking about their investments and how to make them better. If I got that through my head, then being at his place was no different than a coffee shop or a restaurant. It was just lunch at a business partner's home.

Nothing more.

VICTOR

I had been doing a lot of thinking that morning. When I called Melanie, it had been with the intention that I wanted to talk to her—not just about the ideas she had for improving the store, though. I wanted to talk to her about how we could transition things back to her in time.

The idea had been rolling around in my mind since I found out about what the board did to her, and while I hadn't wanted to just come right out and say it when she was being combative, it seemed like the right thing to do and had been weighing on my mind. So, I wanted to tell her that I did plan on it, for sure, and go over how we would do it after we talked about some of the concrete plans that we could hammer out together today.

As for if we picked up where we left off the night before, well, that would just play itself out, wouldn't it?

I didn't want to meet up somewhere public. Doing that would both put us on display for other people but also possibly prevent either one of us from being honest with our actions. If we were somewhere more private, it would allow for that honesty. If that led to something, then it led to something. If it didn't, I also was already home and could lick my wounds in private.

In the kitchen, I spent a good portion of the time between the call and when she would show up making an array of sandwiches. Much like I told her, I could slap stuff together between bread with the best of them. Toasted warm chicken sandwiches, cold cucumber sandwiches, I had them all. One of

the things that had been left behind by the previous tenant was a three-tiered serving plate, which I employed to make a centerpiece and stack the sandwiches on.

With the food ready, I went into the bedroom and made sure I looked presentable. A polo shirt wasn't my normal favorite, but the one I had on was nice and fit well over my shoulders. It looked business-casual, which was what I was going for. If things happened here today, I wanted it to be organic.

I had just washed my hands and decided that I looked as good as I could under the circumstances when the doorbell rang. I crossed over into the living room and opened the door. Melanie was outside, looking curious and confident, a big smile across her red lips and her eyes wide and focused on mine.

"Afternoon," I said. "Please, come in."

"Thank you," she said, brushing by me as I held the door open for her. Her perfume hit my nose, and I felt my knees weaken. It was a unique smell, one that I couldn't quite decipher, but was the same as she had worn the night before. My stomach tightened at just a whiff of it.

I watched as she passed by me and went into the living room. She was dressed like she was going to work, I guessed, khaki pants, a blue button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled to the elbow. It wasn't a particularly sexy look, but somehow, she made it sexy anyway. I got the impression everything looked sexy on her.

"The sandwiches are in the dining room," I said. "Please, help yourself. I made enough for several people."

"Got carried away?" she asked as she walked into the dining room and saw the massive stack.

"I told you. I like bread," I joked.

She pulled a small plate to her from the stack beside the sandwiches and put a couple of the halves together. I was politely surprised to see she wasn't being dainty either. She was stacking them up, and I happily followed behind her and did the same.

“So, I was thinking,” Melanie said as we took the sandwiches to the living room and sat down with them. “What if we took out that wall on the left side like we had spoken of last night, but put in a drive-through? I know it sounds weird, but lots of stores have them for their pharmacy. It could be a pretty unique thing that if you only had less than ten things on your order, you could call ahead, we could do the shopping for you, and you could pick it up at the drive-through, right?”

“Honestly, I think that’s brilliant,” I said. “I love the idea, and it would be a wildly unique thing just to Brewer’s Grocery that no one else would have.”

“That was the idea,” she said, chomping on a cucumber.

“You know, I’ve been doing some thinking too,” I said. “It’s why I called you over. I wanted to talk to you about this in private.”

She got a pained expression on her face, like she had been dreading the conversation we were about to have.

“I see,” she said, seeming resigned.

“I wanted to talk to you about the future of the store. Specifically, the ownership of it.” She seemed to brighten. “My reasons for investing were dual, like I told you. Part of it was for the purpose of investing because it’s what I do, but also, I wanted to give back to the community that raised me. So, I figured once we have these renovations done and things are going well, maybe I can sell a portion of what I own back to you.”

“So, I would be in control of it again? Officially?” she asked, her face brightening with hope on each word. I nodded.

“That was the idea. I thought it might take a couple of years before everything is upgraded, but then once it is, if we can make a consistent profit, which I believe we can, then I will gradually sell off enough of my investment to you that you will be in control of the future of the company, and I will retain a minor stake just for investment purposes. What do you think?”

She shook her head, tears pinching the corners of her eyes. She looked away briefly and picked up the water bottle she had brought in with her and took a sip. As she sat it down, she looked back over at me with a softness in her eyes that I hadn't seen before.

"I think that would be amazing," she said. "Absolutely amazing. Thank you."

I smiled.

"Don't thank me yet," I said. "We have a lot of work ahead of us before then. But I believe we can get there. We *will* get there."

I was struck again by how pretty she was as she shook her head and tried to gain composure of herself. How was she single? It didn't make any sense. Men should be throwing themselves at each other to compete for her. She could have her pick of any man in Murdock, if she only knew.

"These are damn good sandwiches," she said after a while.

I laughed.

"I thought so," I said. "Here, let me do this."

I went into the dining room and brought the entire tray out and sat it on the coffee table in front of her. Then I went back into the kitchen and grabbed a few drinks. Bringing them back with me, I sat them on the table too, then sat beside her. There was a little space between us, so it wasn't like I was crowding her, but I felt like I wanted to be closer. I was drawn to be closer to her. She was magnetic in that way.

We ate as we continued to go over some of the changes we wanted to make, each tossing in ideas that built on the others. Just like the night before, it felt like our minds were connecting on a level I had never felt before, and with each exciting plan, we seemed to draw closer. Her demeanor changed from the peppy but guarded way she had entered my home to a more flirtatious one. She was being silly and sarcastic with me like we had been last night, and I felt the heat rising between us again.

I wondered if she felt it too. She had to. It was so intense.

“You think it could work?” she asked.

I shrugged.

“I do,” I said. “It depends on how the customers handle it, honestly. But I like the idea.”

“It would just remind me of how it used to be when I was a little girl. Before the big chains moved in,” she said, looking wistful for a moment.

“Sure,” I said. “I remember it that way too. People have just gotten so used to the way things are, it might take a transition period.”

“It would be worth it,” she said, clearly still in her memories. “Having that wall was so fun.”

I laughed.

The Wall of Deals had been a thing her father had done for years. When you first walked in the store, a portion of the side wall would be stuffed with various items that he would have slashed the prices of, but only for that day. I assumed now, looking back, that it was how he dealt with overstock or with items that needed to sell to make room for others. But he also would just stick stuff on there that he had to be taking a bit of a loss on, just to make it fun and to keep people interested.

I remembered coming in as a kid and running to that wall. There was always some sort of candy on it, and I would always get a piece. Whatever candy was on the Wall of Deals usually didn't make it home.

But with the superstores coming in, it became harder to rationalize taking the time he took to do that. Then with his death, there was no one else who could take over, and soon the Wall of Deals was replaced by a lottery machine, an ATM, and a community pegboard. All necessary items, I guessed, but none as fun as that Wall of Deals.

The space had closed between us even more, so that our thighs were touching now. As she spoke, our eyes were locked on each other, and I felt the inevitable draw of her, like a planet to a sun, and knew I was going to make a move soon. It was a matter of when, not if.

“You know,” I said, “I’m very happy you came over.”

“I am too,” she said. “I have enjoyed this.”

“Is there anything else I could do to make you enjoy it more?”
I asked.

Our lips were close now as we leaned on the back of the couch. My arm was behind her, and she was leaning into it. We were so close to an embrace I felt like just taking her in my arms. But I wanted that moment. I wanted the moment where she gave in with me.

“I think,” she said, “this is where I will use my right to avoid a question.”

I smiled. She returned it and leaned in.

Finally, our lips touched, and I tasted her. I sank into the kiss and reveled in the pressure of her soft lips on mine. Slowly, my arm curled around her, my hand settling on her shoulder to pull her tighter. She didn’t resist.

There was a knock on the door.

Our lips parted suddenly as I sighed and hung my head.

“Let me take care of this really quickly,” I said.

She nodded but didn’t move. She wanted to see where it went too. Unlike last night, she wasn’t running from it.

I crossed over to the door, expecting one of the neighbor ladies, and opened it up. But it wasn’t a neighbor. It was much worse. Much, much worse.

It was Sarah.

MELANIE

The woman at the door looked at Victor and then inside at me and huffed before stomping in. I stood up immediately, wondering what the hell was going on. I was struck by how familiar she was acting in his home. She was young, roughly my age, and beautiful. Big brown eyes glared under dark eyebrows, and long black hair was pulled into a ponytail. She was exceptionally well dressed, wearing a pair of heels that had to be worth hundreds of dollars.

She swept in like she owned the place and stood in the center of the room, glaring at me then back to Victor. No one had said a word yet, but she was making frustrated sounds that were starting to give me a clue as to what was going on. My heart felt like it was clutched in a vise.

She stopped and eyed me up and down before turning fully to Victor, her back to me.

“Sarah,” Victor said in a stern tone of voice.

Sarah smiled a mirthless smile and stood back on her heels, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Don’t you ‘Sarah’ me,” she said. “You gave up that right, Victor. But you know what right I still have? I still have rights to *our* money. Money that you used to buy a *grocery store*? Seriously, Victor. Of all the things you could have invested in, you chose a failing grocery store in Murdock? This piss-ant town that you finally left to make some semblance of a man of yourself?”

“Sarah, you need to leave,” Victor said, clearly trying to keep his composure. “You don’t have any right to tell me what to do with my money. And that was *my* money. Not ours. *Mine*. I invested it how I saw fit.”

“That’s not what my lawyer says,” she said. “You didn’t take my name off the account before you decided to start spending that money. As far as the banks were concerned, you just transferred money from one account to another. And my name was still on it. So that means whatever you spent money on, you spent money that wasn’t just yours to spend.”

“Sarah, we can talk about this later. Not here. Not now,” Victor grumbled. His eyes flickered over to me.

Slowly, Sarah turned on her immaculate heels and looked at me again. Her sarcastic smile turned into a sneer. She was tall, almost as tall as Victor, and intimidating in her designer suit and earrings that looked like they cost as much as my car. She had the air of someone who routinely looked down on other people. Currently, she was looking down on me.

“And who the hell is this?” she asked.

“His business partner,” I was able to force out. My heart was pounding in my chest. It felt like my throat was being clenched by an iron fist, but I had to ask the question that was burning in my mind. “And who are you?”

“I’m his wife.”

The words came out dripping in venom, and I felt it run through my veins as they sank in. His wife. His *wife*. Now I understood. I understood why he didn’t want to talk about why he’d left Maryland. He was married. Of course. It made so much sense.

I backed away, taking a few steps so that I was behind the arm of the couch. There was a clear path to the door now, but it went between them. I was working on the courage to take off through it.

“Ex-wife,” Victor said. “She’s my ex-wife, Melanie.”

“Oh, so is this some kind of fuck-buddy situation?” Sarah thundered. “Did I interrupt you getting your dick wet while

you were screwing me over too? How's that for a threesome, huh?"

"Just shut up, Sarah," Victor said. "Your nasty mouth doesn't hurt me anymore. I'm done with you. I have papers to prove it. Get out of my house."

"*Your* house?" she shot back. "Seems like you've been paying for it with an account that still has me listed on it. Sounds a lot like this is my house too. And my God, Victor, what have you sunk to? A two-bedroom hovel in Murdock? You didn't even go back to your parents' house?"

"I don't need to explain anything to you," Victor said. "Get out."

"Not until you tell me what you think you're doing blowing my money on this store. And this whore."

That was all I could take. Blowing past both of them and out of the door, I made a beeline for my car. I could hear Sarah laughing as I escaped. They were yelling with the door open as I reached my car.

"Jesus, Victor. What the hell are you doing?" Sarah asked.

"Leave Melanie out of this," Victor said.

"Melanie?" she shouted. "Is that your little bitch-whore's name? I didn't think you had it in you anymore."

"I always had it," Victor shot back. "Just not for you. Not for a long time."

Her voice rose as she began to argue back, but the sound was muffled now as I slammed the door of my car. I could see Victor look out at me and take a few steps out of the door, but I jammed the engine button and slammed on the gas. I glanced back only once in the rearview mirror, watching as he sank back into the house and got in Sarah's face again. They were full-throated shouting at each other, and I was mortified.

Embarrassed and angry, I just wanted to drive. I wanted to drive until I ran out of gas. I wanted the hell away from Victor and the hell away from Murdock.

Emotion took over, and I pulled off to the side of the road and let the tears fall. Slamming my palm on the steering wheel a few times, I let out a cry of rage at the entire situation. At Sarah. At Victor. At myself. I'd let myself fall into this. I could have held off. I could have said no. But I did this.

Victor had led me into this situation. He had screwed me over in multiple ways now. He took my company from me. He built me up with false hope about how I could get it back. He'd made me believe we had something special between us when he was clearly still entangled with someone. Now he might have also gotten me entangled with her if what she said was true about her ownership of anything he bought with that money.

I cried and cried, deep sobs coming out as I sat there. It was traumatic, not just that Victor lied. It hurt, but it wasn't shocking. It was how Sarah spoke to and about me. It was how Victor had led me into that and I'd walked so willingly toward it. I was so stupid.

Finally, the tears started to dry up, and I sat in stony silence for a while. I was so angry I could barely see straight, and the hurt was still there in my heart. I was done crying. I just wanted to go home.

My phone started ringing, and I realized I had shoved it into my pocket and not put it on the dock on the windshield. It was probably Victor, which meant I wasn't going to answer it. I almost just left it in my pocket and let it ring, but I decided to pull it out anyway.

Looking at the screen, I saw that it was Amy calling instead. Momentarily, all my emotions paused in confusion. What could Amy want? It was early in the afternoon. She should be in the beginning of her shift going twelve to eight.

I went to answer it but missed it by a second. Waiting for a moment to let her realize she got voicemail, I called her back. It rang three times before she answered. When she did, she sounded worried and upset, and I sat up in my seat in the car.

"Miss Brewer?" Amy asked.

“Amy, what’s going on?” I replied.

“Haven’t you heard?” she asked. There was a distinct note of panic in her voice. “Where are you? I thought you were coming in today. What should we do?”

“Slow down,” I said. “What do you mean what should you do? I am coming in. I just... I got held up. What haven’t I heard?”

“The storm,” she said. “The storm that’s coming for Murdock. They said we are in the danger zone, Melanie! Norma called and said she thinks we should shut down immediately. What should I do?”

“What storm?” I asked. “I haven’t been paying any attention. It’s gray out here but nothing crazy, and I’m only a couple miles from you.”

“A tornado,” she said. “A big one. They say it’s going to probably touch down right here in town!”

“Okay, Amy, keep it together,” I said, wiping my eyes with the backs of my hands. I didn’t have time to be sad or upset about Victor right now. My store needed me. My employees needed me.

“I’m trying,” Amy said, fear clearly gripping her voice.

“I know,” I said. “I’m on my way. I’ll be right there, okay? Just hang on five minutes.”

“Okay,” she said. “What should I do while I wait for you?”

“If you feel like you need to leave, leave. If you want to wait for me, wait. If there are customers, start getting them out of the store right now.”

“Okay,” she said. “Please hurry.”

“I am,” I said. “Be there in a minute.”

I hung up the phone and put it on the dock. There was no time to check my makeup in the mirror or put myself together. I had to go. I shoved the car into gear and pulled a U-turn, heading back toward the store, determined to do my job while I still could.

VICTOR

I watched Melanie drive away feeling a white-hot pit of anger in my stomach. How dare Sarah do this? How dare she ruin yet another part of my life? I turned to face her, and she was looking past me, also watching Melanie leave. When she slid her eyes over to me, she did an exaggerated shocked face and put her hand over her lips.

“Oops,” she said as sarcastically as possible. “Did I make your little slut feel bad?”

“How dare you?” I asked. “Nothing has happened between Melanie and me. Not that you have any right to know that. Not like I don’t know that you *immediately* slept with your yoga instructor after I moved out. Not like you didn’t bring all this on yourself. You have no rights. To anything.”

“I have rights. You spent our money...”

“*My* money,” I said. “Money you paid and signed paperwork for to buy me out of my own damned company. Money that went from a bank account with your name on it to a bank account with my name on it. Sure, both of us were listed as

authorized users on each other's accounts, but it was *my* account. And a judge would laugh you out of court the second you tried any of your ridiculous arguments."

"My lawyer doesn't think so," she said, smirking.

"Your lawyer is a slimy piece of shit," I replied. "And I look forward to raking him over the coals in open court if you bring this any further than you already have. The investment I made in Brewer's Grocery is mine and mine alone. You can back the fuck off. And while you are at it, get the hell out of my house."

"This isn't over," she said. "I think you set this purchase up while we were still technically married. And if I can prove it, then it's half mine. I will have lawyers crawling so far up your ass they will be able to tell what you ate for lunch. I swear, Victor, I am going to take everything you have and leave you with nothing."

"What did I do to deserve that?" I asked. "I treated you as well as I could. I put you on a pedestal. Then you were the one who said you were unhappy. I was *wildly* unhappy, but I was willing to stick by our marriage vows. This was all you."

"I settled for you," she said coldly. "I thought you could be better, and I settled for you. But you just couldn't leave your stupid backward Texas life behind. You were always so stuck on them. So stuck in being a dumb-ass redneck."

"Get out," I said. "I don't want to even hear your name unless it's coming out of my lawyer's mouth."

"Fine," she said, sticking her chin up in the air and dramatically sweeping toward the door. "I'll have James call you and tell you what an idiot you've been."

As she walked out, heading to her car, I noticed one of my neighbors watching from their garden. She must have been there the whole time. She watched as Sarah left and then turned toward me with an expression of empathetic sadness. I shut the door and leaned against it for a moment. Adrenaline was running through me so hard that I wanted to break things. I wanted to punch a punching bag until my hands were raw. I wanted to...

Work out.

Yanking the polo off and tossing it onto my bed, I pulled open my drawers and found a T-shirt. I slid it on and grabbed my phone, not bothering to change out of my jeans. I wasn't planning on doing cardio today. Today was going to be all about lifting until my arms were jelly.

I tried calling Melanie but got voicemail. I tried a second time and got the same response. So, I pulled up her contact info and shot her a text, asking simply that she would call me ASAP. Then I opened the door to the garage and stepped down into my sanctuary.

I flipped the television on, and immediately went to a sports station playing highlights. I was fine with that. I just wanted the background noise anyway. Sometimes I wanted music, but that was when I needed motivation. When I was working out anger or frustration, I didn't need anything other than background noise. Music would only drown out the images in my mind that I was trying to work through.

Putting on heavy weights on the bench press bar, I locked them in tight and sat down. Strictly speaking, I shouldn't test myself like this unless I had someone to spot me. But right then, I was willing to be a little dangerous if it meant I got to beat this feeling out of me. I laid back and settled myself under the bar.

The first lift was easy, but it almost always was. My body was fine-tuned to lift heavy things after years of doing exactly what I was doing now. Working frustration out by punishing my body. The weights went up and then slowly came down, then back up again. It was always the end of the first set when I felt effort for the first time.

The second set started easily, then by the fourth rep, my effort was back. And by the end of the set, I was pushing, sweat beading on my brow.

The third set was effort from the beginning. I let out a primal roar as I got through the end of the set, feeling the burn of my muscles as I set the weight back on the bench.

The punching bag was next. My arms already hurt, but I still had so much adrenaline, so much frustration. I had to work it out. I slipped on my gloves and took a stance beside the bag. I never envisioned a person when hitting the bag. That was dangerous. That led to dehumanizing people and fists flying at flesh. The bag was a tool. Just like the weights.

And I hit the living daylights out of that tool.

I pounded on it until sweat was dripping off of me, and I was slowing down, throwing haymakers instead of combinations. Grunting with effort with every swing. Eventually, I had almost nothing left, and I sat down heavily on the bench. Now I had my biggest test.

Lying down one more time, I lifted the weights and went through a single set. It was excruciating, but with every lift, I felt the anger leaving me. My arms and chest were burning and spent, but I got the entire set done and racked it again. As soon as it landed in the rack, I let my arms fall and relaxed onto the bench. I was breathing heavily and sweat matted my hair down. I clenched my eyes shut and only opened them when I heard a strange sound coming from the television.

There was a blank screen for a second and then white words appeared. It said something about a tornado, and I sat up fully, grabbing the remote nearby to turn the volume up. A robotic sounding voice was giving the warning, and my eyes widened as I read what the screen said.

A massive tornado. Heading straight for downtown Murdock.

Right for the store.

I stood bolt upright and immediately grabbed my phone and ran into the house toward the bedroom. Yanking the sweaty shirt off, I grabbed a fresh one and was fitting it over my head when I got into the living room. A siren went off, low and piercing, coming from the center of town. I remembered it going off once before when I was a kid. We had to hide in the storm shelter under the house.

It terrified me then. My mom tried to make the best of it, convincing me that it was like a game. We had a propane camp

stove and some beans and hotdogs. She cut up the hotdogs and threw them in a pan with the baked beans and cooked them until they were hot. From then on, that was a meal I wanted every time there was a storm. It was comforting.

There had been a bad one that year. It tore up a lot of the town and blew part of the high school to pieces. It had to be remodeled, which took forever. My freshman year was marked by the sounds of hammering and the smell of fresh paint as they tried to finish a year-long project of basically rebuilding the school from scratch while people were still in it.

I pulled open my phone and checked my messages. Still nothing from Melanie. I decided to text her again.

I texted, Melanie. Please call me as soon as possible. It's about the store. There's a tornado coming. I want to make sure you're safe. I am going up there now to make sure that everyone is out. Please take shelter. We can talk about everything else later. Stay safe, please!

With that, I stuffed the phone into my pocket. I grabbed a jacket and my keys, thinking at the last second to grab the charger for my phone, just in case I got stuck somewhere and needed to charge it and didn't want to go out to the truck to do so. Of course, I was about to ride *toward* a tornado. It was possible that wherever I ended up, my truck could end up somewhere very far away indeed.

I couldn't stop and get anything else. I needed to get up to the store and make sure it got emptied and anyone who remained was safely sheltered. I ran out of the front door of my house, locking it behind me, and took off for the truck. The sky overhead had gone from a pale gray to dark, almost black with clouds. Lightning struck nearby and lit up the world for a moment, and thunder rolled behind it.

I just hoped I could be of some use. I tried to remember if there was a storm shelter at the store. There had to be one. It was the law in our town, I thought. After the storm that tore up the school, I thought everyone had to have one. I hoped they did, anyway.

If there was a shelter, I could go straight to it, open it up, and make sure any stragglers and employees got down there and we could wait out the storm. I just hoped that nothing happened to the building itself.

Pushing the engine start button, I pulled out onto the road and headed toward Brewer's Grocery. Hail started to pelt the windows when I was only a block away.

The storm had come to Murdock.

MELANIE

The wind was already blowing little paper ads and trash around the parking lot when I pulled in. A quick glance to the trees that lined the median on the cross street showed that they were whipping back and forth, threatening to snap in half or come uprooted if it got much worse. And it most likely was going to.

I had the radio on the entire way listening to the alerts as they kept coming in. One after the other, the news was getting worse for Murdock. The storm was tearing through the next town over, and the mayor was pleading for people to seek shelter.

The roads were desolate, and it was creepy to be out on them by myself. When I reached a red light, I noticed that there was no one else around and ran it. There was literally no one on the roads.

As I reached the cross street where the store was, I saw that the lights were still on inside, but there were only a few cars left in the parking lot. The second my car was parked, the front door opened, and I could see Amy's face, locked in an expression of stress and terror. She beckoned me as I ran through the rain that began the second that I opened my door. Thick, heavy drops felt like bullets crashing down from the heavens as I dove into the store.

"Everybody needs to get out," I said. "Right now. Go home."

"People are still shopping," Amy said, shrilly. "I can't make them stop!"

“I can,” I said, yanking down the mic on one of the registers. I pressed the button and heard the intercom system click on. “Attention. Anyone in the store in sixty seconds will not be rung up. You will be locked inside and left to deal with the storm. Bring your crap up and get the hell out. Now.”

Within a few seconds, a line had formed at the register. Amy stood by, but her hands were shaking, and I could see she was a wreck. I laid a comforting hand on her shoulder, and she spun to look at me.

“Yes?” she asked.

“Amy, go home,” I said. “I’ve got this.”

“But the storm—” she began.

“I’ve got this,” I said. “If you leave right now, you’ll make it in time to shelter. Go home. That’s an order.”

Nodding, she took off for the office. A moment later, she was running for the door, swinging her pocketbook behind her and pulling the hood of her jacket over her head. Before she could reach the door, it opened, and I was about to call out to whatever idiot customer was walking that we were closed when I saw who it was. Instead, I focused on the people I was ringing up.

“Melanie,” Victor said as he headed toward me from the door, “please, we need to talk.”

“No,” I said.

“At least let me help get people out of here.”

“Fine,” I said. “Sweep the store and see if anyone else is in the aisles.”

He nodded and took off, going down each aisle as I rang the last of the customers up. At least it got him out of my face for a minute. It had been at least ten minutes since the loud alarm that shook the walls of the store had started, warning people of an incoming storm. The alerts on the radio said the lockdown horn would run when the tornado touched down. Since it hadn’t yet, I was determined to send everyone out of there and go home myself. I just had to get through this last customer.

Victor appeared behind the last customer, seemingly pushing him through the line. I rang him out and handed him his groceries, sending him on his way.

“Leave the cart,” I said.

When he was finally out of the door, I yanked the till out of the register and headed for the office. Victor followed me, still not saying anything. I got the impression he expected me to be the one to start talking.

I went into the office and hit the combination for the safe. It would be a few minutes before it would open, so I put the till down on top of it and went back out to lock the front door and look out over the street.

The clouds were growing extremely dark and violent, an eerie shade of green at the edges, and rain was mixing into hail. The parking lot was now empty aside from my car and Victor’s. I got a sudden burst of worry that this might be the last time I would see it in drivable condition, and part of me wanted to run out right that second, take the till with me, and just go home and hide. But before I could jump to that plan, another loud, blaring horn sounded, seeming to take up all the air in the town.

It was the second alarm. The tornado had touched down.

“Shit,” Victor said from the doorway of the office. “Let’s go, come on!”

He paused and looked out the window. I watched as his shoulders fell. “Oh no. It’s here.”

I turned to look back out of the window and follow his gaze. The black smoky clouds had begun spinning slowly, seeming to be sucked toward a central mass. My eyes trailed in horror to where they formed a cone. It was partially hidden by the buildings in the way, but there was no doubt what I was seeing. The tornado was just a couple of streets down.

A shopping cart crashed into the window and a crack in the glass spiderwebbed up in multiple directions. More carts were soaring along the parking lot and into the street, some of them no longer on their wheels and being pushed along on their

sides. My car was rocking as if someone were pushing on it. The fabric sign of the tiny upholstery shop across the street tore off its awning and flew into the sky.

My knees shook, and my breath hitched. My trembling fingers reached out to touch the glass that was slowly breaking and would soon shatter apart into millions of pieces. All I could think was that I should go get a broom so I could be ready. I couldn't think clearly.

Victor's hand fell on my shoulder and pulled. I turned and met his eyes. I could barely think I was so scared, but something in the way he looked at me focused me on him.

"We have to go downstairs right now. I've seen the blueprints. I know there's a shelter. Where is it?"

Snapping into some sort of coherent thought, I nodded and pointed to the corner of the store. A door to the right led to the back room where a trap door in the floor led to an underground bunker.

"Back there," I forced out.

"Let's go. Grab a case of water and some snacks," he said. "We don't know how long we'll down there."

Nodding, I reached for the candy by the registers, shoveling some of it into a recyclable bag that we sold. Jerky, candy bars, nuts, all kinds of randomness went into it, and then I turned to look out of the window again. The hail was harder now, and the spiderweb break in the glass had gone from near the floor all the way up to the ceiling.

I jolted into movement, heading toward the back. Victor was there when I arrived, carrying a case of water and a case of beer.

A sound like an explosion rocked the building, and the lights went off. Cast in a sudden pitch blackness aside from the dim light coming from outside, I stumbled, falling into Victor's arms as he pulled me into the backroom. Crashing glass followed, and I knew the window must have given way. A whooshing sound of wind blew into the building, and I raced

to the door to the floor. Yanking it open, I ran down the steps, Victor following me and locking it behind him.

The rooms downstairs were reinforced with concrete, designed for the survival of several people for several days if needed. It had a small room with a commode in the back that connected to a backup septic tank. A generator was along another wall with hookups that could be used to power some electronics. A couple of propane camping stoves and cooking materials were on a shelf along with some canned beans and soups and a few stacks of bottled water.

It had been maintained once a quarter, a job that I enjoyed doing personally. It meant a day away from the customers to go and make sure that everything down there was in working order and functional. I usually loved being out with customers, but once in a while, it was nice to get away. It had been one of Dad's biggest brags, that he had a shelter that several people could survive in for weeks comfortably. I had used it a couple of times for tornados that were in the area, but none had ever touched down close enough that anyone was down there long enough to use anything.

There was silence for a few minutes before Victor cleared his throat. I rolled my eyes. I couldn't believe this was happening, especially with Victor trapped there with me.

"Look," he said, "I'm sorry about Sarah. I just need you to know that she has always been like that. She's nasty and rude, and she has zero legal standing about this store. I did everything on the up and up. She will be back out of my life, this time for good, very soon."

"Whatever," I said. "There's a wind-up radio on that shelf behind you. Please turn it on so we can hear the news."

Victor nodded solemnly and went to the shelf to get it. As he did, a crashing sound above us sounded like it was nearby. Maybe our store, but probably a block or so away. Whatever it had been, it was destroyed now. Victor wound the radio and moved the needle to the local pop station, where a voice was excitedly going over reports.

“...coming down Broad Street at a high rate of speed. Again, the mayor and police are asking people to shelter in place as best as possible. The governor has already declared a state of emergency for the region and has asked for reinforcements. There are no reported casualties, but the damage to property has already been tremendous. It is imperative that citizens stay in place. I repeat, stay in place.”

“It’s going to hit us,” I said.

Victor could only nod.

VICTOR

The icy chill of fear went down my spine as I listened to the radio report. The tornado was going to run right over us if it kept its course. And there was no reason to believe it wouldn't.

I sat down heavily on a small bed that was set up against one wall. The whole day had been a whirlwind of terrible events from the second Sarah showed up. It seemed so ridiculous that I had been in my living room with Melanie, sharing a kiss where the heat was so strong that I thought we might tumble into bed right then and there earlier in the day. Now I was here in the storm shelter basement of the store, with Melanie angry because Sarah had yet again tried to ruin my life, awaiting a tornado that could absolutely ruin the investment that I had moved here for.

Melanie was leaning back in a corner of the ancient but comfortable-looking couch in the center of the room. She had a bottled water in her hand and cracked it open. After taking a big sip, she spun the top back on the bottle and stared directly at me. I met her gaze and held it, wondering what she was going to say. She was upset, clearly, and afraid. But she was also angry. Looking at it from her perspective, I totally understood too.

“If she wanted you back—” she said suddenly, her voice slicing through the silence of the room, despite the crashing sounds above. “If she called you right now and said she wanted you back, would you go?”

I didn't hesitate to answer. It was a question I had asked myself plenty of times, and the answer hadn't changed since a week after she'd left.

"No," I said firmly. "I don't love her. I thought I did before. Maybe I did. And for a brief moment after she left me, I probably would have taken her back. But not now. Not even if a gun was held to my head."

She nodded. "Hmm," she said, not giving any indication whether that was an answer she wanted or expected or not.

"*I am* attracted to *you*, though," I said.

"Excuse me?" she asked. "What the hell kind of a thing is that to say right now?"

"I just thought you should know," I said. "Before the storm hits."

"Before—" she began then made an exasperated sound as she threw her head back on the couch. Then she leapt up and paced the floor for a moment, shaking her head. "I cannot believe I'm stuck here with you."

"Me either," I said.

"I could have been stuck with anyone. Anyone. I could be down here with Amy or Norma. Or hell, one of the stupid customers that didn't want to leave even though they could see the damn storm coming with their own eyes. I could be down here with anyone. But I'm here with you."

"Yup," I said.

"Do you have any idea what you have done to me in the last couple of days? How much your mere existence has absolutely wreaked havoc on my life?"

"I have a general idea," I said.

"Shut up... just shut up," she said.

"Hey, look, I know this isn't an ideal situation for you," I began.

"An ideal situation?" she thundered back, interrupting me. "Are you joking? Seriously, are you kidding me right now? An

hour ago, I was in your living room. I was standing in your living room thinking something... real was going to happen between us. And then your *wife* walked in.”

“Ex-wife,” I corrected. It didn’t seem to help matters. When she spoke again, her voice was low and gravely, and her eyes were focused in anger.

“Fine. Ex-wife. An ex who feels it necessary to hunt you down halfway across the damn country when she wants to speak to you and who called me a whore. An ex who might just own part of the store that I already had a problem with *you* owning. And now I am looking at possibly having to deal with both of you and whatever is going on between you two?”

“Nothing is going on between us,” I said hotly. “Sarah just showed up because she cannot handle the idea that I might be enjoying my life. She wants me to be miserable because if I’m miserable then she is still exerting control over me.”

“Yeah, right,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“It’s true,” I said. “She wants to ruin anything I get joy from. Because she hates that she couldn’t do anything on her own and eventually she will figure that out.”

“Sure,” she said, continuing to pace and crossing her arms over her chest.

I stood and closed the space between us, making her stop in her tracks.

“I mean it. I am done with her. As soon as my lawyer shows her how incredibly wrong she is about her claims of ownership in my investment, I will be cutting off communication with her entirely. Then she’ll never be involved in my life again.”

“Well, good for you,” she said.

“Then I’m free to pursue whatever I want.”

“Good!”

“Whoever I want!”

“Fine!”

“Like you!”

“Oh yeah?” she said, her face getting closer to mine, so our noses were nearly touching.

My temples were pulsing with the blood pumping through them, adrenaline was coursing through me, and my hands were clenching. But it wasn't anger. It was something else. Something more intense even than anger. And it was being reflected back at me from Melanie. Her eyes burned with a fire of passion that I had never seen in another person. It screamed for release.

“Yes,” I said.

Our lips crushed into each other, and her arms wrapped around my neck. I lifted her off the ground and grabbed her ass to hold her in place. She crossed her ankles behind my back, and I walked her to the wall, pushing her against it as my tongue slid inside her mouth and I tasted her.

Hard, staccato moans and hurried, sharp breaths punctuated the sounds of our lips pressing into each other. My hand slid up her body and touched the skin of her stomach, eliciting a sharp breath from her. Her arms left my neck, and at first, I thought she was going to push my hand away. Instead, she reached down and yanked up the hem of her shirt, pulling it over her head and tossing it away.

Melanie's soft, pillowy breasts rose and fell with her rapid breath inside her tight white bra. I buried my face in the center of her chest as she reached behind her and undid the clasp. I slid my lips up her neck as she yanked the straps down her arm and tossed it away as well. I lowered her to her feet and stood back to admire her for a moment. Her incredible body was delectable, and I wanted to lick every inch of it.

My hands cupped her breasts as we kissed again, and she pushed herself off the wall, spinning with me so my back pressed against it. She began to yank at my shirt, tugging it out of my jeans and then pulling at the button until it opened. Trailing kisses down my chest, she dropped to her knees and pulled down on the waistband of my jeans and boxers at the same time.

She gasped as my cock sprang out at her, and her eyes floated back up to mine as she wrapped one hand around the base and stroked it. Her mouth had fallen open in a shocked smile, and she settled between my legs, flipping her hair back so it was out of her way.

Melanie plunged down, taking me deep in her throat and making my knees buckle. The warmth of her tongue on my staff made me want to explode right there, but I held tight. She stroked me into her mouth, and I groaned deeply. I looked down, and our eyes met. The intensity of seeing her take me into her mouth while maintaining that gaze was incredible.

Suddenly she stood and ripped at her own pants, opening them up. I reached forward to pull them down over her hips as our lips met once more. She backed up as she kicked off her pants and then tumbled down onto the couch. She moved until her head rested on one of the arms, and I crawled between her thighs.

Fingers tucking into the band of her panties, I pulled down and peeled them off her. She lifted her legs straight into the air as I pulled them up, and then when they were off, let them fall wide again, opening herself to me and giving me access to her. But I wasn't ready to be inside her yet. I wanted to taste her first.

I leaned down into another kiss and then moved my lips down her neck. She reached down to stroke me, but I pulled back to take one of her breasts into my lips as she moaned deeply in my ear. Flicking the nipple with my tongue brought another sound rolling from deep inside her, and my hands reached under her ass and pulled her up, so her legs fell over my shoulders.

I looked up and grinned as I kissed down her center until I reached the soft tuft of hair on her mound. She watched me intently as I brought my lips down her thigh and then traced my tongue down it, back toward her lower lips. I repeated the motion on her other side and could feel her squirming in my hands, her hips bucking up, nudging at me. She wanted my touch.

Tracing my tongue up over her lips made her cry out, and the sound matched the howling of the wind above us. The storm was close now, but we were in our own tornado of intense passion. My tongue slid through her folds, and she screamed and clenched the cushion of the couch. I brought the tip of my tongue up to her pearl in the center and gently nudged it.

Lapping her up, I sucked lightly on her clit. She shook and bucked under me, but I held her in place as I licked her, relishing how her body was reacting to me. Her voice rose in short bursts as my finger slid inside her. She was hot and wet, and the tip of my middle finger brushed along the upper wall until her hands clenched on my hair and her legs squeezed my ears.

Suddenly, she sat bolt upright, and then her body jolted over and over again as she cried out into the sound of destruction above us. I held my tongue in place, pressing into her clit as she came and then fell back onto the arm of the couch again, panting and occasionally jolting like electrical currents were rolling through her body.

Her hands clenched in my hair again and pulled me until I kissed up her body again, languidly tracing my tongue over her nipple until our lips locked, and she sucked my tongue.

“Fuck me,” she said, hoarsely between pants. “Please, fuck me.”

I grinned and spread her thighs, settling between them. My cock slid through her folds, and her wet, throbbing pussy covered it in her juices. She cried out at the sensation of my cock touching her as I positioned myself at her entrance. Curling over her, I kissed her neck and whispered into her ear.

“Are you ready?”

MELANIE

“Are you ready?” he whispered into my ear.

It was a question in theory, but in reality, it was more like a warning. His massive, thick cock brushed through my folds, and the pressure of the head pressed against my opening. I tried to relax my hips, preparing myself for his huge, veiny cock to enter me. To stretch me. To claim me.

I nodded and gasped as he slid inside, slowly inching into me. One of my legs draped over his backside while the other fell off the cushion of the couch and rested barefooted on the floor. The cold concrete mixed with the heat of my core as he pressed deep into me, sending chills over my body. I shuddered as I clenched and released, aching and wailing as he buried his throbbing cock inside me.

My eyes clenched shut as the sensation of being filled continued, Victor impossibly deep before he pulled back and then pressed in again. I cried out as the line between pain and pleasure was erased and an entirely new definition of fullness revealed itself to me.

Victor’s lips crashed down onto mine as his hips rocked back and then into me again, my body loosening as I slowly molded myself around him, and he increased his speed. When our kiss broke, my eyes opened and stared into his. His face was screwed up in a look of pleasure and concentration, and his hips slammed into me for the first time, showing me his power.

I screamed and arched my back, my chest rising to his lips, where he took a nipple into his mouth. As his tongue flicked over my sensitive flesh, he began to pound into me with a rhythmic slamming until I fell into a dizzy, timeless daze. For some time, I lay back, my body warming and feeling sensitive to every touch as he brought me closer to another climax with each thrust.

My jaw fell open as a crashing sound above us made us clench together. The storm was ravaging the world above us, but here, in this dark basement where we were hiding, our bodies were ravaging each other. His powerful hands pressed onto the armrest on either side of my head, and I ran my fingertips over his chest, down his stomach and over his abdominal muscles. His body was exquisite, and as the sweat began to bead in the skin between the muscles on his chest, I sat up to lick it off.

He groaned deeply, and I felt my body respond to the sound with a flush of heat. My core relaxed even more, allowing him even deeper access and heightening the sensation of pleasure. I moaned in response, and the sounds mixed with those above us. The crashing of the world outside of our haven only emboldened us. Encouraged us to reserve nothing.

Victor picked me up and carried me, bouncing me as he did so that I rode his cock while he walked, to the bed. The sensation of his power, carrying me so easily and being in control of riding him while I did so, made me so wet that I thought he might slip out as he laid me down. But he didn't. He had a plan.

Folding me over on my side, he mounted me, pulling one knee up toward my face as his cock pushed into me from below. He was exerting his power, his control as he fucked me harder. I submitted to it and let the feeling wash over me as I blissfully fell into a wave of climax that was building like the storm above us.

Loud, booming sounds above us sounded like bombs dropping, and something crashed into the trap door leading to the shelter. But we didn't stop. Couldn't stop. He was getting close now, and the danger of the moment only heightened the intensity.

Suddenly, the wave crashed over me. I cried out, clenching the sheets in balled fists as I came hard on his cock. I turned fully onto my stomach and screamed into the pillow as his hands gripped my ass and he began to thrust with abandon. He squeezed my cheeks as he rammed into me from behind, and the orgasm rolled through me.

I was shaking and felt like my muscles had ceased to work when he suddenly pulled out. I moaned in sadness, but he took one hand and pulled me toward him. He was sitting with his back against the wall now, and his incredible cock was standing straight and thick waiting for me to mount him and ride him again.

I crawled between his legs and took him into my mouth again, pressing him deep into my throat and relishing in the taste of both our fluids mixing together on my tongue. Then I sat up, letting his massive rod slide down my lips, over my chin, and between my tits as I rose up onto my knees. Settling one on either side of him, I reached behind me to guide him into me and sat down heavily when the head had penetrated me again.

Riding him, I felt yet another climax coming. His face was buried between my breasts and his hands clenching my ass. He was giving me enough control to guide the movements, and the exhilaration of that control pushed me further toward a new, explosive orgasm. My eyes shut as the sounds above us grew more intense. So did the sounds from his chest as he grunted and moaned. His hands wrapped around my waist and clenched. He was about to come. I let the tension go so I could come with him, and a primal cry rose from my throat.

My whole body shook as I tumbled into an earthquake of a climax. I couldn't tell if it was my own perception or if the walls really shook from the storm, but it didn't matter. As his pulsing cock emptied into me, I rode the wave of the most incredible orgasm of my entire life. Throbbing in heavy spurts as he emptied himself, he shook beneath me, and I took his lips to mine and kissed him as we slowly fell onto the cot, only stopping when he was finally spent.

The crashing sounds above us began to fade as we curled up together, my head on his chest. We were both staring at the

ceiling and waiting for the storm to cease. It seemed to go on forever, and eventually, I sat up and grabbed the battery-powered radio. I turned it back on, placing it on the shelf beside us as we lay together in the bed, covered by the heavy blankets.

When things finally went quiet, the reporter on the radio was running down the damage. Apparently, our street had been hit rather hard, but the tornado had essentially died off several miles away, having done most of its damage around where we were. After it hit our street, it seemed to turn around and go back out of town, heading west. It was a miracle for most of the town, which sat east of the store, but I could only imagine the damage that had been done to the place.

“Whenever you’re ready,” he said, kissing the top of my head, “I can go up and see if it’s safe to come out. No rush, though. I’m fine staying here for a while.”

“Me too,” I said. “Can we just not leave for a week?”

“I think a week might be too long,” he said, laughing. “Our friends would eventually wonder where we are. I don’t want to come out of here and walk into my own funeral service.”

“That would probably be bad,” I agreed. “I’m just being selfish. And terrified. I don’t know what happened up there, and I’m not sure I want to.”

“I understand that,” he said, and I realized he would.

His money was invested in the store. Anything that happened upstairs was part of that too. I hadn’t even been thinking about that.

“Still, I need to know,” I said. “I need to go up there with you.”

“It’s very dangerous,” he said. “I don’t want to risk you getting hurt.”

“And if you got hurt?” I asked. “How would I know unless I came up to find you? Your argument makes no sense.”

“Fine,” he said, rolling his eyes a bit.

“Well, remember that wall we were thinking about knocking down?” I asked. “Maybe now we don’t have to hire a contractor to do the removal part.”

He laughed, and it filled my heart up in a way that no one’s laugh had ever done before. It made me giddy in a way. I smiled.

“All right, let’s get dressed,” he said. “I don’t think we can explain away how we ended up naked coming out of the shelter.”

I didn’t want to move yet. It was warm and cozy in the bed on his chest with his arm casually draped over my shoulder. We had made this room a cave for just us for a short little window, and I didn’t want to give that up. What if once we were out there, whatever magic was happening in here was gone? What if we were only drawn into this position in bed because of the storm itself and the close proximity? What if we got up there and he didn’t want me anymore?

What if he wanted Sarah?

I shook my head and forced myself to sit up. I was letting anxiety dictate my life, making choices about how I viewed the world instead of letting myself evaluate it before I experienced it. It was the same way I had gotten so negative after my parents’ death. I had taken it to mean that nothing good would ever happen again. And I manifested a lot of bad because of it.

I caught Victor staring at my body as I stood and looked around the room for my clothes. It wasn’t in a leering way, though it most certainly had a sexual element to his stare. It was more worshipping than leering. He seemed enthralled by it, and only when I began to cover up my private parts did it shake him into movement too. Then it was my turn to stare.

There wasn’t a lot of bad in staring at Victor as he stood and looked for his clothes.

I just hoped the store was still standing. I didn’t know how I would handle it if it wasn’t. It would feel like one more piece of my life had been changed and destroyed, and I wasn’t

exactly sure how I would respond. I just knew it wouldn't be good.

VICTOR

The storm had finally seemed to stop, and the radio said that the tornado had dissipated. I could still hear the occasional sound above us, but I couldn't tell if it was the sound of hail still falling or rain or if more debris was crashing down still.

I was worried about Melanie.

She seemed to have taken the prospect of the damage to the store really well, keeping an optimistic, almost silly attitude about it. I tried to join her in that, hoping that if I matched her energy, then we could take things as they came to us and not fall apart when we got up there. I wasn't sure it was real.

Falling into bed with her was something I absolutely did not regret. The heat between us had been off the charts, and I was certain that we would have ended up in that situation sooner or later, regardless of if we'd gotten stuck together in a shelter, hiding from the storm.

The intensity of it, the danger and fear made everything more urgent, charged with passion and excitement. It built up so much pressure that we didn't have much of an option when the powder keg exploded between us. It was organic and honestly, the best sex of my life.

However, I worried that she might have regrets if the store wasn't in decent shape. Unfortunately, I had no reason to believe it would be. It sounded like the tornado had passed directly above us and hit the store pretty hard. I was going to be happily surprised if our cars were even still in the same zip code, much less the parking lot. If Melanie went up there and

saw everything that she had ever worked for was destroyed, that the store her family built was obliterated, I wasn't positive how she would respond.

She was sitting on the couch and smiling at me as I pulled my jeans back up. I smiled back and caught her eyes trailing from my zipper up my body to my face. I didn't mind her looking. I'd done my share of that while she was getting dressed. But part of me worried that she would compartmentalize everything that happened in the bunker and that she would think it had been a mistake. That falling into each other's arms was something we'd only done out of fear.

As soon as I finished dressing, I crossed the room over to her. I offered my hand, and she took it, standing up beside me. I could see her face drop a little as she did. We were going to leave the confines of our little cave. It was sad and scary, but it had to be done. I led her to the stairs, and we began making our ascent.

Once I unbolted the door and tried to open it, I realized something was blocking the way. I gave it a shove, but nothing budged, and I stepped down a step to give myself better leverage. Whatever it was, it was heavy but finally seemed to be moving. On the last shot, I shoved hard enough for the door to fling open, and we caught our first glimpse of the sky above us.

The roof was gone.

Or at least it was mostly gone. Bits of it, torn and jagged, still hovered up there, missing whole chunks. Other pieces were hanging lower, into the building itself and dripping wet. I glanced around for any downed live wires that might electrify the water on the floor, but I didn't see any. Tentatively, I put my foot down, and when I stood, I could see most of the damage through the window of the backroom door.

A whole chunk of the east wall was missing. As I went through the door into the store proper, it took my breath away to see how thoroughly the tornado had ravaged the building. It looked like a bomb had gone off. Displays and racks were scattered throughout the store, almost none of them even close

to where they had been. Doors were torn off freezers and lay on the floor, racks of clothes were strewn all over, and toys and knickknacks were scattered all along the aisles. I became fixated for a moment on a pair of jeans hanging from a beltloop along a steel beam in the ceiling, looking like someone had been raptured right out of their pants.

A cash register was near the door leading to the back, the monitor, till box, and everything. It inspired awe at the power of nature.

Melanie walked behind me, and when I turned to look at her, she was clearly distraught. Her face was locked in an expression of horror. She too had noticed the register and bent to pick it up before realizing that it was too heavy for her to move by herself. There was no point anyway; the entire front end of the store was a wreck.

Whole sections of checkout lines were missing, either tossed in the tornado or scattered in the store. Plastic and paper bags were literally everywhere, and candy seemed to be lying under every step. We stepped over an entire checkout belt to get to the middle of the store, and Melanie's voice wavered when she spoke.

"There's only six of them," she said, referring to the belt that had been mounted into the ground. "I need them put back so I can open the store again, but they're so heavy I can't do it by myself."

"Melanie," I said, trying to speak as patiently and calmly as I could, "the store is destroyed. We won't be opening again for a long time. We can rebuild, but most of this stuff is unsalvageable."

Her bottom lip quivered, and her eyes shut tight as teardrops fell from them. She was trying to hold it together, but the more she saw, the worse it got. Unlike in the back, the roof was still intact for much of the main portion of the store, but the glass windows were all shattered, and the frame of one of them was obliterated. A soda display case was lying in the parking lot, along with pieces of the window.

I reached over and touched her shoulder, but she shrugged me off and took a few steps to the middle of the store. I followed her, but she seemed to be trying to create distance between us. Finally, she stopped between two aisle shelves that were still standing, unlike most of the others.

“Leave me alone,” she said quietly.

“Melanie, please,” I said.

“No!” she said, shaking her head. “No, stop. What happened down there was a mistake. It shouldn’t have happened. I’ve lost everything now. Everything.”

“Melanie,” I tried again, but she collapsed on the ground into a seated position, her head in her hands. “It’s going to be okay. We have insurance. We can rebuild.”

I knelt and put an arm around her, but she shoved it off. When she looked back up at me, her eyes were filled with tears and her mouth was stretched in a half-moon frown. Still, though, she wouldn’t make complete eye contact, preferring to look at my chest or neck, it seemed.

“I can’t,” she said, and then the tears really came. “I can’t.”

She was sobbing now, and the sound of her cries mixed in the air with a faint noise I slowly recognized as emergency vehicles. I looked up, through the hole in the wall from where the storm had touched down and scattered the contents of the store everywhere. Down the street, I could see a cop car with an ambulance and fire truck behind it. They were heading to us.

“Look, the rescue team is going to be here in a minute. We should try to get outside so they can get to us.”

Standing, but otherwise not acknowledging me, she shuffled to the hole where the front door had been and walked through it. She took a sharp breath and clenched her arm as she did, and I could see a little trickle of red come from her shoulder. She must have cut herself on the jagged glass still there in the frame.

I followed her, walking through a larger hole that offered much less glass to be worried about and stood near her as

ambulances parked nearby. EMTs rushed out and took each of us, pulling us aside and away from each other. The last I saw of her for a little while, she was being bandaged on her shoulder and staring vacantly at the store where the sign used to be.

An EMT brought me over to where his ambulance was near my car. Shockingly, both our cars were still in the lot, albeit several dozen yards away from where they had been parked. Both were upright, although they were facing different directions now, and the windows were busted in both.

“What’s your name, sir?” the EMT closest to me asked.

“Victor,” I said. “Victor McLaren. I am a partial owner of this store.”

“Oh,” he said, looking back at it and then to me. “Well, that’s very unfortunate. However, it looks like you’ve escaped major injury.”

“We hid in the storm cellar,” I said. “It was safe down there.”

“That’s very good,” he said. “It touched down on the street back here and wiped out a couple houses and businesses. It looks like your store was the last place it ran through before it dissipated. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?”

“Sure,” I said.

“Did you hit your head at any point? Lose consciousness? Have you fallen or do you feel any obvious injuries?”

“No,” I said. “We got under the store before it hit and didn’t come out until a few minutes after it felt like it had passed.”

“All right, let me check you out here.”

He checked my scalp for any abrasions, and when he saw none, he moved on to other parts of me. I turned as he looked at my back and arms and saw Melanie in the distance. She was walking away from the paramedic, a bandage on her arm, heading for her car.

Before I could get clear of the EMT, she was in it and driving away, tossing broken glass out of her window as she did.

I was crushed. As she disappeared in the distance, I knew I had to do something, to talk to her. I could recognize what was happening inside of me. I had fallen in love with this girl in a very short time. It was fast that much I knew, but it was so intense that it was undeniable. I had never felt such an attraction to another person before, not even Sarah, and I had to find a way to get her back.

MELANIE

I drove home in a daze, occasionally tossing glass out of my window. It was all over my car, and I was vaguely aware I was going to have to call my insurance in the morning and get someone to replace it. I probably would end up with a rental car for a few days.

My brain drifted away, and the farther I got from the store, the farther my mind went astray. I couldn't process it. Any of it. Not what happened in Victor's house with his ex, not having the most incredible, passionate, best sex of my life, not the storm that destroyed my parents' legacy. None of it. I was numb. I just wanted to go home and sit down somewhere that had windows that were unbroken.

The tornado had apparently spun over the store and then turned around, heading back out of town, so the rest of Murdock was spared. My home was thankfully part of that, and when I pulled into the driveway, all the emotion I had avoided during the drive suddenly hit me.

I was home. I was safe, but my whole world had changed.

I didn't even realize I had been crying. My shirt was wet with tears that I must have been shedding the entire way home. My arm burned from the antibiotic and gauze that now rubbed against the raw part of my shoulder, but that wasn't why I was crying. I cried for everything that had happened. I cried because I didn't know how to handle any of it.

This couldn't stay inside me. I had to get it out. I had to talk to someone.

As I stumbled into the house and locked the door behind me, I pulled out my phone. My thumb hovered over Victor's name but then I scrolled away from it. When it passed Carmela, it stopped, and I threw it on the bed as I got undressed. There were still dust particles and glass on my skin and in my hair, not to mention I could still smell *him*. I needed to get clean. To wash it all away so I could think about it clearly.

I turned on the tub, and as soon as it was warm enough, I stepped inside, setting the phone down on the edge. Once I was finally in, submerged to my neck, and had soaped down enough to feel like I was clean, I hit the button to call Carmela. She answered on the second ring.

"Hello? Mel?"

"Carmela..."

"Mel, are you okay? I heard the tornado was heading right for the store! Where are you?"

"I'm at home," I replied.

"Oh, thank God."

"But I was there."

"What?" she asked.

"I was there when the tornado hit. Under the store in the storm shelter. With Victor."

"With Victor?" she repeated.

"Yeah. He came to help people get out of the store. We ended up getting stuck. Carmela, the place is destroyed. Absolutely destroyed."

"Oh, hon," she said, her voice filled with warmth and empathy. "I am so sorry. I am so, so sorry about that, really. If there is anything you can think of that Mark or Camden or I can do, please let me know."

"Thank you," I forced out.

"I'm sure you don't know yet," she said, "but if you need people to help clean up and move stuff, Camden and Mark will for sure come to help. Maybe Graham and Ryan too. You

just say the word and let me handle it, I will get them all there for you, okay?"

"Okay," I said weakly. "Thank you, Carmela."

"Of course, honey. I am so sorry about the store. I know how much it meant to you."

"Yeah," I said, still holding back. Should I tell her what happened between Victor and me? Would she be impartial since Victor and Mark were so close? I didn't know what the right move was, but it was eating me up inside.

"You just have to take it day by day, you know," she said. "Little baby steps. But for today, all you need to do is take care of yourself. All the other stuff can wait. Insurance can wait. Everyone can wait. You just went through a serious trauma."

"Okay."

"Mel?" she asked, her voice sounding like she was trying not to pry but also wanting to be as thorough as she could "Is there something you haven't told me? Are you okay?"

I couldn't help it. I needed to tell someone. I needed to get it off my chest and into the world.

"No," I said, "I'm not okay. Something happened with Victor and now everything is so complicated."

"I thought so," she said. "What did he do?"

A small part of me was warmed by that. She instantly took my side, something I hadn't expected but appreciated.

"His ex-wife showed up," I said.

"Oh, God, not Sarah," she said.

"You've met her?" I asked, shocked.

"No, but I feel like I have," she said. "She avoided all get-togethers and stuff where the boys saw each other and introduced significant others. They got together and married way before I hooked up with Mark, so I never met her, but I've heard enough about her to know I don't like her."

"Oh," I said. "She's horrible."

“I know,” she said. “I’ve heard. She showed up? Why? Where did she show up, at the store?”

“No,” I said and sighed. I was just going to come out with it. There was no use holding anything back. “I went over to Victor’s place. We kissed. It felt like something was happening and then she showed up and called me a whore and all this crap. I ran off and got a call about the storm and headed to the store. I was barely there for ten minutes before Victor showed up by himself wanting to help. We got everyone out but the storm was on top of us, so we had to use the shelter. And then...”

“And then?” Carmela asked.

“I hate that he came into town, Carmela. I do,” I said.

“I know,” she said. “You have every right to because of what happened.”

“Exactly. He stole my store from me. But I can’t really blame him because it was the board who sold it. He apparently had no idea who I was or why I would be mad.”

“I heard,” she said.

“I just feel like something was happening between us. We were clicking, you know? Even despite everything, we were clicking. Then, I went over to his house, and we kissed, and it was electric. Then his wife just burst in.”

“Ex-wife,” Carmela corrected. “Trust me, if I know anything about Victor, it’s that he was ecstatic to be away from that woman.”

“You don’t think he would go back to her if she wanted him?” I asked.

“No,” Carmela said, laughing. “Most certainly not. Not after the way she treated him, and not after the way their marriage ended.”

“Okay,” I said, nodding and sinking a little further in the tub.

“I wouldn’t worry about her,” she said. “I’m sure whatever she thinks she knows, she doesn’t. She got off easy before, getting his business and everything because he didn’t want to fight it.

He just wanted out, even if it meant losing his shirt. He told Mark and Camden that. His lawyer begged him to fight her over it because he knew they would win. But Victor was just so done with her.”

“She was a terrible person in my limited contact with her,” I said.

“Well, what did he say about it when you were stuck together? How did that go? I can’t imagine that was fun.”

I squirmed a little and tried to find a delicate way of putting it. I didn’t think there was one.

“He said basically that,” I said. “Then we kind of got into a fight about it, and I got in his face, and one thing led to another...”

“And?” she asked, clearly not letting me off the hook for anything.

“We hooked up,” I said. “God, that sounds so juvenile. We had sex. Really, really incredible sex. And I don’t know what to think about it. I felt like something was really happening there, something real between the two of us, but what if it wasn’t? What if it was just the adrenaline from his wife walking in on us kissing and then the storm and us being angry and everything? What if I am screwing up any potential to get my store back by literally screwing the guy who is taking it away from me?”

“Victor isn’t like that,” she said. “He wouldn’t use that against you, even if he could. That’s not who he is. He wouldn’t slander you to win.”

“But what do I do? I’ve fucked this whole situation up.”

“Well, maybe it was just adrenaline and fear and everything,” she said. I felt an unexpected drop in my stomach. Like it was what I *didn’t* want to hear. “But maybe, just maybe, it was real. All I know is you need to talk to him about it. Trust me, coming from experience, if you’re confused about what things mean after sleeping with him, you need to get to talking about it pronto. Clear that shit up fast.”

“You think?”

“For sure,” she said. “It’s the only way to know, and you do not want to be interacting and not knowing the rules of what’s going on between you. Be honest with him and take him at face value when he says how he feels too. From what I know of Victor, he won’t lie. He might be guilty of being too blunt, but not of lying.”

“I will,” I said. “I just can’t do it right now. I need a few days.”

“Of course,” Carmela said. “You just went through something incredibly, insanely traumatic. Take a few days to process that and handle the aftermath a little. Then when you feel like you’re ready, give him a call.”

“Good idea. I just have so much to do now. I have to call insurance and file reports and somehow figure out how to make sure I have a staff *if* I can ever open it again. I just don’t know.”

“Well, you let me know how I can help you. I will do whatever I can and so will Camden and Mark. I am signing them up. But for right now, you relax and try to get your mind straight, and if you need me, you can call. Anytime.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I really appreciate you.”

“I appreciate you too, girl. Get some rest.”

VICTOR

On my way home, I felt the drain of the last few hours weighing on me. It had been an emotional and physical rollercoaster, and now I was finally coming down from the adrenaline of the situation and my body and mind were paying me back. By the time I pulled into my driveway, I was so tired I let my head fall back and my eyes close, letting the truck run so I could still have air conditioning and let the radio play softly.

I dozed for about ten minutes, just letting myself drift into a half daze where my brain started working on what was next almost subconsciously. I needed to fix this situation, but how? How would I not only help the store and get Melanie back what she'd lost, but also make up for the way she had been screwed out of her own future?

Snapping off the radio and killing the engine, I slid out of the door and into the house, heading directly to my bedroom. Thankfully, my home was on the side of town not hit by the storm. Changing out of the dusty, dirty clothes, I stumbled toward the bathroom, my fists filled with shorts, boxers and a T-shirt and my eyes barely open. The warm water was soothing, and before I knew it, I was sinking to the bottom of the tub and plugging the drain.

I sat in the tub, slowly filling from the showerhead as it rained down on me as I struggled not to go to sleep. My mind was still awake, but I was just so tired. So tired and so frustrated.

Shutting off the water, I tried to shake it off. I needed to focus on how to move forward. That was who I was. When I was presented with a problem, be it an investor who was shaky about spending their money on a sure thing or Sarah attempting to ruin my life and deciding to cash out and buy the grocery store, I was a person who took the bull by the horns and went for it.

Melanie needed me to go for it.

A name came into my head that I hadn't thought of in quite a while—Will Wagner. He was a banker that had helped me secure the loan to start the business in Maryland and the personal loan to buy the house that Sarah now owned. We hadn't spoken since Christmas last year when Sarah insisted on hosting a party and playing the happy couple. It had been a miserable night except for talking to Will.

My phone was on the wicker bathroom caddy, so I retrieved it and went through the contacts. As soon as I saw his name, and before I could second-guess myself, I hit the call button.

“Hello, Victor?” he said as he answered the phone.

“Will, hey, how are you?”

“I'm good,” he said. “How are things?”

I spent a little bit of time doing the common explanation that had gotten so old in the last few months, telling him how the marriage had ended. He tried to hide the lack of surprise that comes with having heard already anyway. Once we were past that, I started telling him about the store and what had happened here.

“So,” he said after I made my pitch, “you want a business loan?”

“I do,” I said. “I know insurance will cover most of it, but we were planning on upgrades anyway and insurance won't touch that. I don't know exactly how much it will be yet since it literally just happened. I won't know how much demo and rebuilding will cost.”

“Well, won't it be the same as most any other grocery store demo and rebuild?” he asked. “I mean, if anything, it might be

cheaper since the building is already half destroyed.”

“I guess,” I said.

“What I’m saying is, I’d be willing to sign off on a loan for you if you can guesstimate what you need. Just find a number and let me know. I’ll draw up the paperwork tomorrow.”

Happy I’d accomplished something even while lying in the tub, I felt a little more relaxed and got off the phone with Will with the faintest hint of a smile on my face. I pulled the plug out of the drain and checked the time as I dried off. It was just past seven. Shooting a text that I fully expected wouldn’t be responded to over to Melanie, I got into my shorts and shirt and stumbled toward the bed.

Just before I dozed off, I checked the phone one more time. When I saw she still hadn’t responded, I drifted off to sleep.

* * *

It had been three days since the tornado touched down and destroyed the store, and I still hadn’t heard from Melanie. Will had done a terrific job fast-tracking my loan, and I had a number to work with, giving me a chance to get a few calls in and hiring a demo crew to finish off the tearing down process. The insurance would be slower to respond since the town had a lot of damage to assess, but at least I could get started with the money I had on hand. The rest of it I wanted Melanie to be part of.

That meant I had to tell her what I was doing.

I wanted it to be a surprise. I wanted to show her how much I thought of her and how I wanted to take care of her by setting this all up all while making sure she knew she was in control by not finalizing any new building without her input.

Pulling the phone out of my pocket, I collapsed into my recliner and held the phone to my ear. The call answered on the third ring, surprising me so much that I nearly dropped it when I heard Melanie’s voice.

“Yes?” she asked testily.

“Melanie?” I asked. “Hey. Please, give me just a minute to speak before you hang up.”

“Fine,” she said. “Go ahead.”

“I just want to discuss some things. I know this entire situation is difficult and confusing, but I would very much like you to come over for dinner and we can talk about all this.”

“Dinner at your place?” she asked, sounding rather hesitant.

“Yes,” I said. “If you’re not comfortable with that, then we can go somewhere else, but I would like it to be here if possible.”

“There is fine,” she said. “I don’t want to be out in public, to be honest.”

“Seven?” I asked.

“Tonight?”

“Yes,” I said.

There was a small pause on the other end. I could almost feel her waffling between saying yes and no. I didn’t blame her, but I was prepared to fight for that yes. I needed to see her, to explain things face to face.

“Okay,” she said, much to my surprise. “I’ll be there at seven.”

“Perfect,” I said.

Seven meant I had six hours to get the place ready. Plenty of time. The first step was the flower shop on Main. Then candles.

Lots of candles.

The next few hours were a flurry of activity, much of which involved me running around town collecting items, bringing them home, setting them up, and then deciding that I needed more. By five, the house was mostly ready, and it was time to prepare the meal. And by prepare, that meant order it special from Mero’s. I wasn’t taking a chance on my own cooking. Not tonight.

When seven rolled around, I had the main course heating in the oven, the appetizer already on the table, a bottle of wine in

the chiller, and the candles lit. A car I didn't recognize pulled in, but Melanie stepped out and walked to the door. I opened it with a flourish and watched her face as she saw the inside of the house.

"What's going on?" she asked, a slight smile cracking the corner of her lips.

"I felt like you deserved a nice meal," I said. "In a nice atmosphere."

She stepped inside, and I led her to the dining room table, holding the chair out for her as she sat down, all without saying much of anything. Her eyes, though, told the story. She was enchanted, or at least enjoying what I had done.

"This is incredible," she finally eeked out as I poured her a glass of wine. "Is this Mero's?"

I nodded. "It is," I said. "I thought it was fitting, since that was the place of our first good evening. I wanted to bring us back to that moment and kind of have a chance to redo some of what happened after."

"All right," she said with perhaps a slight hesitation in her voice.

We ate, keeping our conversation somewhat light, as we got through the appetizer and into the main course. Mostly, she spoke of dealing with insurance for her car and the rental, of the building insurance and how she had run into a wall with it and might need my assistance, and how she had been interviewed by several major newspapers in Texas over the damage that the storm had caused.

I already knew those things, but I let her talk. I wanted to get her comfortable before I told her what I had in store. As we were finishing the main course, I put down my fork and knife and took a sip of the wine. It was time.

"So, you said you had a surprise for me," she said.

"I did," I replied.

A small smile appeared on her lips for the first time in a while, and my heart clenched.

“And?” she asked.

“I spoke to my loan officer the other day,” I said, trying to act as casual as possible. “Any day now I will have a loan deposited in my bank account that should cover the remaining demolition costs as well as a complete rebuild of the building.”

There was silence as she blinked a few times.

“What?”

“I got a loan,” I said. “To rebuild the store. To rebuild *our* store. I didn’t want to wait on the insurance to come through first and it wouldn’t have covered the upgrades we wanted to make anyway, so I thought this was the way to go. Brewer Grocery will be up and running by the end of the year.”

Nothing Mero’s could ever cook could be as delicious as the way her expression ran the gamut of shock, happiness, emotional tears of joy, and then laughter. I laughed along with her and crossed over to be beside her as she stood up. I was going to just put my arm on her shoulder while she tried to settle on one emotion, but she threw her arms around me and squeezed.

I felt laughter bubble up inside me and held her tight as we rocked back and forth for a moment. Then she pulled back and pressed a kiss to my lips.

It was short and joyful, and when she pulled back from it, the smile on her face was still one of a woman who was so wrapped up in the moment that she lost control of herself. But then her eyes darkened. It was not the darkness of anger or resentment, or even the darkness of regret. It was the darkness of passion. Like the storm that had blown through our building and torn it to pieces, a cloud of passion had formed in her eyes and threatened to destroy everything in its wake in pursuit of release.

Our lips crushed together again, and I lifted her off her feet. The taste of the wine was still sweet on her tongue as I brought her back to my bedroom. We ripped one another’s clothes off unceremoniously and fell to the bed.

I entered her without hesitation, her legs wrapped around my waist, and found her wet and waiting. Gasping, clenching, tasting each other, we rolled on the bed in a fit of extraordinary, intense, carnal passion. As night fell on Murdock and the room darkened, we filled my bedroom with the sounds of sex and laughter and yearning.

And release.

When I came, she came with me, her toes curling into the sheets that had torn from the corners of the bed and were balling up in the center. Our bodies were slick with sweat, but we curled together anyway, happy as we held each other in the early night. We drifted off to sleep, and it was the soundest sleep I could ever remember having, holding her in the crook of my arm, our naked bodies pressed together like two pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, finally joined.

MELANIE

I didn't open my eyes immediately when I woke up. I felt like maybe this was all some wonderful dream, and if I opened my eyes, it would all go away. Eventually, I was going to have to face reality, but if I just lay there and enjoyed the cozy comfort of the bed for a little bit longer, I could hang on to the feeling.

I rolled onto my back and stretched my legs down toward the end of the bed, wiggling my toes in the sheets. Reaching over to my side, I felt for Victor's warmth. He really had gone to great lengths to help me and do something that he knew would make me happy. He'd created a dreamy, romantic evening for me and put so much into making me feel special.

As I reached for him though, my hand fell onto cool, empty sheets. My eyes snapped open, and I looked over to the side of the bed, hoping he had just rolled all the way to the very edge. He wasn't there.

That took the warm, happy feeling away from me quickly. I sat up sharply, looking around the room. He wouldn't just leave, would he?

Before I spiraled too far into the panicky thoughts, a crashing sound in the kitchen told me Victor hadn't left. He'd just ventured out of bed to scavenge for food. I chastised myself for having as intense of a reaction as I did. Almost as if he could hear my thoughts, Victor called in to me.

"Melanie? Are you awake?"

I laughed. "If I wasn't, that wouldn't have been the gentlest way to wake me."

His head popped around the doorframe into the room, and he grinned.

"Good morning," he said.

"Good morning."

I felt like I was grinning like a fool, but I couldn't help it. It had been longer than I could remember since I'd been this happy.

Victor's head disappeared for a second, then his whole body appeared as he came into the room. Wearing nothing but a pair of baggy cotton lounge pants slung low on his hips, he was carrying a tray of food. Breakfast smelled delicious, but it was definitely the 'V' of muscles visible above the waistband of his pants that was making my mouth water.

I pulled myself up to a sitting position, holding the sheet over my chest. Victor pressed one knee onto the mattress and leaned over to kiss me.

"You don't need to cover up," he said.

"You put clothes on," I said. "I feel like I'm at a disadvantage here."

"I like your disadvantage," he said.

He kissed me again, and I melted into it. I almost told him to put the food aside and get back in bed with me. But he pulled back from the kiss and settled the tray onto the bed. I slipped out from under the sheets.

"Be right back," I said. "Don't eat all the bacon without me."

He made an admiring sound as he watched me walk across the room naked and dip into the bathroom. I might have added a bit of swish to my hips as I went, but I wouldn't admit that out loud.

I found a bottle of mouthwash in the cabinet and swished it around, then ran his brush through my hair. Feeling refreshed

and a bit more presentable, I wrapped myself in a towel and went back out into the bedroom.

“I knew I should have taken all the towels out of there,” Victor said with a devilish grin.

“Do you have something I could put on?” I asked. “I didn’t come prepared.”

“Sure. Go ahead and grab something out of the dresser,” he said.

I went to the dresser and rummaged around in the drawers until I found another pair of lounge pants like the ones he was wearing and a T-shirt. Dropping it over my head, I breathed in the fresh smell of bleach and savored the soft fibers against my skin, imagining them on him.

Slipping back into the bed, I folded the covers back so Victor could get in with me. He pulled the tray onto our laps, and we dug into the impressive array of food and glasses of orange juice.

“So, I’ve been thinking about what we could do with the store when we rebuild,” I said.

He glanced over at me out of the corner of his eye and smiled, then turned his attention back to the pile of eggs he was working his way through. I realized how easily I’d said “we.” Part of me wanted to immediately start back-pedaling, but I stopped myself. That was exactly what I’d meant. It felt good to say that and have it feel so natural.

“What did you have in mind?” he asked.

“Well, I have a lot of ideas. Nothing completely concrete right now, but things that are bouncing around in my brain. First off, I loved that store. It had been around a lot longer than I have, and there was something wonderful about the old building. I probably never would have considered changing it in any way if something drastic hadn’t happened. But now that something drastic has happened, I’m thinking it might be the perfect opportunity to make some adjustments and improvements to the layout and the features of the building. It could make the store even better,” I said.

“Sounds good,” Victor said.

We ate and talked, bandying ideas back and forth and coming up with potential plans to not only bring the store back to its former glory but take it even further. We were just debating the benefits of potentially adding a small café area when his phone rang. He leaned over to take it off the side table where it was sitting and glanced at the screen. Giving it a quizzical look, he held it up, telling me he needed to take it.

“Go ahead,” I said.

He scrambled out of bed and disappeared into the hallway. I’d been so excited talking about the possible plans for the future of the store I hadn’t been focused on eating, so I took the chance to enjoy more of the mushroom, onion, and cheese omelet and potatoes he’d served alongside bacon and fruit. I was contemplating trying to find some paper and a pencil to sketch out some of the ideas I had when Victor came back into the room. He looked shellshocked.

Worried, I put down the strawberry I was eating and gave him a questioning look.

“Is everything all right?” I asked.

He nodded. The stunned look on his face faded, and a wide grin replaced it.

“That was actually two calls,” he said. “The first one was from the bank.”

“Yeah?”

“The loan has been secured. We are officially ready to get these ideas off the ground and bring the store back as soon as possible,” he said.

I nearly jumped up and down on the bed in celebration, but I contained myself. Mainly because the breakfast tray was still on top of me, and I didn’t want to fling the food and the orange juice all over the room. Instead, I clapped my hands.

“That’s amazing! I’m so excited. Do we know when things are going to go through? When can we really get started?” I asked.

“All those details are going to get worked out in the next couple of days. I’ll keep you posted on it. But that’s not all,” Victor said.

“Oh, right. You said there was another call. What’s going on?” I asked. “Who was it?”

He took a few steps closer to the bed. There was something in his eyes and behind his smile now that was different than it had been when he was talking about the loan. It was still happiness, but now there was surprise, satisfaction, and disbelief mixed in.

“It was my lawyer,” he said. “He’s been doing some digging and found out my ex has been embezzling from my old company.”

My mouth dropped open. Now I fully understood that disbelief.

“What? Are you serious?” I asked.

He nodded. “Apparently it was pretty extensive, and she’d gotten really deep. Of course, when she was called out for it, she tried to pin the blame on me. But the records are clear when examined by the right person. There’s no way to get around it. It was her all along.”

He let out a sound that was somewhere between a gasp and a laugh, shaking his head.

“I can’t believe it. Well, actually, I can believe it. She seemed like she was right on the edge. She was definitely hiding something. I think she knew she was in too deep and there was no way she was going to be able to keep it hidden forever. She was going to go down hard soon and was hoping somehow, I could be her last resort to save herself,” he said.

“That’s crazy. But I’m so glad you know now,” I said. “That must make you feel so much better. I mean, probably not the fact that she was embezzling from your company and essentially stole from you.” I gave a relenting shrug.

Victor laughed. “No, but I am glad everything got cleared up and now it can finally get straightened out the way it should be.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“She’s been arrested. It’s the beginning of a rough road for her. As for me, the ownership of my old company is available again. She can’t exactly run it from behind bars, and no one knows that company like I do, so the partners want me back,” he said.

I was a bit stunned but tried not to show it. This, of course, was everything he’d been wanting. It had obviously broken his heart that he didn’t have his company anymore, and it was worse to think about his ex running it, especially when the problems within it became more evident. Now he had the opportunity to right those wrongs and get things back to the way they had been for him. But I would be lying if I said it didn’t make my chest ache to think about him leaving town and going back to that life.

“You have to do it,” I said, knowing it was the right thing to tell him. “That company is rightfully yours anyway, and you deserve to be happy doing what you love.”

Victor took the breakfast tray away from my lap and set it aside so he could move close to me on the bed. He held my hand and looked directly into my eyes.

“Melanie, I don’t know the first thing about the grocery business,” he said. I let out a short laugh. That wasn’t exactly the declaration I was anticipating, but it was at least honest. “But there is something I do know. I don’t want to be anywhere other than right here right now.”

The tightness in my chest released, and I smiled. “Really?”

“Really.” He leaned forward and kissed me softly, taking a second to rest his forehead against mine as he pulled away. When he sat up, he looked earnest, like there was a long list of things going through his head and he knew he had to work through them but was determined to do it. “It’s going to take some time to figure it all out, and I need to decide exactly what I’m going to do about all this. But what we have is important. I’m not going to just let it go.”

VICTOR

“S hit,” I muttered under my breath as I hung up the phone.

When I heard what had happened with Sarah, I had mixed feelings even though I could recognize how beneficial it would be to me financially. Still, the headache that would come in the fallout was obvious, and I tried not to let myself get too excited.

That phone call was the reason why.

I scrolled through my contacts and found Mark’s number. Mark had always been the most responsible of our little group, the one who could be depended on to remember the little things and act like a grown-up.

“Hey, bud, what’s up?” Mark asked as he answered the phone.

“Hey man, I have a favor to ask you.”

“Sure,” he said, his reliable nature shining through immediately. “What can I do for you?”

“I have to go back to Maryland for a bit and just need someone to drop by my place once in a while and make sure the mail is brought in, stuff like that. I don’t have any plants to keep alive, just make sure the place isn’t broken into.”

Mark laughed. “I thought you had a girlfriend,” he said.

“Hey now,” I said. “I don’t know what Carmela is telling you, but Melanie and I have been keeping that all under wraps for now.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he said. “Still.”

“I don’t want to bug her with keeping up my place,” I said.
“You know how things are when you’re still new.”

“I get it. No worries, brother. How long will you be out of town?”

“It might be a little bit. Maybe a month? Did Carmela tell you what I found out about Sarah?”

“She did,” he said. “I was waiting to talk to you about that. Seriously, what the fuck?”

“Man, I don’t even know,” I said. “I knew she was an ambitious ice queen, but this... it takes the cake.”

“Well, damn,” he said. “Anyway, yeah, I can keep an eye on your place. If you want to drop a key off at my practice, I’ll start going over there either on my way to work or back. It’s right on my way.”

“Awesome,” I said. “I will do that.”

“Can I ask if you know what’s going to happen with everything up there? I’m not trying to get all in your business, but I’m stressed out *for* you,” he laughed. “Getting arrested for embezzling is nuts. Did they think you were involved?”

“From what my lawyer says, they investigated me too, but figured out pretty quickly that I was clean,” I said. “She didn’t really start siphoning money until I was gone. Apparently, that’s what the whole business about her coming down here was. She wanted to bully her way into an ownership stake in the store so she could pay back what she took from the consulting firm.”

“Damn,” he said. “That is wild.”

“It is,” I said. “I have to go give some in-person interviews with the detectives and prosecutors and tie up some loose ends there. Eventually, if she’s going to go to prison, I need to figure out what to do about the house and all the stuff. It will probably all be sold off to pay her debts, but some of the paperwork still has my name on it, so I need to go figure things out.”

“Well, good luck, brother. I can’t imagine going through all that. How’s Melanie taking it?”

“Thanks,” I said. “She’s handling it well. She doesn’t know I have to head out of town for a month yet, though. I just found out and called you. I’ll be telling her tonight.”

“Oof,” he said. “All right, well, I’ll keep that under wraps from Carmela until tomorrow.”

I laughed. “Good idea.”

We chatted for a few more minutes, and when I hung up the phone, I at least had a plan for how to handle things going forward. All that was left was telling Melanie and then giving her the real surprise that I had held off on until now. The one that required I make a bunch of calls and set up before I approached her with it. The one that would make her the happiest I could make her.

I pulled up a chat message with Melanie and shot her a text asking if she wanted to go out to Mero’s and visit the store to talk about the future. She said she would love to, and I made the reservation, happy to be revisiting our new favorite place already. It would soften the blow of seeing the store completely demolished and telling her about my upcoming trip. But it would help set the scene for what I wanted to tell her about the future. About her future—ours if she wanted it.

* * *

Dinner was, as was becoming custom, delicious, and I decided to keep the conversation light through it, wanting to preserve that place as only one of happy memories. When we finished and headed to the lot where the store used to stand, Melanie’s breath hitched when she saw that all the walls had come down. There was only a little rubble left of the original walls, foundation pieces that were still in place and would come down tomorrow. The floor had been emptied and cleaned out, all the materials inside either donated or tossed. Only flooring still remained, checkerboard tile in some areas and the beige concrete flooring elsewhere. All that would have to come up too.

“It’s so weird seeing it like this,” she said as we walked through what used to be the front door and was now just a lip where the concrete rose higher than in other places.

“It is,” I agreed. “But try to think of it not as a destruction of what was, but a new beginning. A starting point.”

“I’m trying,” she said. “I keep seeing possibilities. Things that I always thought we could do but didn’t have the space or the structure or, frankly, the money for.”

“Exactly,” I said. “Hold on to that.”

“I’m trying,” she said. “Like, for instance, right there.” She pointed at a corner that had previously been a section of home and beauty products. “What if we put the drive-through there for a pharmacy? Mark has said before that having a pharmacy in town would be great since Old Man Stevenson passed away last year. Right now, everyone has to either get them filled out of town or online.”

“It might require some extra licenses and permits, but I think we could get that done,” I said.

“And over here,” she said, a grin spreading across her lips and excitement filling her voice, “I was thinking we could have an in-store sandwich shop. Maybe even license it out to a local business so they can partner with us. I would love to be able to come into the store and smell fresh bread every day.”

“Sounds dangerous,” I said. “I have well established with you my love for carbs.”

“You have,” she said. “Don’t think that wasn’t part of the plan.”

I laughed. “You just want me in the store more often.”

“Maybe,” she said. “But these are all just ideas. Clearly, it’s up to you. You are the primary owner and are paying for the reconstruction of everything until the insurance money comes in to reimburse you. I’ll be happy to just have a building here again and customers I can support.”

“Well, about that,” I said, drawing a concerned look in her eyes. “I have a couple of things to tell you, and I wanted to be

here to do it. One of them is good, and one is frustrating but not necessarily bad. Which one do you want first?"

"Give me the bad first," she said. "I always handle bad news better if I know good news is following it."

"All right," I said, taking a deep breath. "The detectives on the case want me to come up and do some in-person interviews about Sarah and everything that went down with the company. Also, some of the things that were being split up in the divorce hadn't finalized one way or the other, so they will have to be dealt with considering she is likely looking at prison time. It includes the house, apparently."

"Oh," she said, nodding sadly. "That means you will be gone for a while."

"Probably a month," I said. "Maybe more, hopefully less. But in the meantime, I have something much more exciting to tell you that I think will help."

"It better be pretty good," she said, closing the space between us. "I was just getting used to the idea of having you around."

I smiled. "Me too," I said. "But I think you'll like this part."

"All right, what is it?"

"You know those ideas you just gave me? About the drive-through and the bakery? Not only do I really like them and think they are gloriously good ideas, but there is nothing stopping you from doing them. It's your store. You can do them. You have control."

"I don't understand," she said.

"If you want the bakery or the pharmacy, you can call the architect and tell him what you were thinking. They will draw you up some plans to go through, and you can approve whatever you feel like is the best plan."

"Wait, so you're giving me control of the rebuild?" she asked.

"Not quite," I said, getting a confused frown from her.

"Why did you say that then?" she began, and I had to cut her off.

“Because you are the primary owner,” I said, interrupting her.

There were a few beats where her mouth moved but no words came out.

“Excuse me?” she asked.

“I’m selling ten percent of the company back to you for a total cost of one dollar. It’s a bit undervalued, but considering the circumstances of the rebuild, I feel it’s appropriate. I mean, the building was demolished. Any smart investor would get out as much as they can now.” I winked. It still didn’t seem like it had gotten through to her, so I sighed and took her hands so I could look deeply into her eyes. “It means you are the primary owner now, and I am just a silent partner. I am giving you control back of your company, control you never should have lost in the first place. If you want it, of course.”

Her jaw was slack as she processed the information and then suddenly tackled me, wrapping her arms around my neck.

“Oh my God, yes!” she exclaimed. “Thank you so much!”

“Don’t thank me,” I said. “You deserve it. It’s a shame what the board did to you in the first place. I am just righting a wrong.”

“You have no idea what this means to me,” she said. “Thank you, Victor.”

She pressed her lips against mine, and I held her tight to me. Her chest pressed hard into mine, and I could feel her heartbeat thumping against me. As the kiss continued, growing in heat, the heartbeat only grew more intense, and her body seemed to melt into mine. My hand slid down to her ass and pulled her into my groin, letting her feel how hard I was for her. She moaned into the kiss, and when our lips parted, the rest of our bodies stayed pressed together.

“You know,” I said, both hands filled with her ass cheeks, “I wonder if the shelter downstairs is still there or if they demolished that, too?”

She laughed and shook her head.

“You know, we could just go back to my place,” she said.

I grinned.

“I thought you’d never ask.”

* * *

We were locked in an embrace before we even got the door open, muffled sounds of groaning and giggling passing between us as she struggled to find her key to unlock the door. It was dark out, and she had forgotten to turn her outside light on, meaning it was pitch black where we were. I was tempted to drop my pants right there, daring her to be with me in the grass, but she swung the door open, and I eagerly followed her inside.

She was tearing off her shirt as she ran down the hallway toward her room, and I kicked off my shoes at the door. I made it to halfway down the hallway when her bra came flying into it from her room, all alone. I stopped in my tracks, and a second later her pants came flying past me as well. I grinned and disrobed myself, dropping everything in the hall so when I crossed into her room, I was completely naked.

Melanie made a purring sound when I appeared in her doorway from where she was, curled up on the bed. I crossed the room to her, pouncing on top of her as she rolled to her back with a laugh and pressed her lips to mine. I lowered my lips to her neck and then shoulder before wrapping them around her breast, lavishing her nipple with my attention as she reached down to stroke my cock.

I was hard and ready for her, and as I switched to her other breast with my lips, my fingers felt for her wet pussy and I slid one inside, penetrating her and making her moan loudly into my ear.

“I need you inside me,” she whispered. “Please.”

I settled between her thighs, pulling her hips up and settling a pillow under them. Her grin had turned to an expression of desire, of need, of yearning.

My cock brushed through her folds, wetting itself with her juices, and she cried out at the sensation of my touch. I smiled

at the way she squirmed in my control and slid my hands down to her wrists, holding her down on the bed.

Slowly, I slid inside her, letting her moan and adjust to my girth as my cock filled her wet, throbbing pussy. When I was fully in, I slid back and forward again a few experimental times, judging how ready she was. Then, when she seemed to be fully prepared, I began to rock into her.

Her breasts bounced rhythmically as I fucked her, and soon she clenched her legs around me tightly and shook as she came. It only seemed to heighten her desire. From then, she was wild, uncaged and uncontrollable, and I matched her enthusiasm with every movement, every position, every giggling moan of ecstasy.

We moved from the bed to a chair to the wall and back to the bed, her body facing away from me as I pounded her from behind, my hand clenched on her shoulder and the other on her hip as I felt the climax building to an unavoidable degree. Her moans were loud and insistent, and she begged for my release.

I came, exploding into her and sending her into her own mutual orgasm as her thighs shook and my knees buckled. Moaning in exhaustion and satisfaction, we tumbled into the bed.

MELANIE

I curled up into his arms as we tried to catch our breath, feeling a weightless, lightheaded feeling of post-orgasm deliriousness. Snuggling into his chest, I felt my heart slowing down and my breath calming along with his as we drifted off to sleep, naked and happy.

The next morning, I was torn when I woke up. It was never a disappointment to wake up in Victor's arms, and I felt like I was still glowing from finally hearing the words I'd been wanting him to say and getting to say them back to him. I loved him. There'd been no denying it for a while, but it had completely taken over, and getting to say it was an incredible rush. At the same time, it was so natural and content it was like I'd loved him all along. I wanted to just lie there and savor the feeling, tell him a few more times, and relish hearing it come back from him.

But that brought with it the other half of the feelings I was struggling with that morning. I didn't have the option to just enjoy lying with him in bed. We weren't even going to spend the day finalizing plans for the store or having fun on some sort of adventure together. That morning, he was leaving. He would be gone for an entire month, and even though he was lying right there beside me, I already missed him.

I'd woken up before the alarm, and the light outside was just barely starting to soften up the horizon. I nuzzled against Victor and spent a few minutes trying to memorize the feeling so I could bring it to mind when I was lonely. All too soon, his alarm went off, and he had to get up to leave.

He'd already packed the night before, so we had a little bit of time. We took a shower together, holding each other under the hot water and talking like we weren't going to be apart. I walked him to the door, and he pulled me close, giving me a long, deep kiss.

"I guess that's going to have to hold me for the next month," he said, resting his head on my forehead and letting out a long breath.

"It will be over before you know it," I said, not really believing the words even as they were coming out of my mouth.

"I'll call you," he said. "And if you need anything at all, call me."

"Even if I just need to hear your voice?" I asked.

"Especially if you just need to hear your voice."

"I'll make sure everything is good with your place," I said. "Bring in the mail. Water the plants. Flip lights on and off. That sort of thing."

He laughed. "I already have Mark handling that on his way to work so you can focus on the rebuild."

"Well, you just think of everything, don't you?"

Finally, there was no more time left. He had to get going. I kissed him again, and we whispered our goodbyes.

"I love you," I said.

"I love you, too," he said. "I'll call you as soon as I get there."

"Travel safe."

The house felt empty and too quiet the second I closed the door behind him. It was going to be a long month.

It was still early, and part of me considered going back to bed for a while, but I knew my mind wasn't going to quiet down enough for me to really get any rest. It made more sense to just stay awake and try to do something productive to get me through this first hump of him gone. With any luck, I'd be so

busy over the next month, I would barely have the chance to miss him.

I went to the bedroom to gather up all my dirty laundry and threw it in to wash. While that was going, I made breakfast. When I was finished eating, it was late enough in the morning for me to get in touch with the architect. I wanted to set up a meeting to discuss the rebuild and the suggestions Victor and I had come up with.

As it turned out, my theory about being so busy I wouldn't think about missing him didn't exactly pan out that way. The next month was crammed, and I was constantly jumping from one thing to the next handling the rebuild of the store and making plans for some changes and improvements in operation when it opened. As a fun side project, I was planning the grand reopening, hoping for a celebration to welcome the local icon back and thank the public for their love over the years.

Everything was keeping me plenty busy, but it didn't matter. I still missed Victor. Countless times every day I heard or thought of something and wanted to immediately tell him. Sometimes I picked up the phone and called him to tell him about it, but not every time. As much as I would have liked to attempt to spend the entire month on the phone with him, we both had things we needed to do.

We talked every day, sometimes a couple of times, and had regular video calls.

The heat between us hadn't died down, and by the time the month was drawing to a close, I was humming with excitement to finally have him back. He was supposed to be back in town in a few days, and I was coming up with plans for how to make the most of his return. Most of them involved locking ourselves away in either his place or mine and pretending we didn't exist to the outside world for a little while. Maybe ordering a pizza for sustenance.

I'd finished up work for the day and went to his house unloading some groceries I'd bought to restock his kitchen so he would have one less thing to think about when he got back.

I planned on baking him some brownies and making some other goodies, so he had a few special things waiting for him. I was just getting ready to start a lasagna to freeze when someone knocked on the door.

Confused and wondering who could possibly be coming to his house, I took off my apron and made my way to the front door.

I peered out the peephole and saw a uniformed driver. Opening the door a little, I saw a limo sitting out front.

“Yes?” I asked.

“Good evening. Mr. McLaren sent me for you,” he said.

“He did?”

The driver smiled and nodded, stepping back and gesturing toward the car. I looked down at what I was wearing. It didn't feel totally limo appropriate, but I didn't have anything else with me and wasn't going to ask for the time to make a stop at my house. Curiosity had a hold on me, and I wanted to know what was going on. I asked him to wait for just a moment while I put everything away in the kitchen, then went outside and let him open the door for me.

I slipped into the backseat and looked around, taking in the lush interior. The driver got in, and I leaned slightly forward.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“I was told to tell you it's a surprise from Mr. McLaren but to enjoy the champagne while you ride.”

He pulled away from the curb, and I took the bottle of champagne from the integrated bucket beside me. Pouring myself a glass, I sat back and watched out the window as we drove through town.

VICTOR

The lake was quiet and serene, a perfect picture of peace and relaxation. It was everything Melanie had talked it up as being from her many vacations there with her family when she was a child. An hour outside of Murdock, it was a little bit of a day trip but nothing really for most locals who were used to having to drive an hour just to get to a decent store or restaurant.

Melanie had mentioned this was a place where she only had good memories of swimming and rope swings and days where she could lounge around and not do anything. I wanted her to have that sense of relaxation when I brought her there.

The cabin specifically was mentioned, and the second I had this idea, I went about procuring it. Specifically, the same cabin her family always stayed in. It meant reserving it for an extra week since they only did weekend or week rentals and not by day, but I figured what the hell. Even if we were only there for a couple days, it would be worth it to see the smile on her face and know how much effort I'd put into making this a magical moment for her.

Getting the right cabin took some digging. I ended up having to have a long email conversation with the ownership group that bought the cabins and digging through their old rental records that they were nice enough to let me see. I had to find her family's name in them, which took forever, then figure out which cabins they'd rented. Thankfully, they always seemed to get the same one.

I got there early, knowing it would be a while before Melanie was able to arrive since she was working, and started decorating the cabin for her. Roses everywhere, candles burning in each room, everything was set. I bypassed the fire in the fireplace only because it was already hot enough outside and went about stringing soft white lights from the cabin down its private little walkway to the water.

Around seven, I got a text from the limo driver saying they were close, and I directed him to drive straight to this cabin. When she arrived, I saw her disappear inside. After a few minutes, she sent me a text me asking where I was. I responded telling her to look at the lake.

Her face appeared in the kitchen window, and I saw her beaming when she saw me, barefoot in the sand, surrounded by tiki torches to combat the slowly dying light. She opened the back door, and I marveled at her beauty for what must have been the thousandth time, and yet never got old. She had changed out of her work clothes and into the dress that I had laid out on the bed for her with the note to put it on. It was white and flowy and sheer, and I could see the delicate shape of her body through the fabric. Had it been bright daytime, it would be almost completely see-through, but in the darkness of the night, alone in this private part of the lake, it was just a taste, a hint of what was hidden beneath.

Enough to rile me up even more.

She kicked off her sandals and walked slowly down the aisle that I had created with the Christmas lights on either side, strung from the trees and ending right at the beach. It was a preview of what I hoped I would see when this moment was fulfilled, when the question and the answer were in the past and the actual day had arrived. The day I would make her my wife.

Melanie had tears in the corners of her eyes, and as she reached me, I wiped them away with my thumbs before embracing her. She was soft and warm in my arms, and when I pressed a kiss to her lips, it was like drinking from the cup of life itself. This day had been planned to be one of the most monumental of my life and the most special of hers, and it was

living up to it. Every second, every stolen breath from the angels themselves were precious.

“It’s the cabin,” she said. “How did you know?”

“I have my ways,” I said, glossing over the agony of the research in an effort to spoil her. She never had to know the effort that went into just the most basic part of this evening. I didn’t need her to. She just needed to feel special.

“This is amazing,” she said.

I nodded.

“You described it very well,” I said. “Will you take a walk with me? Just down to the next property and back? I feel like walking.”

“Sure,” she said, slipping her arm into mine. “Let’s go.”

Our steps were rhythmic, side by side and in step with one another, which was indicative of everything else about us. We were together, but we were more than that. We were one.

“While I was gone, I had a lot that I had to do and it brought up a lot of bad memories,” I said.

“I’m sorry,” she replied.

“No, you don’t have to be. It’s good that those memories came. Because I was able to follow them with new memories. Memories of you. Plans that I had for you. Things that I was excited for and wanted to focus on. Every time something popped into my mind that made me angry or sad about how my life there had been, I was always able to follow it with the thought, ‘Yes, but it is so much better now.’”

“I like that,” she said.

“So do I,” I responded. “Over the first few days, the stress was pretty high, and there was lots to do. But your face, your voice, it kept me going. Knowing I could speak to you on the phone kept me focused. Knowing I could come back home to you kept me motivated. I thought about this day, about this moment, all the time. I thought about *you* all the time. By the end of the first week, you were all I could think about.”

“I missed you too,” she said, curling into my arm and squeezing.

“It was more than missing you,” I said, grinning. “I’ve never missed someone the way I felt for you while I was gone. As a matter of fact, I’ve never felt for anyone anything resembling what I feel for you all the time. You are the center of my thoughts, my most primary concern, all the time. And happily so. There is no one else that I would want to think about, no other subject I would rather delve into. No one has captured my heart or my mind the way you have. No one has ever churned the feelings of love in my heart the way you have. Not even in the best of times has anyone even come close to making me so delighted, so damn giddy to spend the rest of my life admiring them. Loving them. Worshipping them. Only you. Ever.”

I stopped as we reached the torches again, having walked down to the line where the property ended and back again. I could keep going, bringing her to the edge of the property on the other side, where the lake snaked up the hill and then washed back away again, heading toward another cabin, but I wouldn’t. This place was perfect. Not as perfect as Melanie, but perfect.

I pulled her in tight and kissed her softly, then took a single step back. Her breath hitched and I felt like she saw it coming. I smiled. I loved that she anticipated it. I loved that she knew how much I loved her and part of her expected this to happen.

I knelt down, placing one knee firmly in the sand and keeping one hand in mine. My other hand reached into my pocket and pulled out the box that I had gotten on the third day I was back in my old town. I knew what I wanted right then. There was no question, even that long ago, and it was torture to wait. But this was worth it. The heavy breathing, the eyes that were watering and the white dress, clinging to her body as the light breeze blew it tight to her skin.

“Melanie, I love you more madly, more passionately than a man should be allowed to love. I don’t ever want to spend that much time away from you again, and I want the whole world

to know that I don't ever intend to. Will you do me the privilege, the honor of allowing me to make you my wife?"

Her hand trembled as I took the ring out of the box and placed it at the tip of her finger. Her face was a mask of emotion, and she was beaming through the tears that now streamed down her face. These tears I would not wipe away. They were earned.

"Melanie, will you marry me?"

"Yes," she said, nearly breathlessly. "Yes, I will."

I slipped the ring onto her finger and stood, embracing her again, but this time with the promise between us. The promise of a future that I could not wait to begin.

MELANIE

I was overwhelmed with happiness, unable to fully wrap my mind around this incredible life that was unfolding in front of me. Looking down at my hand, I watched the beautiful glow of the sunset sparkle on the ring Victor had just slipped onto my hand. It fit perfectly. I didn't know how he knew what size I wore, but it was exactly right. Everything about it was exactly right, like he'd designed it himself and had it crafted just for my hand. Something told me that was just what he did.

But as beautiful as the ring was, and as much as I knew I'd be staring at it constantly, it wasn't the most amazing thing about the moment. I couldn't believe how far Victor had gone to create this experience for me. Asking me to marry him would have been wonderful no matter how he had done it, but the fact that he had brought me out here to the lake to do it was beyond special.

He'd listened to everything I told him and knew what I valued the most throughout my life, and that was more meaningful to me than I could even begin to describe. When I was younger, and the girls around me were getting dreamy-eyed about their future boyfriends and the kind of man they'd like to marry, they all talked about the same things. They wanted a handsome man with a lot of money who would sweep them off their feet and carry them off to their fairy tale.

Of course, those things sounded nice. I liked the idea of the handsome man and the beautiful life. But I knew even then I wanted something more. I wanted a man who listened to me, who really knew me. When I thought about spending my life

with someone, I knew it needed to be a man who was going to make me feel like he valued everything about me and was going to make sure I knew I was special to him because I was me.

It had seemed that was never going to happen—until now. Victor had not only listened when I told him about my childhood and how important my family was to me, but he'd found a way to make them a part of the most important moment in my life so far. Coming out here to the lake flooded me with memories and made me feel happy and content, and now our proposal was a part of it.

This was so much more than I could have imagined. He wrapped his arms around my waist and cuddled me close while we watched the sun dip down beneath the edge of the water and suddenly it became even more.

“Come on,” Victor said when the sun had fully set. “Let’s go check out that cabin.”

He took my hand, and we frolicked off to the cabin so I could show him around and tell him all about the time I’d spent here. I was stunned when we went inside and I found clothes, toiletries, and everything I would need for a few days of vacation there. I didn’t need to even think about going back to Murdock or to a store to get anything. He’d thought of everything. All we needed to do was relax and enjoy making new lake memories together.

Part of me just wanted to burrow myself down in the cabin and stay there at the lake forever, but there was another part of me that was excited to get back to Murdock. There was something waiting there that I couldn’t wait to show Victor.

After a few days of being blissful in our little love nest, hidden away from everyone and everything else, we packed up and called the car to take us back to Murdock. It brought us to his place, and Victor smiled as he walked around, noticing the tiny touches I’d added. I helped him unpack and do the laundry to wash all of our vacation clothes. When they came out of the dryer, I put mine away in the bedroom, smiling as I saw the beginning steps of our lives truly merging together.

When all of that was finished, I found him in the kitchen starting to make a pot of tea.

“Before you do that,” I said, “there’s something I want to show you.”

He looked around curiously. “I thought you already showed me everything you did around here.”

I shook my head, smiling as I took his hand and started gently tugging him out of the kitchen.

“It’s not here. I have a surprise for you this time,” I said.

One eyebrow lifted. “Oh, really?”

I nodded, and he let me take him out of the house and into my car. Brimming with excitement and doing everything I could not to blurt everything out so I could keep it a surprise, I drove us to the store. The shocked expression on his face was obvious even before we pulled all the way into the parking lot.

“It’s changed a little bit since the last time you saw it,” I said.

His mouth open, he nodded slowly a few times like he couldn’t quite come up with the right words to say.

“You could definitely say that,” he finally managed to get out. “How is this even possible?”

The crew had already gotten off for the day, so we drove right up to the building. We climbed out of the car and stood side by side overlooking the amazing progress. The last time he’d seen it, before he left to handle everything back in Baltimore, the store was still essentially rubble. Now the outer shell of the brand-new building was nearing completion.

“You chose a very good architect, and he has an amazing team,” I said. “We started talking about plans for the building the day you left, and he hit the ground running just a couple of days later. This is what they’ve accomplished so far. Obviously, there are still a lot of things left to do. The inside still has to be finished. There are some electrical and plumbing things that need to be done. But it’s more or less built. Just reading for the last touches and to get filled up and reopened.”

Victor looked totally stunned at the progress, but also very happy with what he was seeing. He looked around, craning his neck a little to try to see more of it.

“Can we go inside?” he asked.

“Of course,” I said. “It’s ours.”

He grinned at me, and I smiled back, taking his hand as it slid into mine and our fingers intertwined. As we walked toward the door, I pointed out some of the improvements being made to the outside of the building and the guest experience starting from the very moment they arrived.

I used the new key the crew gave me to open the building and usher Victor inside.

“It looks amazing in here,” he said, gazing around as he walked slowly through the big open space.

“Well, there’s still a lot that needs to get finished in here. There are some partitions that are going to go up, and the back rooms need to be closed off. Then we’ll add in the freezers and refrigerators and all the shelving units and everything. But the floor is finished.”

We looked down at the tile I’d chosen, and he chuckled.

“I think it is the absolutely perfect floor,” he said, taking my hand and pulling me into his arms. “There’s plenty of room for all kinds of things. Like dancing with my future wife.”

That giant smile stretched across my face again. I knew then I was in for a lifetime of those smiles. There was no way I was ever going to get tired of being in Victor’s arms and being called his future wife was just one more thing to put me over the moon.

We danced through the store for a little while, Victor humming as he held me close. I occasionally pointed out a new design or an idea, and he seemed to love all of them. I could see the excitement in his eyes and knew he was looking forward to the reopening just as much as I was.

But I wasn’t finished yet.

“There is one more thing,” I told him.

“More?” he asked, looking around and giving me a shocked face. “How could there possibly be more?”

“Well, there was something we needed to figure out, but I think it came out just right. According to law, all buildings in Murdock have to have a storm shelter. I’m sure you understand why.”

He laughed. “I’m familiar with the storm potential in the area, yes.”

“So, when we were finalizing the plans for the building, I put a lot of thought into the storm shelter. The one that was already there was good, but if I had the opportunity to create changes and make the store into what it could really be, I might as well add an improvement there as well. So, I asked them to dig a bigger hole,” I said.

“A bigger hole?” he asked.

There was a note in his voice that sounded almost disappointed. I nodded, trying to contain my excitement. This was the actual surprise I had for him. I knew he would be happy to see all the amazing progress that was made on the building, but it was the storm shelter I was especially excited to show off to him.

I took his hand and led him to the door at the back of the building that opened to the steps leading down to the storm shelter. At the bottom of the steps was another door. A keypad next to it operated the locks, and I gave him the code.

“The day we met—” I explained.

He smiled. “I recognized it.”

He hesitated, and I gestured impatiently at the door. “Go on. Open it.”

Victor put the code into the pad and the lock deactivated. He opened the door and stepped inside. As he did, I reached around to flip the light switch next to the door. I was glad there was already power running through the building. Some more wiring and things would need to be taken care of before the store could totally reopen, but at least there was light now.

As soon as the lights burst on overhead, Victor's mouth fell open.

"You've got to be kidding me," he said.

I laughed. "Do you like it?"

"Like it?" he asked incredulously, taking a few more steps into the huge space. "This is unbelievable."

The storm shelter was now a full-fledged apartment under the store, designed to not only provide shelter and protection to a large number of customers and others if there was a storm when the store was full and there was no safe way to evacuate them, but also a place for us. This way we could work late or handle big sales and events without worrying about needing to commute home for meals or to sleep.

"There are still some details to be taken care of," I said. "Namely, furniture." I gestured around at the empty floors. "I've already picked it all out and ordered it. I'm just waiting for it to be delivered and then we can finish it up. Do you want the full tour?"

"Of course," he said.

I brought him around the space, starting with the large area designed for the actual emergency aspect of the storm shelter.

"There's another door upstairs that leads down straight to this section," I said. I brought him to a smaller area sectioned off with a door. "This is the storage space. We'll have cots, blankets, pillows, all of that kind of stuff down here. There will also be shelves for food, water, and emergency supplies. Enough to handle a good number of people for a few days if necessary.

"I think this is something we could add to and enhance over time. Something I'd like to do is maybe have some toys and books and things down here in case any children get stuck here during a storm. Maybe it would help them be less scared and it would get them through the time more easily."

"That's a fantastic idea."

I continued the tour, making our way through the apartment and ending in the bedroom. Walking over to the far side of the space, I open my arms up to indicate the area.

“This is where the bed will be,” I said.

Victor’s eyes darkened and he licked his lips. He came over to me and swept me into his arms, pulling me up against him.

“Why wait?” he asked before his mouth crushed down on mine.

VICTOR

Camden whistled as he looked out of the front door.

“That’s a hell of a crowd out there,” he said, gesturing for me to look.

I took a peek and saw the crowd gathering outside in the parking lot of the high school. There had to be hundreds of people out there, all waiting to get in and watch the charity game Graham and I had put together. To say that it was already a smashing success was an understatement.

“Damn,” I said. “I think we’re going to hit our fundraising goal tonight in one shot. The other businesses and families hit by the storm are going to be so excited.”

“It also means a bunch of headlines saying *Brewer Grocery Charity Drive Meets Fundraising Goal*,” Graham said, beaming as he stretched behind me. “High five.”

I high fived him and shook my head. This was crazy. When Melanie first suggested we do a charity game, with Graham as the centerpiece, I thought he would say no. But the second I pitched it to him over a hotdog during a cookout at Melanie’s place, Graham was all about it. He loved the silliness and fun of charity games, and the last couple he had done worked spectacularly for their money raising goals.

Combining the event with the opening of the rebuilt store and a host of other events designed to raise money for the other folks hit hard by the storm was another stroke of Melanie’s genius. It engendered goodwill among the community at large,

helped us get visibility for our opening, and have a bit of fun too.

We were standing in the locker room on the outside of the school, leading either out into the yard or back in through the gymnasium. It was about time to head down there, and as I looked back at Mark, Camden, Ryan, and Graham, all in patchwork baseball uniforms with “Brewer’s Grocery” on their chests, I was filled with pride.

All five of us were together, having fun and playing with a couple of other townsfolk, including the mayor. All of us apart from Graham were playing against select employees from the store. Graham was designated pitcher for both teams, which was going to be interesting. He promised not to fire any fastballs, or worse, his slider, at us. But I didn’t believe him.

The game itself flew by in a blur. Starting at nine in the morning, I was shocked to see the stands packed with so many wide-awake and excited people. Graham was having a blast slinging zingers in there, getting the crowd going with laughter when he would send his looping curve in and make people strike out so hard they fell over. It was a point of pride for myself that not only did I not strike out, but that I cranked a double off him, smacking off the wall and missing a home run by feet in one of my at-bats.

After the game, Graham was set up to do an autograph session, which explained the large mass of jerseys from his days in the majors. All of us were technically going to be out there, but we all knew that Graham was the one they wanted to get autographs from, take pictures with, and chat about baseball with. It didn’t bother us, but we did like to poke fun at him some.

There was a slew of other events set up for the day as well. After the game and post-game activities, I was rushed, still sweating in my uniform, down to the fully rebuilt store. The office suite that was built inside had a tiny restroom with a shower in it, and I hopped in so I could change and be ready for the store opening at noon.

By the time I got out of the shower, Camden had already shown up with some of the horses and built a corral for them in the neighboring empty lot, which I had bought after the abandoned building in it had gone down in the storm as well. Alongside Camden was Carmela and Mark, guiding children over to do pony rides and taking pictures of people with the gorgeous horses.

Not to be outdone, Ryan and Allison showed up and set up a booth outside, handing out samples of the cupcakes Allison served at their bed and breakfast. Word spread quickly, and a line formed at her table so long that Ryan had to permanently come back in and work in our bakery, cranking out more of the cupcakes according to Allison's recipe as fast as he could.

Then, at noon, Melanie opened the door of the store and let shoppers in for the first time since the place had been rebuilt. It was shiny and sparkly, but most of all, it was exactly what Melanie always thought it could be.

The bakery, despite having Ryan in it frantically trying to make cupcakes and not screw them up, was in full force, making fresh bread and cakes for customers to order. Mero's had a little bistro set up inside as well, serving sandwiches using the bread from our bakery and coffee and tea. We licensed them for two years, and it was a steal of a deal, making sure that we had a name brand in the store to make sandwiches that didn't involve a big multi-national chain.

The drive-through pharmacy was also a big hit, and several of the folks that Mark saw regularly had switched their prescription pick-ups to our store for the occasion. It was far more convenient than their other options, and they seemed happy to support the store anyway.

Everything was going splendidly, and as I oversaw the opening both from the mirrored window in my office and from milling around on the floor to get down in the crowd and see what they were really saying, I could not be prouder of everything that we had accomplished.

Especially Melanie. She was an absolute rockstar the whole day. Greeting customers at the door, she put on a smooth,

effortless charismatic face for the company that certainly won her new loyal customers and endeared her to employees both that had been there for years already and those that we hired new to help with the now larger store.

“It’s a shame this is a soft opening,” Norma said, coming up beside me as I watched Melanie laughing with an older lady who she seemed to know from years of patronizing the old store.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“I said, it’s a shame that this is only a soft opening,” she said. “Seems like we could probably go at this pace for hours yet.”

“What time is it?” I asked.

“Almost six,” she said. “I’ve instructed the boys to start ushering people to the front for a few minutes now.”

“Look at you,” I said. “Always on top of things. No wonder Melanie thinks so highly of you.”

She beamed and rocked back on her heels for a second.

“Yeah, well, it’s also why she made grocery manager,” she said. “If she’s going to have ownership duties all the time, someone needed to be in control of the day-to-day, and if anyone knew how to do that, it was me.”

“Indeed,” I said. “I was in on the discussions to make you grocery manager. And for Amy to take your old position.”

“Amy’s so good,” Norma said. “She’s on for closing tomorrow, right?”

“I believe so,” I said.

Norma nodded.

“Well, at any rate, I’m just glad Melanie can do what she does best,” she said. “Be the heart of this place and check in on everybody else to make sure we are being the brain.”

“She’s good at being the heart of operations,” I admitted. “She’s good at everything really.”

“Yeah, yeah, you have a perfect fiancé,” she said, laughing. “I’m going to head up the door to help usher people out before you gross me out talking about how perfect the two of you are together. Newsflash, we already know.”

I laughed as Norma walked away, heading to the front of the store to open doors and try to get the wall of shoppers to calm down and start filtering out. Slowly, the store became quieter, and when the last one was rung through, we shut the door, and Melanie embraced me in the center of the store.

“How was that?” I asked. “You looked amazing out there.”

“Maybe I looked that way today but give me a week and I’ll be back to putting out fires with some of these people, I swear.”

“Stop being modest,” I said. “You are a natural at being the face of the company.”

“Dad was too,” she said, growing misty-eyed for a moment. “I remember he always used to greet people at the door with a big smile. He remembered names too. Like I saw him call this one customer by name and they had moved away and come back, gone for something like five years. Dad’s mind was like a vault. You couldn’t get anything past him.”

“Sounds like an interesting man,” I said. “I wish I would have known him better than as the grown-up who owned the store.”

“Me too,” she said. “He would have loved you.”

“And he would be so proud of you,” I said. “I’m positive of it. Everyone here loves you, and I’m just the lucky one who gets to take you home.”

Just as the last of the customers filtered out, Mark, Camden, Ryan, and Graham made their way inside. They looked like they were still as energetic as they had been that morning during the game, and I wondered just how many of the cupcakes and coffee they had gotten into.

“All right, buddy,” Camden said, “time to get a move on.”

“What?” I asked.

Ryan had his hands on my shoulders and was pulling me away, the rest of them forming a wall between me and Melanie.

“It’s time to go,” Graham said.

“Go where?” I asked.

“Your bachelor party, stupid,” Mark laughed.

“But the wedding isn’t for another week!” I exclaimed.

“We know that,” Camden said. “Which is why it’s much more surprising to kidnap you now. Plus, if we do it tonight, you can’t chicken out on us at the last minute later.”

“Who said I’d chicken out?” I said, still trying to stop the horde that was now dragging me almost to the door.

“She did,” Mark said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder at Melanie.

As I looked past him to Melanie, who was now being surrounded by Allison, Mallory, Carmela, Amy and Norma, she winked and waved. It looked like they were gathering her up to take her out as well.

Once in the limo that had inexplicably shown up outside of the store, I whipped out my phone to text Melanie.

Did you know about this? I texted.

It was my idea, she texted back. *The girls and I are going out too. Go have fun. Be silly. I love you. I love you too,* I texted back.

It was a permission slip to go be dumb and act up with the boys, and yet, all night, I found myself texting her. I wanted her to know how much I loved her, and how much that even in a moment of fun with my best friends, I still thought of her. Plus, it was fun to send her pictures and to get ones back of the shenanigans the girls got into. Apparently, Norma knew how to party. I wasn’t sure if I would ever see her the same way again after some of the stuff I saw in those pictures.

By the time midnight rolled around, I was sure that not only had I had enough to drink, but that there was nowhere on earth I would rather be than in bed in Melanie’s arms.

MELANIE

Victor said I had no idea how many people in town loved me and my family, and that I would be surprised, but I still had a hard time believing him. With the store having struggled financially in recent years, I thought it was all due to a lack of interest by the town of Murdock. The combination of new and emerging markets and superstores were smoking us out, and after my parents died, people seemed to be slowly losing the connection to the local store that they once had.

But Victor insisted I was wrong. That the love for Brewer's Grocery was as high as it had ever been and that customers had simply taken the store for granted recently, and the storm and losing the original building was going to bring them back. I had my doubts.

Then the store opened, and it had been a bonanza every day. With a wedding to prepare for, I couldn't be there all the time, but thankfully I didn't need to be. Norma and Amy stepped up in their new roles, and a host of new hires were making it easy on me to be an executive and do the big picture stuff I had always wanted, while also having an actual work-life balance that meant I got to go home after eight hours instead of sleeping in the spinning chair in the tiny office the old store used to have.

When Victor suggested that we get married in the empty lot behind the store, and that we shut down for it and invite the whole town, I thought it was a sweet, if silly idea. Our friends would come, sure, and maybe a few of the regulars. But

inviting the whole town was borderline embarrassing. Who else was going to show up?

As it turned out, everyone.

It seemed like the whole town was there, and from my view from inside the store in the office, I could see that cars were parked on the sidewalks all the way down Broad and Main and all the side streets around them. The whole town had come to a standstill, and everyone was filing into the lot, wearing suits and dresses and enjoying the atmosphere.

Carmela was with me, sitting in the spinning chair that had somehow survived the storm and the transition to the new store. It had been found two streets away, sitting in the middle of the road, completely unharmed. Norma took it home, and when the new store opened, brought it back. She said she couldn't imagine the store being complete without that chair in the office, even if the office was now twice as big and connected to a suite for Victor and me to work out of.

I paced between the two rooms, going from the office to the suite and back, my stomach in knots as I watched people file in.

"Babe, you are going to sweat yourself right out of your makeup," Carmela said, standing and bringing me a cold bottle of water. "Why don't you sit down in the chair?"

"I can't sit," I said. "Not in this dress. This is not a sitting dress."

"All right," she said, not skipping a beat, "then why don't we walk around the store a little? Watching people file in isn't going to help your nerves. The other girls are out there. We can go have a little glass of wine and relax."

"The girls aren't there," I said. "I just looked."

"What now?" Carmela asked. She ran to the door overlooking the floor and then turned back to face me, a big fake smile on her face. "Well, that's... that's a thing."

"How long do I have?" I asked.

“Umm, since I can see Amy waving at me frantically, I would say you have about, oh, a minute. Gotta go, babe. You look amazing. This is it!”

With that, she darted out of the door, my Matron-of-Honor and a woman that I now considered my best friend, heading to the aisle that wound from the back door of the store across the empty lot and to the stage that Ryan had built for us.

I followed her out, watching her leave through the door and seeing Amy beaming by the door. She had taken on a role as an assistant wedding coordinator and had an earpiece on connecting her to the woman that we’d hired from Austin to handle the details. Amy had confided in me that planning weddings was her biggest dream and that she was hoping to learn something from the experience that she could put to work one day.

I would hate to see her leave the store, but watching her as I walked closer, I knew I would be happy for her too. She was clearly having a blast. She began to wave with one hand as she held her finger to the speaker in her ear. Outside, I could hear the music stop. That meant there was another song about to play. The one picked out just for me.

“Are you ready?” Amy asked.

“To be married to Victor? Absolutely,” I said. “To do this? Maybe not so much.”

“Well, get ready because you are on in five, four, three, two...”

The wedding march song came on over loudspeakers placed on the roof of the store and in the yard of the lot across from us. Amy pushed open the door, and I heard gasps from the crowd as I stepped out.

I thought there would be no one walking me down the aisle, but as I got outside, I saw something that was different from what we’d rehearsed. All of the boys that Victor grew up with were standing at various places along the aisle, Graham right at the door. He offered his arm and walked with me until I reached Camden, who then took my arm and walked me

farther along. By the time we reached Ryan, I was struggling to hold back tears, and when we reached Mark, they were streaming down my face. All four of them stood where my father would have had been alive and gave me away in his place before taking their places beside Victor on the stage.

“Hello, princess,” Victor said as I reached him.

I blushed in spite of everything. It was a silly nickname he’d given me early on and occasionally called me, usually sarcastically. But at that moment, it felt genuine. Maybe that was because in that dress, in front of the entire town of Murdock, I actually did *feel* like a princess. Never before had I felt so beautiful, and with Norma joining Allison, Mallory, and Carmela as my bridesmaids, I’d never felt stronger and more supported.

Never before had I even really had time for a best friend. My closest friend in school had moved away two years before my parents passed, and I’d never bothered to have a circle of them in school after. The only friends I bothered to keep were ones that were either employees or regulars at the store, and they came and went with time.

But Carmela had ingrained herself into my life in a way that no one else ever had. She was funny and smart and sassy and had brought me out of my shell a lot. I couldn’t imagine my life without her in it anymore. Allison and Mallory were also great, along with friends of theirs that were regularly around, but Carmela and I had become like two peas in a pod and having her directly behind me as I held Victor’s hand made me feel like I could handle the thousands of eyes staring at me.

The ceremony was quick and simple, and before I knew it, there was a pause as everyone waited for me to say the only two words that meant anything on a day like this.

“I do,” I said.

Victor repeated the ritual and said all the things that I was sure I had also said but already couldn’t remember doing, and then slipped a ring on my finger.

“I do,” he said, his eyes locked on to mine.

And with that, we were pronounced man and wife and walked through a cheering crowd back into the store where we would change for the reception while the chairs were moved, tables were moved into the grounds, and the lot became the site of our party.

Victor and I kept our hands linked together for most of the evening, dancing, laughing, and kissing as a married couple and enjoying the attention of our friends and townspeople. As the night grew longer, Carmela came up beside me and tapped my shoulder. I turned into her as she wrapped her arms around me in a tight hug.

“The limo is here,” she said. “It’s time for you to get out of here and go enjoy your husband.”

“Limo?” I asked. “I thought we were just going back to my place.”

I turned and saw the grin on Victor’s face as he shook his head.

“No,” he said. “I have something much better than that planned.”

“Are we going somewhere?” I asked.

He nodded.

“Yup,” he said.

“But I don’t have anything packed!” I protested.

“I packed it for you,” Carmela said, laughing. “I snuck over to your place this morning and packed a couple extra bags on top of what Victor packed for you. It’s all waiting in the limo.”

“How... what?” I said, shocked. “Where are we going?”

“Well,” Victor said, “I always thought I should take you somewhere very specific, but parts of it should remain a bit of a surprise until we get there. But let’s just say that the limo is taking us to an airport, and that we will be boarding a plane to a location that is far away.”

“And gorgeous,” Carmela said, then sidled closer in a near whisper. “I saw some of the pictures on the website when

Mark let it slip. Girl, you are going to love this. It's going to be amazing!"

"Where is it?" I said, clawing at her as she giggled and shook her head.

"Nu uh," she said. "I am not ruining the surprise!"

With that, Victor took my hand, and we spirited away, slipping out while the rest of the guests were busy dancing to eighties music and getting in the limo.

"At least this means I get a few minutes alone with you," I said, curling up in Victor's arms. He pulled me tight to his chest and kissed the top of my head.

"Yes, it does," he said. "Though by the end of the week, you might be sick of me already."

"Week?" I asked. "We're going to be gone a week?"

"Well, one doesn't fly all the way to Scotland to spend a weekend, do they?" he asked.

I didn't know what to say. My jaw had dropped, and I couldn't believe what I just heard.

"We're going to Scotland?" I finally managed.

"Going to Scotland is just the beginning. I have a surprise for you there that is going to blow you away."

"I don't even care," I said, beaming. "I get to go to Scotland with my husband. That is a sentence I never thought I would be able to say."

"Well, now you get to say it as much as you want," he said. "Would you like to practice it a few times over a glass of champagne?"

"I think I would, husband," I laughed.

Victor poured us each a glass, and we clinked them together before settling back in the seats.

"How long until we get to the airport?" I asked.

"Probably a good hour," he said. "We have some time."

"Oh, really?" I asked. "An hour?"

Before I could say anything else, a partition lifted up between the front and back seats, blocking out the view from one to the other. Just before it passed by the reflection of the driver in his rear-view mirror, he smiled and winked.

VICTOR

As the car stopped at the sprawling estate, I could barely contain my excitement. Melanie had slept almost the entire way from Aberdeen in the car, her head on my shoulder as I instructed the driver on where to go and he took off through the serene and gorgeous countryside. For the first time in a long time, I felt a peaceful joy that I could barely even comprehend, much less put words to.

Years of being married to Sarah had beaten me down to the point where even when I was somewhat happy, there was an underlying worry, a tension that I couldn't get rid of. Anxiety would creep in and make me tense, even in the best of times. I thought that was just how life was. How I was. That the happiest I would ever be wasn't really all that happy.

But as the car wound through the Scottish countryside, heading to the castle that I was going to surprise the new wife that slept on my shoulder with, I was happy. Truly, happy. No anxiety. No worry.

"We're here," I said softly.

"Hmm?" Melanie said, sitting up and blinking a few times.
"We're where?"

"Home," I said. "For the next week anyway."

"Wait," she said, looking around, out of the windows and at the castle itself. "All I see is a castle."

"Exactly."

She looked back at me and then out of the window and then back again. Her mouth fell open, and her face was screwed up in genuine confusion, and I chuckled to myself.

“We are staying at a *castle*?” she asked.

“Not just any castle,” I said. “How much do you know about your family history?”

“Nothing?” she said questioningly. “I mean, I know my great-grandmother was named Roberts and she married my great-grandfather who brought the Brewer name with him. They started the store. That’s about all I know. They died before I was born.”

“Come with me,” I said, opening the door and holding out my hand.

She took it and looked back as the driver stepped out and shut her door behind her, then went to the trunk to begin unloading the luggage. I took her up a long cobblestone driveway, winding around a well-cared-for topiary and through a trellis covered in vines and roses. White roses.

Her fingers gripped tightly into mine as we got closer to the magnificent castle, the moors behind it in the distance and a light fog settling over the hilly countryside. It was breathtaking, and it took all my willpower to concentrate enough on telling her what was going on.

“You are right about your great-grandmother,” I said. “Roberts was her maiden name. Which, if you trace it, like I did, you will find came from the name Robertson in the eighteenth-hundreds when they immigrated to the US. Before that, they belonged to a clan, one called Donnachaidh. As a matter of fact, your line is shockingly easy to trace, all the way back to King Malcolm the second.” I paused and watched, delighted as the realization settled over her face. “So, my princess, as far as I am concerned, this is *your* castle.”

“Oh my God,” she said, a slow, wide smile settling over her lips.

“I wanted to treat you like the royalty you clearly are. I hope this is good enough,” I said.

“This is amazing,” she said. “Come on, let’s go inside!”

Taking my hand, she ran to the massive door in the center. Another was just off to the side, and as she knocked, the little one opened and a bespectacled man stepped out. He wore a tweed jacket and had thin, gold-rimmed glasses on the edge of his nose. A whisp of graying blond hair fell over a bald spot on the top of his head, though his mustache stayed mostly yellowish white.

“Fáilte, my friends,” he said, holding out a hand for both of us to shake. “That’s Gaelic for ‘welcome.’ My name is Hamish, lovely to meet you both, then. Please, come inside and let us show you your place of residence for these next few days.”

Following him inside, we were shown around the place and noted the places where the staff would be at our beck and call at any point. At any other time, there would often be several other couples or families staying there, but I pulled a few strings and got the place all to ourselves. Hamish seemed to be happy about the turn of events as the workload was clearly smaller, and he seemed to revel in lavishing attention on guests.

Our room was incredible. With wide French doors leading out to a balcony that hung over the cliff, windowless portions of the castle curling in on either side, we were utterly alone. No one could see inside unless they were deep in the loch with a pair of very fine binoculars. Maids visited every afternoon and freshened the room while we were guided to tours of the town nearby and drives to larger cities to explore shopping and nightlife.

But every night, we ended up back in our room, bathing in the clawfoot tub that was as big as a car and curling up to sleep with the windows open, letting in a salty breeze. When our eyes closed, they did so stare out over a black, inky sky, filled with stars.

With only two days left in our time there, we came back from a lovely dinner down in the great hall, settling ourselves in the room. I lay on the bed and flipped through a book while Melanie brushed her hair out and then opened the doors to step

out on the balcony. She had changed immediately upon getting back into the room, disappointing me a bit because the only thing I enjoyed more than looking at her in one of the dresses she wore each night was peeling them off her when we were alone again.

Now, she stood on the balcony, a sheer nightgown on that left little to the imagination. But just enough. I felt a stir in my center and tossed the book aside. She was facing away from me, arms out on the balcony's marble railing and leaning out so her backside faced me, almost like it she was presenting herself to me. A glass of wine was clenched in her fingertips, and I watched as she drew it to her face and took a sip.

I snuck up behind her, not wanting to alert her until I was ready. As soon as I reached her, I slid behind her, my thick, erect cock pressing against the fabric of my loose pajama pants and brushing between her thighs and her bubbly, round cheeks.

"Well, hello," she said, straightening up a bit. Her gown was loose, and I reached around her waist with one hand and over her shoulder with the other, sliding down under the gown to grasp her breast.

"Hello," I said.

"Careful," she said. "Someone might see us."

"Who? The fish?" I asked, my free hand sliding down over her belly toward her core.

She pressed her ass back into me as she let out a breath, and her nipple hardened under my palm. I kissed her beneath the ear, and she began to swish her hips side to side. I groaned, and it elicited a giggle from her.

I slid my hand between her thighs and pressed the fingers down over her center, feeling the heat through the silk and reveling at how she felt pushed against my cock. Her hands slid behind her and to my waistband, pulling it down and exposing my throbbing dick, hard and ready for her.

Releasing her from my grip, one hand pushed her down on her upper back, bending her at the waist while the other hand

reached below to pull her nightgown up over her waist and then her panties aside. I didn't want to wait to pull them off her. I needed her right then, right there.

She was soaking wet and hot, and as my head pressed against her opening, she gasped. I plunged inside, filling her, and she moaned out over the night, a slight echo returning to us as I settled deep inside her pussy. Rocking back, I plunged deep inside her again, and her hand clenched over mine on her waist, the thumb under her panties, holding them aside.

My other hand slid under her, cupping her other breast and pulling her up so she pressed her back into my chest, and I rocked upward into her. She rose on her toes with each thrust, and eventually, the glass fell from her hand and dropped, shattering on the rocks below.

Her breath rose and fell faster with each stroke into her, and soon she was crying out into the stars as she came, shaking and bucking as her body rolled through a powerful orgasm. When she slowly settled, she pulled me out of her and pushed me against the wall, dropping to her knees and pulling my pants fully off of me.

I moaned loudly as she took me deep into her lips and made a succulent, sexy sound as the head of my cock brushed against the back of her throat. She sucked me, stroking me at the base as she looked up into my eyes. I could feel the intensity building inside me, stronger than it ever had been before. The combination of the bond between us as a married couple now and the sexiness of being outside, overlooking the dark, murky waters of the moor were making me struggle for control.

I pulled her off me and stood her up, guiding her back into the room. The doors were still flung wide open as I laid her down on the mattress and crawled between her thighs. Slowly, I pulled her panties off her and then my shirt. The silky, see-through gown stayed on, and I leaned down to suckle her nipple through it. She gasped and moaned, and I slid back inside her as she arched her back, pressing her chest into my lips.

My motion was slow and deliberate, gaining a measure of speed only when I felt a second, heavy climax was building in her too. Her fingernails clenched into my biceps as I mounted her, dominating and claiming her. Her feet wrapped around my legs, and I could feel her toes digging in as she came closer and closer to release.

Kissing her lips then her neck, I settled over her and began to pump furiously with my hips. Her hands fell on my back, and she scratched down it with her nails, adding another element to the sensation. It only heightened the pleasure, adding a touch of pain. I responded by going faster, harder. My hips slammed into her as I fucked her, desperate for release and in dire need of feeling her coming too.

Suddenly, she threw her head back and cried out with whimpering sounds. Her eyes opened and focused on me, but she was incapable of words. She stared into me with a desire, a primal hunger for my release. I stopped trying to keep the feelings at bay, reveling in the pleasure. Her jaw fell open as I slammed hard into her over and over. Then a deep, untamed roar built in my chest and rolled from my lips, filling the room and the sky and the moor below with itself.

I exploded, shaking and growling as I came. She came with me, her legs shaking violently as her whole body fell into a wild dance of ecstasy. Spent, I settled down beside her, and she curled into my arms. I pulled the covers up and over our shoulders, ducking beneath our chins as she smiled in her already dozing sleep.

Another perfect night. Another perfect sleep.

EPILOGUE

MELANIE

The last of the customers was almost out the door, and the party had more or less started in the backroom already. Christmas lights were strung up from one end of the store to the other, crisscrossing and flashing red and green and white faintly in the florescent light of the store, but not for long. Soon enough, those would be turned off, and all that would be lighting the store would be those Christmas lights, just as they had every night I had closed up all December.

It was Christmas Eve, and the store was closing at six, giving last-minute shoppers a chance to grab food or gifts before the entire town of Murdock was closed up until the twenty-sixth. As soon as the last customer was gone, I was going to open the door to the backroom, and all our friends were going to flood the floor, bringing with them the party supplies and the merriment of the season.

We could have gone to any one of their houses, or even the house that was now mine and Victor's, the childhood home he had grown up in, which had recently become available. But the second I had the idea to do it in the store, Victor was all about it and pitched it to the boys and their wives. Carmela was by my side decorating as much as she could, and by the time Christmas Eve had rolled around, all that remained was to run the store and then party.

Cots were set up in the back and in the office suite, just in case someone had too much to drink. Mallory and Allison had gone insane helping me prepare, spending much of the day in the bakery section of the store, working with a cook from Mero's

to build a menu and little finger food to pair with the alcohol. Carmela had been a wonderful taste tester, and I had done my fair share of grading the sweet treats as they came out of the oven.

When the door opened, it was like a stampede of joyful revelers, and I giggled as Victor picked me up and spun me as the music turned up loud and jaunty Christmas tunes filled the store. Amy and Norma joined us for the party, and I poured them each a drink as I headed back to the front of the store to join Victor and prepare for the gift exchange.

It had been a game of Secret Santa, and I had drawn Camden. I had hoped for Victor or Carmela, but the colossal pro-wrestling belt-themed belt buckle was a huge hit, and he strutted around the store wearing it, making the boys laugh and building anticipation for the next gift exchange.

Victor ended up getting a vintage record from one of his favorite bands growing up and was delighted to find out it had come from Graham, who had somehow gotten the band to personally autograph it for him. He had no idea that the record and the autographs were my idea after Graham casually mentioned that he'd played a celebrity golf tournament with the lead singer last spring.

When it was my time to open a gift, I felt butterflies in my stomach and a surprising amount of anxiety. What if I didn't like whatever it was? Or worse, what if I made the person who got it for me upset by not reacting the correct way? My cheeks flushed and my palms began to sweat as I peeled the wrapping paper.

When I got it off, I realized there was no need for all that. Not only was I not upset about the gift, but I was also delighted by it.

It was a large picture showing my family tree, going back as far as the researcher had Victor hired could go and following all the way down to Victor and me, with pictures and paintings in place beside the names. It was so thoughtful and required so much work that I knew who had done it. A sly grin was returned as I stared at my husband. He shrugged innocently.

“I didn’t rig it, I swear. Your name just came up!” he said, feigning innocence.

“Uh huh,” I said. “I don’t know how you did it, but I’m glad. This is wonderful.”

“Hey, hang on a second,” Carmela said, looking at the picture a little more closely than I expected any of them to.

“What?” I asked.

“Right here,” she said, pointing to a little empty spot below Victor’s and my names. “There’s a blank spot.”

“Sure,” I said. “In case we have a child and want to put them in it.”

“It’s not blank,” she said, looking up at me curiously. “It looks blank because it’s framed, but it’s not. It just has something over it.”

“What are you talking about?” Mallory said, stepping over. Then when she looked down into the spot between and below Victor’s and mine.

“Oh, I see it,” Allison said. “It’s not White-Out. It’s a piece of cardboard matte pushed over the spot. It looks like there’s writing on the spot like the other ones. Right there, see? Ink.”

“What? No,” I said, shaking my head. But there was no use. They didn’t believe my denial and had the overt looks of women who had begun to figure out the jig.

“Babe,” Victor said, putting a hand over mine and squeezing gently. “It’s probably time we told them.”

I nodded, grinning madly. I had been waiting for this for a long time.

“Tell us what?” Graham said, a bacon-covered cracker in his hand before he tossed it into his mouth and began chewing.

I glanced over at Victor, who smiled wide. He nodded at me gently, and I cleared my throat.

“Well,” I said, “I wanted to wait until we had the party going full swing and either we had done gifts or were about to leave. I wanted this to be one of the last things we talked about.”

“Spit it out,” Allison said, joined in laughter by Mallory and Carmela.

“Yeah, out with it,” Mela said.

“Okay,” I said. “We’re pregnant!”

A chorus of cheers rose up among the close friends who either already had their own, safely at home with grandparents or babysitters until their parents could get home or were happily childless. Amy and Norma hugged me first, followed closely by Carmela, who squeezed me tightly.

“I can’t believe it,” she said, her eyes wide with excitement. “Actually, you know what, I can believe it.”

“What do you mean?” I laughed. “Are you saying I look pregnant already?”

“No,” she laughed. “It’s the grape juice for one thing.”

“Are you kidding?” I asked. “I thought I was so careful not to let anyone know!”

“Well, maybe that would have worked had I not been the one to fill the initial orders,” she said. “I got everyone’s drinks together to start the night and noticed you had grape juice. I thought you’d go for the shiraz, but when I saw grape juice, I knew something was up.”

“Good ol’ Carmela,” Victor said, taking her in a light headlock. “Ever the detective.”

“Congrats,” she said, shaking off the hold and then wrapping Victor up in a tight, short hug. “Seriously, that’s amazing. I can’t wait to play with a little one.”

“Me either,” Victor said. “Kids have the coolest toys these days. I’ve been meaning to find a way to buy them anyway.”

Laughing, we went back to our party and enjoyed the music as it turned back up and dancing the night away.

We all stayed until around nine, when Graham and Mallory said they needed to get out of there. I hugged them and told them Merry Christmas again and sat in the chair by the refreshments. As I watched friends say goodbye to each other,

I was again struck by how beautiful my life had turned out. I had friends who I loved dearly who would do anything for each other and me at the drop of a hat. I had loyal customers who made sure to keep me not only in business, but with their references, they had helped me start to grow again.

Last, but not least was the most incredible husband a woman could have. He was strong and kind and funny and loved me unconditionally. I reveled in his attention in every way and loved the way he looked at me from across the room or across the bed.

The secret of my pregnancy had torn us up as we wanted to tell our supportive and terrific friends. But the second I knew the party was going to be in the store, I knew that was where I wanted to tell them of the impending baby. Every time I saw Mela, it was an exercise in tremendous control that I didn't blurt it out and celebrate with her for a while in secret. Even though I knew it probably wouldn't remain a secret.

My life was very soon going to change in a way I could never have imagined only a year ago. Yet it was the greatest change I could have asked for. A husband who I loved and who loved me, friends that surrounded me with love and affection, and a baby growing inside of me that represented the future of the tiny family we were growing together. The family that would continue the legacy my parents laid down for me with the store and would take into the future, well beyond my life.

The End

Enjoyed the story?

Please check out my previous novel that was released

All stories can be read standalone

[My Hot Neighbor](#)

Keep reading for a short preview of the story.

RYAN

It was almost noon.

Used to be, noon was my least favorite time of the day. Out in the desert, wearing approximately a million pounds of gear, carrying a rifle that I simultaneously hated and depended on to keep me alive, noon was the most despised time of the day. The heat was unbearable, yet somehow, I bore it. Not that I was anything special for that. All of us did it. We bitched about it, but we did it.

Now noon wasn't so bad. Not compared to midnight. That was when the nightmares came.

I shook my head and tried to blot that thought out. No reason to worry myself with the troubles night brought. I would have to deal with those later anyway. Best to enjoy the day I had until then.

Being home in Murdock, Texas wasn't actually all that different than the desert in some ways. It was damn hot, and a dry heat at that. There weren't a whole lot of people in the neighboring towns, though you tended to meet friendly people when you did see them. And the food was good. I never ate more chickpeas in my life than I did in the service, but I was shocked at how good food could be without a big slab of meat. In Texas, though, it was the reverse. Everything was heavy with meat, and it was damn good too. Especially at the border, where the tacos were as authentic as they were delicious.

It took a long time for me to realize the good things that my hometown had. I'd avoided the place like the damn plague for

years. Growing up, all I wanted was to get the hell out of there, join the military, and make something of myself. My mom and my sister, my whole world, encouraged me at every step of the way, and the very second I turned eighteen, I signed up for a tour of duty wherever Uncle Sam felt like sending me.

Turned out, I was good, too. Made special forces and went on dangerous missions when there was something worthwhile to do. Otherwise, I did what everybody else did: sat around and waited. And sweated. All while knowing death was always hanging out just around the corner.

It was a good way to spend my twenties, I thought. Hell, it was a good way to spend my life. I planned on staying in Marines until they made me leave by way of a walker and a watch. But life had other plans. More painful ones.

I rubbed my knee before I stood up. It was a habit now to warm it up before I did anything with it, just to avoid cussing for several minutes straight. The achy pain that tended to resonate from that part of my body would spread out and cause all manner of distress up and down from the skull to the toes if I didn't get it ready first.

After the shrapnel removal, I often became stiff after sitting for too long, but once I was warmed up, there wasn't anything I couldn't do. I was still in impressive shape. *Just keep marching, Beasley.*

Standing up and trying to avoid making old man noises was a new game I'd started playing after the replacements. It was a hard one, but I managed it sometimes. Depended on if cursing was considered old man noises or not. I tried not to do much of that either. Mom might be dead, but her spirit probably haunted the halls of her old house where I lived, and if she heard me say some of those words, I was likely to get mysterious books falling off shelves or doors swinging back to smack me in the head.

She had been a good woman. A great woman, actually. I hadn't wanted to leave her, but I had to get out of Murdock. My sister stayed behind until she got to eighteen too, and then much to my chagrin, she left. Mom had been so supportive of

her, though, much like me. She wanted us to live our own lives. So we did. Now I wished I hadn't stayed away so long. What I wouldn't do to have one more dinner with Mom.

I crossed over to the little table by the front door and fished my keys out of the bowl there. My wallet and phone often ended up there too, but I already had them in my pocket on account of ordering my new meds twenty minutes before. I was easing off the painkillers slowly, but faster than they expected. I'd rather not take them at all, but if I didn't, I'd never sleep. Much less be able to go to work.

My boots sat beside the little table, and I smirked at them. I'd never seen myself as a fireman. Lots of little boys do, at least for a little while. But it had never done anything for me when they came to the school with the shiny red truck and the giant ladder. I wasn't impressed then. I knew in my heart I was born for a helmet and camo. It wasn't until I got discharged and ended up at home that the thought even crossed my mind.

For months, I had sat around, living off my pension mostly while I decided what in the world I was going to do with my life now that the military didn't have much use for me. I was honestly baffled by the idea of doing anything else, but the longer I sat around at home, the more the darkness took hold. I would wake up from a dead sleep in the middle of the day, ready to dive behind the couch and shoot at the door with a gun I didn't have.

I might have left the battlefield, but the memory remained.

Getting active was the trick. I knew that, and it was reinforced by my doctors and physical therapists. The more active I stayed, the less my body was going to fight with me as I got older. I just had to get used to it all, and then I would be more or less fine. So one day while I was down in the town mailing off my taxes, I saw the help wanted sign outside of the fire department, and it was like a beacon. Suddenly, big, red, shiny trucks with giant ladders was something interesting. And the little bit of danger that came with the job was like a shot in the arm.

Training was easy enough, though tedious at times. I was used to a lot more physical demands, and while I was still fighting against body parts that didn't always want to do what I told them to, I was still able to handle the demands of a fire department in desperate need and in a town that barely had enough people, but more than enough hot spots in it.

Doing so got me reconnected with Caden and Graham too. Caden wasn't even aware I was back home, but when I got called out there for one of my first emergency calls, we reconnected. He was running a very successful ranch just at the north edge of town and was a bit of a local celebrity. He was a hometown boy, born and raised in Murdock, and when he bought the ranch, it was for pennies because it was about to go under. With hard work and a knack for the business, he turned it into the pride of the town.

Almost immediately, Caden offered me a job at the ranch, but I turned it down. I liked the fire department for one thing, and for another, I didn't want to seem like I was taking advantage of my friend. But I did take him up on volunteering there. He needed some extra hands to help with the horses, and I found myself going down there rather often just to hang out with them, eventually pitching in and now getting put on the roster of people to call when they were shorthanded.

Like now.

The text message was still up on my phone, having interrupted my phone call. Caden wanted to know if I had a few hours to come help muck the stalls and do some of the general upkeep at the stable. He offered lunch and dinner as payment, but I would have brought my own if he hadn't. Being around the horses was like therapy, though I'd never say that outside of my own thoughts. Physical therapy had been the only kind of therapy I had any truck with. The horses, though... they might make me rethink that position.

I grabbed the ballcap from the coatrack and stuffed it on my head. I had at least four of them, but this one was my favorite. It was from Graham's ballclub, and he had sent it to me when he got drafted by the big leagues. He sent me a couple more while I was in the service, usually autographed by whatever

stars were on his team at the time. I kept them all in a shadowbox, along with some of the other things he sent along.

The drive wasn't so bad, considering I was excited about the destination. The drive home would likely be less fun. I barely even realized I had been going as long as I had when I saw the town limit sign. Technically, Caden's ranch was just outside town limits. Murdock still claimed him, though, and Caden didn't seem to mind. He sponsored the youth athletic teams and donated to the fire department and sheriff's department all the same.

"Staying for dinner?" he asked as he held out his hand for me to shake.

He always met me in the driveway, like he was waiting around all day for me to show up. He outworked everyone, and it started when you showed up. It was like you were already late, no matter how early you got there. Some people took it as an insult, like he was trying to be pushy, but I just saw it for what he always was: someone who was going to push himself and everyone else around him to be better than they otherwise would be.

"Maybe not today," I said. "Looks like rain. Might just head home and spend the evening with a pizza."

Caden laughed and shook his head.

"Whatever floats your boat, bro," he said. "Bentley's in his stall, if you want to take a ride."

"Cool," I said, grabbing a shovel. "If I can get one in before the weather."

"Good luck," Caden said, staring at the sky. "Seems good for a few hours at least. Just let me know when you're heading out."

"Will do," I said.

I did some work around the stall, mostly mucking up and keeping things tidy. There was only so clean a stable could get. Then I hitched up Bentley and found one of the instructors who usually taught little kids how to ride. Letting him know I was out meant someone would come looking if I screwed up, a lesson I'd learned early on.

As the sky began to darken, I guided Bentley back and got him into his stall to eat. Just that short ride had done wonders for my mood, and again, I thought of how therapeutic it was. As I said goodbye to Caden, I wondered if I would ever get around to thinking of it as actual therapy.

ALLISON

I used to love road trips. I used to love this specific road trip. Those days were a long time ago, though, and this time, I hated every single second of it.

When I was little, my father would pack us a cooler full of sandwiches and sodas, and we would make this trip together just him and me. The long trek to visit my grandparents during summers and holidays was never so bad when I was in the car with Dad. We listened to loud, silly music with the windows down and stopped at gas stations to fill up on fuel for the car and ourselves. The hot dogs at the halfway point were something I cherished.

When he passed, those trips stopped. They were my clearest memory of him most of the time, driving along, smiling wide under his mustache, his plastic-rimmed glasses pushed up to his eyebrows. He was jolly and silly and knew all about cars and sports and how to fix things. I missed him so much.

Especially now.

My car was limping along on its last legs, struggling to go each mile. Dad would know what was wrong with it. He could probably fix it with a roll of duct tape and a wrench. But I was no good at that stuff, and instead relied heavily on talking to the car, coaxing it to make it just a little while longer. If it could make it to the house, that would be best. But even if it could only make it into town, I'd take it.

It probably was weighed down, a part of me looking for wild guesses as to what was wrong said. I did have all my worldly

possessions in the back seat and trunk. And beside me. And possibly underneath me. I'd shoved everything in there in such a hurry that I didn't really account for space for myself, of which there was very little. I couldn't see out of the back window, and the trunk wouldn't latch, held closed by bungee cables that let it bounce up and down onto the small dresser that was stuffed back there with my bags of clothes.

I hated this drive now. I hated the shattered life that I was leaving behind, too. I hated just about everything about where I was and what I was doing and how I'd gotten there, in fact. The car limping along like it was just seemed like another kick in the teeth from the universe. One more insult from up above. Or down below. Whichever one it was that controlled mechanics.

There was so much uncertainty about what was about to happen in my life. From how I was going to live day to day, big picture stuff, to if this car was going to make it another five miles kind of smaller picture stuff.

"Come on, you can do it," I moaned hopelessly at the dashboard of the car.

All the lights were on inside the dash. I didn't know much about cars, but I was positive that all of them being on was bad.

The car hiccupped, and a grinding sound roared out, and then a loud pop from under the hood shook the entire car. Tears stung the corners of my eyes as I shook my head, pushing against the steering wheel in desperation to give the car some more momentum. Like if I got it going faster, it would just fix itself.

An angry whooping, coughing sound followed and then silence. I was going down a hill, but I knew that the second gravity had no more pull was where the car was going to stop. I clutched the wheel and watched as I came up to a sign for a berry farm five miles away, and slowly the car stopped just beyond it. At least I had a mile marker.

I sat there, the car stopped and smoke starting to stream out from under the hood, staring into the middle distance for a

moment. I snapped back to reality when the first big, wet drop of rain hit the very center of my windshield.

“No. No, no, no,” I said. “Not rain. Not rain.”

Another plop.

“Son of a bitch.”

I got out of the car, slamming the door behind me and marching over to the hood. Opening it up gave me a wall of smoke at first, and the hot, greasy blast made me take a step back and cough for a second. The rain was coming down in slow, heavy drops, and one went right down the back of my shirt. I wiggled and realized I must look like an idiot.

Not that there was anyone else on the road. I was in Nowhere, Texas. Not literally, but I may as well have been. Murdock bordered absolutely nothing, and from my memory it was thirty minutes to an hour to get anywhere civilized. I didn't even know how far out I was from Murdoch, since my phone had decided the GPS app didn't want to work anymore and I was going off memory. The last ten miles had been panic combined with sadness, and I hadn't paid attention to any of the road signs. I could be anywhere between an hour and ten minutes from Murdock at the moment.

Might as well be a million.

As the smoke cleared, I stared at the engine blankly. I had absolutely no idea what to do with any of it. I wasn't an idiot; I knew how to add oil and jump a battery. But that was the extent of my mechanical prowess.

Shrugging, I turned to walk back to the driver's door and stopped in my tracks. A cold, wet blob of rain had hit me directly in the eye. It felt purposeful.

Gritting my teeth, I stalked up to the door and yanked.

My shoulder felt like it was on fire. A familiar panic went up my back, and the thousand times I had told myself never to do this exact thing started running through my mind. I'd left the keys in the ignition. I'd left the keys in the ignition, and out of habit, locked the door when I got out.

I pressed my face against the window and looked in. As expected, I could see the keychain, a little Homer Simpson face staring back at me from the dangling toy attached to it, hung from the ignition.

“Dammit, dammit, dammit!” I yelled to nothing in particular.

The rain pelted me on the top of the head and shoulders, soaking me almost instantly.

For the first time since I’d rolled away from my former home, I felt the tears start streaming down my face. They came in big, ugly globs and as an insult to the injury, I was sure they were ruining my makeup. I could see the umbrella sitting just below the passenger door. It had a yellow duck print on it. I’d always loved that umbrella, and for the life of me, could not ever remember using it. It just stayed in the car on the off chance. Now I needed it and couldn’t get it.

Because this was my life.

Everything, absolutely everything, had gone wrong. I didn’t want to think about what had led me to this moment, forcing those thoughts back. I wasn’t ready to get into that yet. That would require a warm bed and soft pajamas and, preferably, a considerable amount of alcohol. Not standing on the side of a Texas highway in the middle of nowhere as rain poured down on top of me and my broke-ass car.

A few moments later, I felt myself gaining some measure of control. My head leaned against the glass, staring at my keys, but no longer could tell if it was tears or rain streaming down my cheeks.

A tug in my heart made me almost break down again when I heard the rumble of an engine coming from behind. I peeled my face off the window and looked back. The rain was harder now, coming down like little bullets and stinging my face, falling in sheets that made patterns in the road. But I could see through them to the truck that was now parked behind me.

Bright white lights illuminated the back of my car, and I noticed the trunk had done some good damage to the back of the dresser. Just another thing, I guessed. The lights didn’t turn

off as the door opened, and I waited to see who it was that had stopped. Knowing my luck, it would be some creepy dude, looking for an easy victim to pull into the cornfields.

Maybe I should lay off the murder documentaries for a while.

A boot came down below the door, and I waited for the rest of the body to follow. It took a second, like the person was struggling a little, then another boot joined it. When the door shut, in spite of everything, I felt my breath hitch a little.

A tall, gorgeous man shut the door and turned to look at me, smiling under his baseball cap. He was wearing a T-shirt and jeans with his boots, pretty much the Texas Tuxedo as it were, but he made them look good. Tall, broad-shouldered, and muscular, with a wide smile, he looked too good for the situation I was in. I briefly wondered if I had just passed out, or maybe even the car crashed, and I was having one of those coma dreams.

“Having trouble?” he asked, the drawl in his voice faint, but there.

All I could do was nod.

* * *

****End of Preview****

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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Thank for you taking the time to read my latest release.

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It would mean the world to me if you could take some time to leave a quick review for this book. Reviews allow me to understand how my readers truly feel, and they keep me improving to be better.

I appreciate you supporting me, thank you so much.

- Natasha L. Black

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Natasha L. Black is an Amazon Top 100 bestselling author. Dreaming and fantasizing ever since she was a young teenager, her love of writing flourished from a very early age. After working for 15 years as a veterinarian, she now follows her passion in writing for a living. She currently resides in a lovely country home in a rural area of Dallas, writing steamy novels to fulfill her readers' desires.

* * *

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