

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ALEXA ASTON

A Sugar Springs Small Town Romance



RECIPE FOR

Love

RECIPE FOR LOVE

SUGAR SPRINGS
BOOK 5

ALEXA ASTON



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PROLOGUE

DALLAS

“**W**here’s the fiery girl I’ve known my entire life?” Dante demanded. “The one who always stuck up for herself, as well as the underdog? Face it, Vivi. You’ve become a doormat.”

Viviana Romano opened her mouth to protest and then pressed her lips together. Her brother was right. Though sometimes he could irritate her to no end, as only an older sibling could, they had always been honest with each other and supported one another through thick and thin. Dante was just calling it like he saw it. She had let Beck walk all over her.

Because she loved him.

And it was time to change things.

Dante took a sip of his wine and set down the glass. “This is your wake-up call, little sis,” he continued. “I’ve sat back and kept my mouth shut because I knew you were crazy about the guy—even though I think he’s been using you from the beginning.”

The realization ran through her that Dante had hit the nail on the head. Vivi *had* felt used for a long time now, but she had made excuses for Beck, over and over, while he blamed his childhood. His parents. His circumstances. The market. She had always nodded sympathetically and taken care of him—and everything. She’d paid the bills. Done for him things he should have done for himself.

No more. She was turning over a new leaf. Getting back to who she truly was. Beck could either climb aboard the Viviana train.

Or he could go to hell.

“You’re right, Dante. Things need to change if I’m going to stay with

Beck.”

He reached for her hand and squeezed it. “That’s the first sensible thing you’ve said in two years, Vivi. Hallelujah. Don’t let Beck talk you out of anything. Don’t make any compromises—because if you do, he’ll continue to eat you alive. He’s one of those energy vampires. He just drains and drains and drains you until nothing is left.”

“I couldn’t have said it better myself.” She placed her hand atop his. “Thanks for the glass of wine and the pep talk, big brother. I’m going to go home now and confront him. It’s time I stick up for myself.”

Dante walked Vivi to her car, and she drove to the small bungalow where she and Beck lived. The house was in his name since his parents had given him the down payment for it a few months before she and Beck had met, but she was the one who paid the mortgage each month. It was a struggle for her, but she paid all the bills because her lover put everything he had into the small restaurant he had opened fourteen months ago.

The public didn’t realize how many restaurants floundered versus those which flourished. One in three restaurants didn’t even survive their first year. And two out of three didn’t make it past three years. Even though Beck was a talented cook, Il Giardino was on the edge of going under every single month.

That’s why Vivi paid the bills. She worked two jobs to do so, hers at the steakhouse, and then she spent the rest of her waking hours at Il Giardino, doing whatever needed doing. Prepping. Cooking. Busing tables. Keeping the books. Cleaning the restrooms. She wished she could quit her job and work at Il Giardino full-time—shopping for food, planning the menus, cooking full-time. Beck would never allow that, though. Once, he had admitted to her that he was jealous of her cooking skills and acknowledged that she was a much better chef than he was. He also needed her bringing in money.

She parked and entered their house, finding the TV and lights still on. No matter how many times she had asked Beck to turn off things to save money on their electric bill, he blithely ignored her. Aaron Beckham came from an extremely wealthy Highland Park family in Dallas and had never had to consider such things, while Vivi had grown up in a frugal household. She had never lacked for anything, but there had never been extravagances.

She went around the house, turning off lights and the TV, until she reached their bedroom. Beck’s soft snores filled the room, irritating her. Vivi realized that everything about him seemed to bother her these days.

When they had met, she was instantly smitten with him. Beck was handsome, moody, and endlessly fascinating, interested in everyone and everything around him. The problem was that he had never really bothered to learn that much about her. They had moved in together after only a month of seeing one other, and Vivi now realized it was probably so that she could start paying his expenses. At that time, Beck teetered on the edge of a shaky relationship with his wealthy parents. They had insisted he go to college and major in business, which he had done on their dime, but once he graduated, he bounced from job to job. Banking. Real estate. Finance.

On the side, Beck had always been indulging his artistic bents. Writing music. Painting. And cooking. Especially, cooking.

From the beginning, Beck's parents had disliked her, an Italian girl from a small East Texas town, one who had never attended college. His mother had taken Vivi aside the first night she had met them and simply told her that she wasn't good enough to marry a Beckham. Flabbergasted, Vivi had listened as Mrs. Beckham elaborated, saying Vivi lacked the breeding, social graces, education, and connections necessary to move in their world. The final blow occurred when Mrs. Beckham stated that Vivi would never be welcomed into their family, despite Beck's feelings for her.

Vivi had kept that conversation to herself until Beck pressed her. When she revealed what his mother had said, he confronted his parents. That had caused irreparable harm to their relationship. They had been giving their son a monthly allowance, and that immediately ceased. It was right at the time Beck had decided to open his own restaurant, and Vivi took over all the financials at that point. The Beckhams couldn't take back the money they had already given their son, most of which he'd planned to use to start *Il Giardino*, so she placed Beck on a tight budget in order for them to be able to lease a reasonable property for the restaurant. She had found the furniture and decorated the entire establishment. Purchased all the kitchen equipment. Helped in hiring the staff.

She had even had a large role in helping Beck create the menu, using many of the recipes she had gotten from her grandmother and other relatives when she had gone to live in Tuscany after graduating from high school. That had been Vivi's college education. Living abroad for three years. Learning to speak Italian fluently. Traveling throughout various regions in Italy, both alone and with some of her cousins. Most of all, learning to cook the food of her Tuscan ancestors.

She had returned to the States and decided to work in Dallas, which was about ninety minutes away from her hometown of Sugar Springs. By that point, Dante had finished culinary school and was also cooking in Dallas. She would be close to her brother and not too far away from her parents, as well as Paige Laramie, her best friend since kindergarten, who taught high school in Sugar Springs and had just started writing screenplays in her spare time.

Regret filled her. She rarely went back to Sugar Springs after she began living with Beck. She spoke on the phone with her mom and Paige but working at the steakhouse and at Il Giardino left her tired and drained, with no time to visit her hometown.

Things would have to change. Starting tonight.

She didn't have to turn on the bedroom light because Beck had left it on, as well. She caught the scent of weed and knew that's what he had used to help him fall asleep. He told her the drug calmed him, and she had kept her mouth closed, not wanting to rock the boat. She didn't believe in taking drugs of any kind. It pained her to even take an aspirin.

Vivi went to Beck's side of the bed and gently shook him.

He opened his eyes, blinking several times, frowning. "What time is it?" he mumbled.

"Time to talk, Beck," she said bluntly. "Sit up."

He pushed himself to a seated position and immediately reached for his phone. Glancing at it, he said, "What the hell, Vivi? It's almost two in the morning. I need my sleep. You know that."

"And I need some things from you, Beck," she said sternly.

He rolled his eyes. "Here we go. A relationship talk. What's it gonna be now? What do you want? Oh, I can guess. You're tired of us living together. You want a ring on your finger. Your maternal clock is ticking, and you just heard it. Whine, whine."

Her lover glared at her. "I'm gonna shut that down right now. I'm not the marrying kind, Vivi. You know that. I think all kids are brats."

He stared at her defiantly, daring her to contradict him.

She had thought that she would demand he make some changes to mollify her, but Vivi now saw that no changes would be required. The only change would be that she was walking out the door.

For good.

"I've never put any kind of pressure on you to marry me, Beck. You know that. I don't ask for anything for myself. I never have. But think about

it. When is the last time we made love? Or you even bothered to kiss me or tell me you loved me?”

She crossed her arms. “I don’t think you ever loved me. I think I was merely convenient to you. Some sap who would hang on your every word and pay your way while you indulged yourself. That’s over now.”

Vivi saw awareness light his eyes. “What are you saying?” he asked, panic in his tone, as he realized the free ride was about to end.

“I’m saying that I’m tired of working my fingers to the bone and not ever receiving any acknowledgement for doing so. I’m tired of you thinking only of yourself and not us, as a team. I always have called us partners when people asked about our relationship status, but partners signified equality between a pair. You’re the only one who gets anything out of this relationship. I’ve catered to your every whim. I’ve given into you on every argument. I’ve paid every bill, including parts of the salaries for your staff. You’ve never thanked me *once* for any of that. You’ve taken and taken and taken from me, Beck. Sucked me dry—financially, physically, and emotionally. I don’t have anything else left to give you.

“Find yourself another doormat to walk all over—because we are done.”

She turned to leave the room, even as he scrambled out of bed and grabbed her, spinning her so that she faced him.

Desperation filled his face. “You can’t mean any of that, Vivi. You love me.”

She shook her head. “See? Even in saying that, I realize how one-sided this relationship is. If you truly loved me, Beck, you would have said we love each other. *We* need to find a way to make it work.”

Vivi shook her head. “You said I love you. Frankly, I don’t anymore. Any love I did have for you dried up a long time ago. I was just too stubborn to admit that. All I’ve been is an ATM to you. Guess what? Withdrawal time is over. This bank has shut its doors because it’s been bled dry.” She jerked away. “I’ll sleep on the couch tonight. I’ll pack and be gone sometime tomorrow.”

Brave words, because she had nowhere to go. Literally, less than ten dollars in her bank account. Her savings, which had always been meager, were used up long ago, the funds sunk into Beck’s restaurant.

“You don’t mean any of this,” he said defiantly. “You’re nothing without me, Vivi.”

His gall never ceased to amaze her.

“And here I thought the same about you. Who’s managed everything about your business? Who provided the bulk of the recipes you cook? Who waits on you hand and foot, doing everything for you, from your laundry to your taxes? That would be me. This train ride is over, Beck. I’m getting off while I still can. If you need money, you’ll have to suck it up and go back to Mommy and Daddy. Il Giardino is going to go under soon, especially if I’m not there to help pick up the pieces.”

Vivi ignored his loud cursing. Hurrying to the bungalow’s only bathroom, she locked the door.

Beck beat on the door, screaming and shouting at her, but she ignored him, not answering back. She slumped to the ground, burying her face in her hands, wondering how it all went so wrong and why she had enabled Beck to treat her like trash.

Finally, his shouts ceased. She only hoped he hadn’t awakened any of their neighbors, especially Mrs. Feathers, who lived next door. She could imagine the nosy woman calling the police.

Vivi brushed her teeth and washed her face. Venturing from the bathroom, she found the house quiet and dark. She went to the tiny living room and caught sight of the flashing lights as they pulled up outside.

Prying Mrs. Feathers had definitely heard Beck’s loud cursing and called the police. Vivi switched on a light and then went to the door, unlocked it, and opened it just as two police officers approached.

“We had a call of a domestic disturbance here,” the officer on her left said.

“Yes, Officer. I’m sorry if my boyfriend and I disturbed our neighbors.” She paused and added, “My ex-boyfriend. That’s what the fight was about. I’m leaving in the morning.”

The second officer, concern on his face, asked, “Are you all right, miss?”

“I’m fine,” she assured him. “Beck has never laid a hand on me. He just has a temper and likes to shout.”

“We need to come in and speak to him, miss,” the second officer informed her. “We need to make certain everything is all right. That you aren’t under duress.”

They must think she was a battered woman, lying to protect her lover. Knowing that she had sunken that far made Vivi all the more resolved to leave this roof as soon as she could.

“I understand,” she told them. “Please come in.”

She stepped back so they could enter the bungalow. “I’m Vivian Romano, by the way. My ex is Aaron Beckham. This is his house, but I pay all the bills.”

They introduced themselves, and she said, “Beck is in the bedroom. I’m sure he’s already asleep again after I told him we were done. I locked myself in the bathroom and stayed until just before you arrived. Things were quiet, so I came out. You’re welcome to go back and talk with him.”

The first officer said, “I’ll do that.” He turned to his partner. “You stay with Miss Romano.”

Vivi went and sat in the rocking chair which her parents had given her for her sixteenth birthday. Rocking had always comforted her. It was the only piece of furniture in the house which was hers.

“Have a seat, Officer,” she said.

“I’ll stand. Thank you.”

Moments later, his partner appeared, a grim look on his face. “I just radioed for an ambulance,” the cop said.

Vivi shot to her feet. “What’s wrong with Beck?”

“Your boyfriend didn’t take to the breakup so kindly. I found him with a needle stuck in his arm. He’s OD’d.”

“Beck is... dead?” she whispered, a numbness filling her. “He’s always smoked weed. Even though I disapproved, but hard drugs? I never saw... He didn’t seem...” her voice trailed off. Nothing was making sense to her.

She started to head for the bedroom, and the cop stopped her.

“You can’t go back there, Miss Romano. You have to stay right here.”

The next two hours went by with Vivi in a daze. The ambulance came, and the paramedics pronounced Beck officially dead. His body was removed and taken to the city morgue to be autopsied. Vivi was interviewed about their relationship. Their argument. Why Beck might have overdosed.

A detective showed up on the scene and pressed her about their finances. She admitted they were on the verge of bankruptcy and gave them permission to search the premises without a warrant.

The house search turned up more drugs—heroin and cocaine—hidden in a shoebox Beck kept under the bed. Vivi had never seen it before, and she figured her stunned reaction convinced the cops that she was telling the truth.

People started leaving the house, and the detective asked her if she had anyone she could stay with for what was left of tonight.

“My brother. And I need to call Beck’s parents. Let them know what’s

happened.” She shuddered. “They are going to blame me for this.”

“Why?” he asked, sympathy in his eyes.

“Because I’m an uncultured Italian girl from a small town. They thought I was some leech attaching herself to their golden boy.” Angrily, she wiped away the tears which continued to fall. “When I’m the one who’s had to pay for everything after they cut him off.”

Saying that, she wondered where Beck had gotten the money for the drugs which had been found, worried he might have been stealing from the restaurant without her knowledge. That—and the thought of having to talk to Beck’s parents and tell them their son had died of a drug overdose—made her physically ill.

“We can make the notification for you, Miss Romano,” the detective told her. “Since things are strained between you, it might be better that way.”

She nodded in agreement. “I would appreciate that more than I can say. Yes, I would prefer that you contact the Beckhams. Beck was estranged from his parents because of our relationship. They move in pretty high social circles in Dallas.”

“I understand. Do you have their contact information for me?”

“I don’t, but I can get it for you. It would be in Beck’s phone.”

Vivi went and retrieved her ex’s phone, typing in his passcode and scrolling through his contact list. In typical Beck fashion, he had listed them separately as Big Bucks Daddy and Bossy Mama Beckham.

She handed the phone to the detective, and he made a note of both numbers, returning the cell to her. She placed it on the coffee table in front of her, wanting nothing to do with anything related to her former lover.

“Thank you for all your help tonight, Miss Romano.” He hesitated, as if he wanted to say more to her, but was holding back.

Vivi asked, “Is there anything else, Detective?”

“Only that I know the Beckham name. Everyone in Dallas does. But I want you to understand that no matter what kind of guilt trip they try to place on you, don’t fall for it. Your boyfriend made the decision to take the drugs. Maybe—or maybe not—he meant to OD. We’ll never know.”

Tears filled her eyes. “How can I not blame myself?” she asked. “If I hadn’t broken up with him—told him I was leaving him—then he wouldn’t have done this.”

“He was a grown man who made his own decisions. You need to make yours. My advice? Don’t look back. Keep moving forward. Talk to your

friends or family or even a therapist if you find yourself in a dark place. Don't be shy about asking for help. You're going to face some tough days ahead in the future, but you're a strong, good woman. You'll get over this. You'll move on to new, better times in your life."

"Thank you," she said quietly. "I needed to hear that."

She saw him out the door and then, knowing she couldn't stay here, sleeping in the same bed Beck had killed himself, she called Dante.

He answered on the fourth ring. "Vivi?" he asked sleepily.

"Can I come over and sleep on your sofa?"

"You broke up with him? Whoa. It's almost five in the morning."

"Can I come, Dante? I need to get out of here."

"I'm here, little sis. Come on over."

Vivi packed a few things in an overnight bag, just for a few days, not knowing when she would return to move the rest of her stuff. She would need to lease an apartment as quickly as possible, but she didn't have enough in the bank to even put down a deposit. Her credit cards were maxed out, as well. She believed her brother would loan her the money, though.

Leaving the house, she turned off all the lights and locked the door, driving the short distance to Dante's apartment.

He greeted her at the door. "Chamomile tea," he said, giving her a hug and the mug.

Over the next half-hour, Vivi told him about her discussion with Beck and how she had told him she was moving out today.

"It got pretty heated on his part, Dante. Beck was screaming at me, enough to wake up busybody Mrs. Feathers next door. She's the one who called the police."

She bit her bottom lip. "The cops who showed up wanted to make sure I was okay, even though I told them I was. They asked to speak to Beck. When one of them went back to the bedroom, he found Beck had OD'd." She swallowed. Her voice choking, she said, "He's dead."

Dante's jaw dropped. For the first time in a long time, her brother was speechless.

He didn't use words. Instead, he comforted her by enveloping Vivi in his arms, holding her tenderly and stroking her hair as she finally broke down and sobbed.

Her life would never be the same. Guilt flooded her, despite what the detective had advised. She tried to shove it aside, knowing he was right. Beck

had made the choice. She hadn't even known he was doing hard drugs. If she had, she would have either seen that he got help or left him sooner.

"I just want to curl up and sleep for a few hours," she said. "Then I'll need to go to Il Giardino. I don't know who will cook today because I'm on duty at the steakhouse."

"I can do it," Dante said. "Today's my day off. As it is, most of what Beck cooks are things you taught me from our relatives. I can do this for you, Vivi."

"Thank you, Dante. I'm so glad I have you to lean on."

"You can stay here as long as you want. It'll be cramped, but you're welcome to be my bunk mate until you can find something for yourself."

"I might need a slight loan from you for a deposit on an apartment," she admitted.

His eyes narrowed. "You don't have enough for a deposit? How bad are things, Vivi?"

"Bad. Really bad," she admitted. "If I had two nickels to rub together, I'd feel rich."

Her brother let out a string of expletives, cursing Beck to the high heavens. She actually agreed with him, though she refrained from joining in out of respect for the dead.

"I don't know if I should quit my job and try to make a go of Il Giardino. I've got mixed feelings about it. I don't want to let down the staff. If we close, they're out of a job."

"Don't make any decisions now. You're drained. You need to get some rest. We can talk about it later."

"I'll set my alarm for nine. That'll be enough sleep. I'll take a quick shower and then head to the restaurant if you want to come with me. You've only been in the kitchen once, right after it opened. I want to make sure you're familiar with everything."

"I'll be here when you wake up," Dante told her.

Vivi went to his bedroom and set her cell phone's alarm. She thought she would have trouble falling asleep, but the next thing she knew, the alarm was going off. She jumped into the shower and dressed in some of the fresh clothes she'd brought, not bothering with makeup.

Dante was waiting in the tiny kitchen. He gave her a cup of coffee and made an omelet for her.

"This hits the spot. Thank you," she said, devouring the omelet.

They went to Il Giardino's, where she informed the staff already on the premises that Beck had passed away unexpectedly. She knew Dante's protective stance prevented anyone from pressing her for details.

"This is my brother. Dante is going to cook at lunch and dinner today since I'm due at the steakhouse."

"And then what, Vivi?" the sous chef asked, worry plain on his face. "We're barely keeping the doors open now."

"I'm going to figure it out," she promised. "Just give me today to think. I'll come in tonight when I get off work and address the entire staff after dinner service tonight."

She didn't want to think about the funeral for Beck. It wasn't her place to plan it. She wondered if she and the restaurant staff would even be allowed to attend it. She doubted the Beckhams would notify her or anyone at Il Giardino about whatever plans they would make for their son.

Vivi decided she needed a clean break from the place she and Beck had shared. She drove to the bungalow to pack up her things.

When she arrived, she was speechless. Clothes littered the front lawn.

Her clothes.

She jumped out of her car and ran toward the front door, only to find Gloria Beckham stepping out, her arms full of Vivi's clothes.

"What the hell are you doing, Mrs. Beckham?" she demanded.

The older woman thrust the clothes at Vivi, and she managed to catch most of them.

With her long index fingernail painted a bright red, the woman poked Vivi in the chest. "You tramp!" she shrieked. "You killed my Aaron."

Vivi was determined to stand her ground against this woman. "I did not buy the drugs he took," she said flatly. "I didn't even know he was taking them. I certainly didn't inject them into his vein. That was Beck's choice. His alone."

"Aaron would never have done drugs before meeting... *you*," she sniffed. "I know you murdered him. You couldn't get him to marry you, and so you decided to get rid of him."

Anger sizzled through her, and she tossed aside the imaginary kid gloves. "For your information, I told your son last night that I was leaving him. I wanted nothing more to do with Beck because he treated me so poorly. Now, move aside, so I can get the rest of my things. The ones you haven't already scattered across the lawn."

Thadford Beckham appeared at the door with another man. “That’s not happening,” Beck’s father said, nodding at the other man.

He had that slick, lawyerly look about him and cleared his throat. “You have no legal right to enter the premises, Miss Romano,” he said brusquely.

“Who do you think paid the mortgage each month on this place? Not Beck. I’ve been paying all his bills ever since I moved in with him two years ago.”

“In the eyes of the law, you have no standing,” the attorney curtly informed her. “The name on the deed of this house is that of my clients’—the Beckhams.”

She was startled by that information. “Beck always told me that his parents had given him the down payment, but that this house was in his name.”

“He lied to you,” Mrs. Beckham said, her tone vicious. “He knew he couldn’t trust you.”

Vivi knew Beck’s parents wouldn’t listen to a word she said. They wouldn’t care that she was the one who had kept the restaurant afloat. They only saw her as a gold-digger from the wrong side of the tracks.

“I’m sorry Beck is dead,” she said quietly. “I did love him at one time.” She paused. “I won’t ask to come to his service.”

“I wouldn’t have the likes of you there,” his mother said, venom dripping from her voice.

Holding her tongue from an ugly comeback she might regret, Vivi said, “All I’m asking is to come inside and collect my things. My clothes. Some cookware and knives which my relatives from Tuscany gave me. And the rocking chair from my parents. Everything else is Beck’s.”

“You should be glad my wife didn’t take scissors and cut your clothes to pieces,” Mr. Beckham said. “You ruined our son. No, you may *not* come in. We want you off the premises now, or I will have my attorney file a restraining order. You are not to come here or to Il Giardino.”

Anger poured through her, but losing her temper would accomplish nothing.

“I have photographic proof that the cookware and knives are mine. The rocker, as well,” she said stiffly. She allowed her gaze to bore into the attorney’s, knowing he was the one who could reason with the couple.

Sure enough, he cupped a hand and whispered into Mr. Beckham’s ear. Turning to Vivi, Mr. Beckham said, “You have ten minutes.”

Mrs. Beckham started protesting, using language unfit for anyone, but her husband pulled her away. Vivi raced inside and gathered up what belonged to her in the kitchen, hurrying it out to her car in a few trips. Next, she lifted the rocker and brought it outside, knowing the clock was ticking and she would rather have the rocker than any clothes remaining in the dresser or closet.

She did have time to go inside one more time, opening a suitcase and throwing as much as she could inside it before the attorney appeared in the doorframe of the bedroom.

He gave her an apologetic look. "I'm afraid that's all the time I can give you, Miss Romano."

She shook her head. "Your clients are horrible people. No wonder Beck couldn't stand them."

Snapping the locks on the suitcase, she left the house, her head held high.

At her car, she placed the suitcase into the trunk. The rocking chair would never fit, so she called Dante.

"You won't be cooking at Il Giardino," she told him. "But you can come by the bungalow and get my rocking chair. I'll explain when you get here."

Hanging up, she walked around the front lawn, Mrs. Feathers watching from her porch as Vivi retrieved all the clothing Mrs. Beckham had tossed onto it. As she did so, any guilt Vivi had about Beck's death was replaced by a white-hot anger. She hated Beck. She hated his parents. She was in debt up to her ears. She had loved a man with all her heart and been burned. She would be in debt for who knew how long, thinking of the loans she had co-signed with Beck, ones which gave him access to everything and her nothing.

Vivi would never trust a man again. And she would never, ever fall in love. Love was for idiots and fools.

From this day forth, she would be neither.

1

SUGAR SPRINGS—JULY—FOUR YEARS LATER

Vivi took a seat at the kitchen table, and Lorenzo handed her a cup of coffee.

“It is just as you like it, Vivi,” her friend said in his lightly-accented English, flashing her the trademark, charming smile which melted women’s hearts.

“Thank you,” she said, accepting the mug and placing it before her.

She looked about the kitchen, still pinching herself that she had made such a life change in the last two weeks. She had finally agreed to buy out her parents after months of them pressuring her, telling Vivi she was the only one who could continue the Romano legacy in Sugar Springs. She had never let them know how foolish she’d been in co-signing loans with Aaron Beckham. Beck’s parents hadn’t paid a cent on any of those loans, and Vivi had been the one who had toiled for the past several years in order to pay them off and clear her name.

What had hurt most had been how the Beckhams had swooped in and taken ownership of both Il Giardino and the bungalow, even though Vivi had poured in money, sweat, and tears into both. The Beckhams had sold the restaurant immediately, and she had not been given any of those proceeds. The entire staff had been let go without notice—and without their final paychecks—while Vivi hadn’t received anything from the sale of the restaurant. She understood under the letter of the law, she was due nothing, but the spirit of the law certainly wasn’t followed, in her opinion.

Working double shifts at the steakhouse for years had helped her climb out of the mountain of debt, but her credit record was shot even though she

was now finally in the black. She had no savings to purchase Romano's outright, much less the ability to take out a loan. Her parents had no idea of her financial woes, bragging to others how their daughter worked so diligently and must be saving huge amounts of money. In their eyes, she could easily make a huge down payment on the restaurant and take out a loan for the rest. It was only thanks to her best friend, Paige Haddock, that Vivi was able to buy the restaurant outright now.

Paige had offered to loan Vivi the money for her half of Romano's—interest-free—and Paige would pay the other half, becoming Vivi's silent partner. Considering that Paige and her husband Tanner lived in Malibu and had a new baby girl to occupy their time when they weren't working, Vivi realized all the responsibility would truly lie on her shoulders. It would allow her full, creative control over the restaurant and its daily management. Vivi had promised her friend that she would eventually repay her and Tanner, not only for her portion of the restaurant, but hopefully one day she could buy out the Haddocks and own Romano's outright.

Paige had told her not to rush and was supportive of the ideas Vivi had already run by as far as the changes she wished to make to the pizza parlor and its menu. Fortunately, the Haddocks didn't miss the money they had invested in Romano's. Paige had sold another screenplay recently, while Tanner's career—already one of the most rock-solid in Hollywood—was pushing to new heights since his directorial debut. He was now in demand as both an actor and director, earning millions as an actor for his role in a film and a healthy salary as a director. He and Paige had also started their own production company, and Paige was tinkering with the idea of getting into producing.

She took a sip of her coffee. "*Perfetto*," she told Lorenzo. "And thank you again for letting me borrow your truck to get Mama and Papa to the airport today. I don't think we could have gotten their luggage and the three of us in my sedan."

Vivi had sold her car before leaving Dallas, which had been on its last legs, having almost two hundred thousand miles on it. It needed a new transmission, along with new tires and brakes. Papa had told her that he would simply give her their car. It was a small sedan, five years old, but it was paid for and in good condition. She had thanked him profusely for the gift.

She would also be living in her childhood home while her parents were in

Italy. Mama's original plan had been for them to move to Tuscany permanently and sell the Sugar Springs house. She was from Lunigiana, and she missed the countryside and her relatives. Papa, who had been born in New York, shut down that idea, telling his wife they could go and live for an extended time—a couple of years or so—but that he wanted to eventually come home to the U.S. Vivi would live in their house, rent-free, since the mortgage had already been paid off. She would be responsible for paying the utilities, insurance, and taxes, while she owned and managed Romano's.

Dante had said the minute one of them married and had children, Mama would hightail it back to Sugar Springs, eager to play *Nonna* to any little *bambina* or *bambino*. Vivi thought him right, but she didn't see either of them marrying anytime soon. If ever.

Her brother was easily one of the best-looking men in Dallas, and she believed he would remain single for many years before settling down. Dante was a good man, but he had a roving eye as far as women were concerned.

As for her? She had given up on men after her disastrous relationship with Beck. Though they had lived together two years, she understood now that she had never truly known who her lover was. She firmly believed he had never loved her, merely using her and leading her on. She was done with all of that. Men were too needy and self-centered, and she was better off without one in her life.

Besides, Romano's would take up all her time now, and she doubted Sugar Springs had a huge dating pool of single men anyway. It was the type of place where people married and settled down. Eligible bachelors would be few and far between, and she doubted any would put up with the hours she would be working to keep Romano's afloat, and hopefully, profitable.

Lorenzo joined her at the table and sipped on his own coffee. He was staying, for the time being, in Dante's old bedroom, but he was looking for a place of his own.

"I think I have found an apartment to rent," he shared. "It is near the high school, so it won't be far from the town square. I can walk to work, just like in Italy."

"I can't tell you again how grateful I am that you came to Sugar Springs with me, Lorenzo. You're welcome to stay in the house as long as you'd like. In fact, if you do, it will save you rent money. I don't want you to think I'm chasing you out."

"Yes, Dante has called me a defector from his side to yours," he joked.

“I suppose there is a little sibling rivalry between us,” she admitted. “I’m glad we aren’t in the same town, with competing restaurants. That would be terrible.”

“Have you told Eduardo and Sophia about your plans for the new menu at Romano’s?”

She shook her head. “No, because they would be dead set against it. Especially Papa. I hate to sound cold, but it is no longer their restaurant. Romano’s is mine. I want to be free to make the changes I want and put my stamp on it.”

“I do appreciate being here the last couple of weeks and learning from your father. Eduardo is truly a genius in the kitchen when it comes to making pizzas.”

“You know I want to keep pizza on the menu. It’s the star and always will be. It isn’t Romano’s if we don’t serve pizza. But I have other ideas, Lorenzo. Ambitious ones. I want to make Romano’s a destination stop on the weekends for people. Not just residents of Sugar Springs, but others in the area who are looking for excellent, authentic Italian cuisine.”

“Have you a menu in mind?” he asked.

“Definitely. I’ll be sharing everything with you—and the staff—once my parents are on that plane and headed to Italy. Even then, if Papa gets wind of things, he might ask for a parachute and bail out, racing back to nix everything.”

They both laughed.

Her father appeared in the kitchen doorway. “It is almost time to go, Vivi.” Looking to Lorenzo, he added, “I am trusting you to make my pizzas the way they should be made, my new friend.”

“You have taught me well, Eduardo,” Lorenzo told the older man. “And don’t forget that Vivi also will be cooking.”

Papa cast his warm gaze in her direction. “My Vivi has been making my pizzas since she was barely out of diapers. I could never have turned over Romano’s to anyone but her. She will keep the traditions I have established.”

Guilt filled her. While she would continue making her father’s pizzas, she doubted Papa would appreciate her adding to the menu at Romano’s. He was a man who liked things the way they were and didn’t accept change easily. The fact that he was walking away from his restaurant and accompanying his wife to Tuscany still surprised her.

Mama came in, all aflutter. “I cannot find my rings!” she cried. “I cannot

leave without them.”

Lorenzo came to his feet. Slipping a hand into his pocket, he withdrew something and opened his palm in front of Mama. “I found them beside the kitchen sink, Sophia. You must have taken them off when you washed the dishes.”

She flung her arms around Lorenzo, thanking him profusely in Italian, Mama’s default anytime she became emotional.

That was one of the small changes Vivi would make. Mama never used the dishwasher at their house, and she insisted all dishes at the restaurant be cleaned by hand. While that could be more efficient during a rush, Vivi would not be opposed to the staff using the dishwasher at Romano’s. It was quite large and industrial strength and had sat unused for too long a time.

“Now that you have your rings, my love, it’s time to go,” Papa said.

Mama looked around the kitchen, tears brimming in her eyes. “We have spent many happy times in this kitchen, haven’t we, Eduardo?”

Papa took her hand and kissed it. “We have, indeed, *mio caro*.”

A lump formed in Vivi’s throat, seeing after decades of marriage how much her parents still loved one another. She had hoped to have that with Beck. Her dreams of a husband and children were no longer in her future. She was a businesswoman now. Her focus must be on Romano’s.

“Do you have any more luggage to put in the truck?” Lorenzo asked.

“No,” her father said. “Only our carry-ons, which I placed at the door.” He thrust out a hand, and Lorenzo took it. “Take good care of our Vivi and the pizzeria.”

Lorenzo smiled. “Vivi will be the one who will take care of Romano’s and me, Eduardo.”

She grabbed her purse from the kitchen counter and walked out to the truck with her parents. Lorenzo kissed her mother goodbye and then gave Vivi the keys.

“I’ll see you later, Vivi. Don’t worry. Things will be in good hands. You’ll only miss the lunch shift today.”

She climbed into the truck, and they left Sugar Springs behind, Mama weeping profusely.

“We don’t have to leave if you are this upset, Sophia,” Papa said gently, rubbing his wife’s back.

“No, Eduardo. These are happy tears. I am remembering all the wonderful things about this town. How we started Romano’s. How we raised

our two beautiful children here. The friends that we have made over the years and the families we have served our pizza to. But I am ready to be with my family and look for yours, as well.”

Vivi had them leave in plenty of time, knowing construction was never-ending along I-20. They reached Dallas and crossed the width of the city, heading west of it to DFW International Airport, which lay between Dallas and Ft. Worth.

She pulled up to the curb so that a skycap could take the large amount of luggage. Papa had fussed at the price he was having to pay for the extra baggage, but Mama had insisted there were things she simply couldn't live without. Vivi knew his grumblings were all in good nature and that he would do anything to please his wife.

Once their luggage had been taken care of, Vivi tipped the skycap handsomely, and they got into the truck again. She found a parking spot, accompanying her parents inside the terminal and waiting with them in line to make certain they were properly checked in.

Vivi escorted them to the security line and stood with them the entire time until they reached near the front. It was now time to say their final goodbyes.

She embraced Mama. “Remember, you have your iPhone, and we will be able to FaceTime.”

“I know, I know,” Mama said brusquely, wiping tears from her cheeks.

Papa hugged her tightly. “Take care, *mi acara ragazza*. Enjoy running Romano's.” He kissed her cheek and then whispered in her ear. “Don't stay closed off from the world, Vivi.”

He pulled away, gazing into her eyes. Her parents knew she had broken up with Beck but had no knowledge of his death, only that Vivi had not dated anyone since the breakup. While she understood what Papa was telling her, she had no intention of becoming involved with a man again. It had taken a long time for her heart to mend, and it was still far too fragile to entrust it with another.

“Goodbye, Papa. I love you.” She looked to her mother. “I love you both so much.”

Stepping out of line, she saw the agent motion her parents to move forward. Vivi watched as they showed him their passports and then moved to the conveyor belts where they would place their carry-on luggage and personal items. She continued to wait, holding back tears, seeing them pass through security and reclaim their items. They were a great distance from her

now, so she stood on tiptoe, her arm stretched high as she waved.

Mama blew her kisses, while Papa bowed his head a moment to her.

Then they were gone.

Vivi turned, walking briskly through the terminal until she reached Lorenzo's truck. Once inside, she let herself have a good, cathartic cry.

Her parents would return someday, probably in a couple of years. Papa loved America too much to stay gone forever, and Mama loved Papa enough to come back with him when he did. Still, running Romano's would prevent her from traveling to Italy to visit them. She wouldn't have the luxury of vacations. In effect, she had become her parents. She would work long hours every day, without a break.

Yet it was exactly what she wanted to do. The restaurant business was in her blood. She was excited to be in charge of her own kitchen and cook for others, as well as handle the business end of things.

With new resolve, Vivi started the vehicle and drove back to Sugar Springs. She arrived a little after two in the afternoon, finding only one table occupied. She had already asked the staff to stay until she returned. Usually, they were given a few hours off mid-afternoon until dinner service began. It had always been Papa and Mama who stayed behind in case anyone stopped in and wanted pizza between lunch and dinner.

She saw Lee Sommers, one of their servers, go to the table and return the man's credit card, wishing the customer a good day.

Once he exited Romano's, Vivi gathered the staff in the dining room.

"Other than Lorenzo, the rest of you have worked at Romano's a good while and are familiar with how things are run. While I love my parents and respect them a great deal, this is now *my* restaurant. You will see some changes coming. One thing that will never change? We will always serve Romano's pizza. What will be different is our Friday and Saturday menus."

The staff sat up, curious about what she would share next.

"We'll offer food beyond pizza and our usual salads, starting in two weeks. I will be creating a menu that Lorenzo and I will execute. It will be a spin on traditional Italian fare and vary from weekend to weekend, but it will be available at the dinner service on Friday and Saturday evenings. I want Romano's to become a place people intentionally visit, one known for more than its pizza."

"Friday *and* Saturday nights?" questioned Jimmy Sutton, who had assisted her father in baking pizzas for years. "That's not gonna to work,

Vivi,” he said, shaking his head.

She had known there would be some resistance and said, “I’m always open to suggestions, Jimmy. What roadblocks do you see standing in our way regarding that menu change?”

“Sports,” he barked out. “Football, in particular. Tons of people come to Romano’s on a Friday night before the game, or they do carryout. If you’re serving some fancy, frou-frou stuff, that would affect business.”

She had been gone too long from a small town and forgotten how important football was to this place.

Wanting to show she was willing to compromise and be collaborative, Vivi said, “Then what if we try both nights for the rest of this summer as a test? We can always cut back to Saturday nights once football season starts. Pizza will always be available during any dinner service. I merely want to add new items to the menu. Specialty dishes. Do you think that could work, Jimmy?”

He nodded thoughtfully. “Sure, Vivi. Romano’s could be a place people want to bring a date if you’re doing some upscale fare. Football and basketball games are Friday nights. It’s a louder, more family-friendly crowd. But I do think Saturdays could work.”

“Then we’ll test drive the idea this summer, with the intent to scale back come fall. Maybe we could expand after football—and basketball—seasons are over. We’ll talk more about menus and crowds. I simply wanted to let everyone know I’m making some changes. I always want to seek your input, just as I am now. My door is open to you. I want to keep the business we have—and do even more of it.”

She paused and then said, “I’m also grateful for all of you agreeing to stay on. Mama and Papa built something very special here through the years. You’re a part of Romano’s success. I appreciate each of you being willing to have me as your new boss.”

Lorenzo spoke up. “And I want to say how I’m thankful that you’ve accepted me. I’m an excellent cook, but I learned so much from Eduardo in the past two weeks. I’ll do my best to uphold the traditions at Romano’s, while making room for the new dishes which Vivi will bring.”

She mouthed *thank you* to him and then addressed the group. “Go ahead and take your usual breaks. Be back at the regular time. It will be business as usual on this Tuesday.”

The staff stood and left the dining area.

She told Lorenzo, “Let’s start looking at some of the menu items I’m thinking of.”

Pulling her tablet from her tote bag, Vivi had them sit at a table. She pulled up her list of appetizers and entrées, and she and Lorenzo debated each one, asking themselves which would be more popular. Which would be seasonal and those that might earn a permanent spot on the specialty menu. They agreed on a dozen dishes to start and would begin testing them immediately, Vivi taking lead as to the exact recipes.

“We can use weekday afternoons when things are slow and the staff is gone,” she said. “Once we’ve cooked each dish several times and ways, we can nail down the exact recipe and timing,” she said. “I’m going to start looking at ovens now. Not everything can be baked in our current pizza ovens. I want to purchase a couple of new ones and have them delivered as soon as possible so that we can make this happen.”

“I’ll work with what we have on hand now and begin a few test runs,” he told her. “I’ll shop for more items we need for tomorrow afternoon’s testing before I come in. We can play with recipes each afternoon during the slower hours. I’m sure the staff wouldn’t mind coming back to work a few minutes early to sample the dishes and give us their opinions.”

“Agreed. If you need me, I’ll be in the office.”

She headed upstairs. At one point, the entire Romano family had lived above the pizza parlor. She had a few, fleeting memories of those days, being crowded together. Her parents had slept on a fold-out couch, and she and Dante had slept on pallets on the floor. Fortunately, they had moved to a house two years before she started kindergarten, the business established and starting to thrive.

Nowadays, upstairs served as storage space and an office. Vivi already had bought a new computer, ready to abandon her father’s ledger system of entering everything by hand. She would need to meet with a tax specialist. Walker Cox, a local attorney and friend, had handled the sale of Romano’s, transferring it from her parents to Vivi and Paige. She thought he might have a suggestion as to whom she might use, and she jotted his name on a sticky note as a reminder.

She sat at the desk, taking a moment to savor the changes in her life. Although Paige no longer lived in Sugar Springs, Vivi was making friends with other women, including Walker’s wife Rory and Gideon Ross’ wife Hope. Hope had invited Vivi to join their book club, and she decided that

would be a good outlet for her to make new friends.

Firing up the computer, she made a final decision on ovens and ordered them, scheduling delivery for this coming Friday. Then she began scrolling through her recipes, having placed them all in Word documents over the years. She printed out a few and toyed with them, adding and deleting ingredients, before coming up with the exact dishes she and Lorenzo would begin trying to perfect, starting tomorrow.

By now, it was time to go downstairs for the dinner service. She would have to fight from spending a majority of her time in the kitchen producing pizzas. That was Lorenzo's job now, assisted by Jimmy. Her role was more managerial during the week, but she would stroll through the dining room at intervals, just to allow the residents of Sugar Springs to know she was now head of Romano's. It would be the weekends where she would try to shine through the food she prepared.

The next hour passed quickly, and Vivi stopped in the kitchen, tossing a few pizza crusts for old times' sake, before turning things back over to Lorenzo so she could stroll the dining room on another round on this first night.

As she left the kitchen, she saw Walker and Rory stepping inside the pizzeria and went to greet them.

"Hey. Checking me out on my first night?" she teased.

"Actually, Gid asked us to meet Rory and him here at six," Walker told her. "Ford Carpenter is in town, and we're getting together with him."

Her pulse sped up. "Isn't he the guy who used to come here summers?" she asked casually.

"That's Ford," Walker agreed. "I can't wait for him to meet Rory. He's in for a couple of days, visiting his aunt and uncle, before heading back to Houston."

She hadn't thought about Ford Carpenter in fifteen years or more. He'd stopped coming to Sugar Springs once he started college. He'd been four years older than Vivi, and she'd had a mad crush on him.

Vivi couldn't help but idly wonder if the drop-dead gorgeous teenager had blossomed into a smokin' hot man.

Ford Carpenter awoke before his alarm went off, excitement pouring through him at the prospect of spending the next two days in Sugar Springs, a place which had always been a second home to him. Instead of his usual workout, he did a quarter-hour of meditation, centering himself and calming his mind.

As he jumped into the shower, he couldn't believe it had been over six months since he had seen Uncle Rex and Aunt Sandy. That was on him, and he told himself he needed to do a better job of getting away from the emergency room he managed. He had given everyone explicit instructions not to call him during the next two days because he would be out of town. That they would have to handle any crisis without him.

Normally, Ford received two days a week, Tuesdays and Wednesdays, as his downtime. Invariably, however, he was called back to work on one—if not both—days. As head of one of Houston's largest hospitals, his ER was never quiet, especially on the weekends. This time, though, he would have forty-eight hours totally to himself.

He shaved and dressed, throwing the last of his toiletries into his Dopp kit, which he placed in the duffel bag he was taking with him. He stopped in the kitchen and started the coffee maker, needing a morning hit of caffeine to get going. While he waited for it to warm up, Ford decided to text Gideon Ross, who was always up during these early morning hours. He had become friends with Gideon and Gideon's best friend, Walker Cox, when he had spent summers with Uncle Rex and Aunt Sandy in Sugar Springs, a small town in East Texas, close to Tyler. Though a year younger than the other two

boys, they had welcomed Ford with open arms, and he had spent idyllic summers with them. Riding bikes. Swimming at Sugar Lake. Playing in an intramural softball league.

He had actually followed the two to SMU, thanks to the athletic trainer scholarship he had received. Ford had known from an early age that he wanted to go into medicine, thanks to Uncle Rex's influence. He, like Gideon, would never have been able to attend college without a scholarship, however. Ford had spent a lot of time in college with Gideon, who played on the Mustangs football team, a breakout star who earned All-American honors before a devastating knee injury ended his senior season prematurely.

Both Gideon and Walker had remained in Dallas, Gideon as a police officer and Walker earning a law degree, going to work for a fancy downtown law firm. Ford had been accepted to medical school in Houston and had spent his time there. He stayed in touch with the other two men, mostly by text, all of them too busy to see one another. Gideon and Walker had made radical changes in their lives recently, however. Both men had returned to their hometown, Walker taking over the law practice of his retiring father, and Gideon assuming duties as Chief of Police in the town.

Even though he wanted to spend the majority of his time with his aunt and uncle, Ford hoped he might be able to see his two friends and meet their new wives.

Setting the coffee to brew, he pulled his phone from his pocket and texted Gideon.

Leaving now for SS. Would love to see you, Walker, and meet the wives. Any chance of getting together? Romano's? I'm in town today and tomorrow.

AS HE WAITED FOR A RESPONSE, his mouth salivated, thinking of a pizza from Romano's. Mr. Romano prepared the best pizza on the planet, and Ford always tried to have some anytime he was in Sugar Springs.

The coffee finished brewing, and he poured it into a tumbler, leaving it black, as usual. His cell dinged, and he saw that Gideon had replied.

Will be great to see you. I'll rally the troops. Romano's at 6 tonight?

GRINNING, he texted back a thumbs up, which would be enough for Gideon. Ford sealed his tumbler, grabbed the duffel bag, and locked the door to his condo. He headed to his truck, tossing his bag inside, and was soon headed north for the three-and-a-half trip to Sugar Springs.

As he drove, he felt the tension in his neck and shoulders slowly dissipate. He lived most of his life in fast-forward. Practitioners of emergency room medicine had a high turnover rate, burnout being the most common reason cited for leaving the ER. While he loved what he did, at thirty-five, he was already beginning to feel the strain of the long, brutal hours. His job left him drained—physically, mentally, and emotionally.

That was one of the reasons he wanted to visit with his aunt and uncle. Ford needed to talk over career options with them before burnout claimed him. The couple, who were childless, considered him their own and had even paid for his medical school training. He had insisted on paying them back, though, sending them small monthly checks once he began earning a salary as an intern. Those amounts grew during his residency and became even larger when he became a fulltime physician. It had taken years, but he had finally repaid them in full.

He passed an eighteen-wheeler and couldn't help but think of his dad, who had been a truck driver for a freight company. His mom had been a server at a family chain restaurant. She had gotten pregnant with him when she was only seventeen and had graduated from high school, having him two months later. His parents had married the moment she turned eighteen, three days before his birth. While they had always been loving and attentive to their only child, he had learned to live with the knowledge they could barely pay their bills. On several occasions, the lights had been shut off. It was nothing for a bill collector to come hammering on the door of their apartment, and Ford had learned at an early age you kept quiet and didn't answer the door.

His father had always told him to keep his head down and work hard. To make more of himself than his parents had. No one had been prouder of him than his dad when Ford had walked across the stage at college, earning his

degree in biology, headed off to medical school.

Ford had lost both of them far too soon. His mother died of breast cancer when he was in medical school. His parents had no insurance, and she had waited too long to see a doctor. By the time she did, she was in Stage Four and only lived another six weeks.

His dad had never gotten over losing the love of his life, and he had ended his own two years later. Ford had felt so alone during that time. Thank goodness, he had Uncle Rex and Aunt Sandy to help him through it.

When he was half an hour from arriving, he called his aunt to give her a heads up.

She answered, saying, "Tell me that you're close, Ford."

"About thirty minutes or a little less, Aunt Sandy."

"Good. Perfect timing on your part. My Christmas sausage casserole and cinnamon rolls will be coming out of the oven about the time you arrive."

He brightened. "You made Christmas casserole in July?"

"I know it's your favorite, honey. I want to spoil you while you're home. Rex is so excited you're coming. He had Rebecca juggle patient appointments, and we both have the entire day off today to spend with you. I think the two of you will be going to Sugar Lake to fish this afternoon." She laughed. "Even though you won't catch squat."

Ford knew the best fishing occurred in the early morning hours before dawn at Sugar Lake. Still, he didn't mind spending time in a boat with Uncle Rex, shooting the breeze.

"I'll see you in a few," he said. "I am going to meet Gideon and Walker tonight, so don't plan on me being there for dinner."

"Oh, I'm so glad you'll get to see both of them, Ford. I hope you'll get to meet Hope and Rory. They are just lovely women."

"Gideon is putting it together, so I hope all four of them can make it. Love you."

"Love you, too, sweetie."

He ended the call and found anticipation building within him the closer he got to Sugar Springs. He entered the town limits and drove by all the familiar places from his childhood.

Reaching the town square, he circled around it, seeing Ida Lou's diner had its usual morning crowd. He turned off the square and drove six blocks down, turning on Elm, the Carpenters' street, and easing into their driveway. He found his throat thick with emotion, seeing the two-story colonial house,

which had looked so fancy to him the first time he had seen it.

Claiming his duffel bag, he went to the front door. Finding it unlocked, he pushed it open and dropped his bag by the door, closing it. He followed his nose, which caught the drift of cinnamon in the air, and made his way to the kitchen.

Uncle Rex sat at the table, poring over his newspaper, while Aunt Sandy was pulling her famous breakfast casserole from the oven.

“Good morning,” he said cheerfully.

Uncle Rex sprang to his feet and shook Ford’s hand, slapping him on the back. Aunt Sandy set the hot casserole dish on a trivet on the table and then wrapped her arms around him.

“It’s so good to have you home, Ford,” she said fervently.

He cleared his throat. “What can I do to help?”

“Not a thing,” she told him. “Have a seat. Rex, pour orange juices for all of us and get Ford a cup of coffee.”

His uncle took care of the drinks, and he watched how the two seemed to be so in sync with one another. They would have made excellent parents to their own children, and he couldn’t help but feel sorry they had never had any. He had no other aunts and uncles, much less cousins. These two were all the family he had.

In that moment, Ford decided he would stop wasting time. He would come to see them more. Maybe he could get on at a hospital in Tyler. Move to Sugar Springs so that he could be around them more, especially as they aged.

They seated themselves, and Aunt Sandy served him a large piece of the casserole. Uncle Rex passed him the plate of enormous cinnamon rolls, and he claimed two.

“Will you have enough room for pizza tonight?” his aunt asked, her eyes twinkling.

“I’ll always make room for Romano’s pizza,” he said. “I may not have room for lunch later, though,” he joked.

The couple caught him up on all the happenings in the small town. After visiting for so many summers when he was growing up, he knew many of the residents.

“I saw something new on the square,” he remarked. “Playful Painting. What’s that?”

Aunt Sandy’s eyes lit up. “Oh, that’s Nova Johnson’s place. She and her

son moved here from Austin. Her aunt was a local artist, and Nova inherited her talent from Rain. She mostly creates pottery and jewelry, but she's opened Playful Painting. It's been quite successful. Even Rex and I have gone to it for Date Night."

"You went to an art store for a date?"

His uncle laughed. "It's one of those places where you drink wine or beer and paint," he explained. "Nova has wedding and baby showers there. Birthday parties. The most popular nights, though, have been Date Nights, where couples go and paint and drink together with their friends. I'm terrible at it, but Sandy's not half bad."

His aunt rose and returned a few moments later, holding a painting in her hands. "I did this a few weeks ago. What do you think?"

It was a scene of a wooded area, the trees studded with the colors of fall.

"That's really good, Aunt Sandy," he praised.

"Maybe if we can get you to stay longer next visit, we can set you up with someone, and you can do your own Date Night painting."

She set the painting in the empty chair and took her place again.

"That's not going to happen," Ford said. "I can't imagine going on a blind date. I can't imagine going on *any* date, much less painting during it."

She frowned. "You work too many hours, Ford Carpenter," she chastised. "When's the last time you did something for yourself? And don't tell me it's when you exercise or meditate. When is the last time you went to a movie? Saw a concert or play? Went to a football game or had dinner with friends?"

He shrugged. "ER docs don't have the luxury of time. We don't do those kinds of things." He paused. "We don't get to do much of anything. Except save lives, of course."

Her brows knit together. "Then maybe you should think about doing something else, Ford Carpenter. You're a talented doctor. The ER isn't the only place you could be."

Uncle Rex took up the banner and charged ahead. "I agree, Ford. You're an excellent doctor, but life needs to be a balance of work and play. I urge you to think about that carefully."

Ford took a deep breath, blowing it out slowly. "That's one of the reasons I came to see you. I never seem to have time for myself. The hospital always calls me in on one or both days I'm supposed to be off. I'm working sixteen-to-eighteen-hour days. I come home so tired, I can barely brush my teeth."

He paused. "I guess I'm at a point in life where I want something more

than work. All I've ever wanted to do was be a doctor like you, Uncle Rex. You both made that possible for me."

"We may have helped you financially, Ford, but you are the one who put in the hard work necessary to become a physician," his uncle said. "And you were responsible enough to reimburse us. That was something we never expected."

He looked from his uncle to his aunt. "I guess now that I've hit my mid-thirties, I want more out of life than the four walls of the ER. I do want to keep helping people, but I want something for myself. I see the two of you and how you look at one another after all these years of marriage. I suppose I want what you have. I don't know if I can find that if I continue the way things have been."

Ford raked his fingers through his hair. "I've considered seeing if I could get on in the ER at Tyler. I would love to be closer to the two of you."

Aunt Sandy covered his hand with hers. "You're good at what you do, honey, but if you leave the ER in Houston, don't replace it for one in Tyler. You'd be just as busy, and it would continue to suck the life out of you. If you're going to make a drastic change, *really* make a change."

"Like coming to work with me," Uncle Rex injected.

"What?"

"I'm sixty-five now, Ford. I'm not getting any younger, and my patient load seems to be increasing. It would be wonderful if you joined me in the practice. Splitting the workload between us—or even making it a sixty/forty split. With you doing sixty, of course," his uncle said, grinning. "It would be just the thing. I'll probably want to retire by the time I'm seventy, and then I could hand the entire practice over to you. Or you might want to seek a partner to replace me."

"I'm stunned by your offer," he admitted, tempted by the idea of serving as a doctor in Sugar Springs.

"You think you see it all in the ER, but a small town physician is a jack-of-all-trades. I guarantee you, there would never be a boring day. Think on it, Ford."

He was silent a moment and then said, "I don't have to take any time to think it over, Uncle Rex. My answer is yes. A *big* yes."

Ford was surprised that he had made such a spontaneous decision to leave his position in Houston in order to share his uncle's medical practice in Sugar Springs. Yes, he was known at work for making instant, critical decisions regarding patients, based upon his gut and experience.

In his life away from the hospital, however, he was always methodical and pragmatic in his decision-making. He would gather the facts and study them. Make a mental list of pros and cons. He believed every decision should be weighed carefully before acting. He had never been a look before you leap person outside the ER.

Yet that is exactly what he was doing right now—and it felt liberating.

Sugar Springs had been a home to him for as long as he could remember. He appreciated now how his parents handed him over each summer, giving him a chance to experience a kind of upbringing he couldn't under their care. Both his parents had worked such long hours, his dad being gone on road trips for days at a time, while his mom would pull double shifts at her restaurant. They hadn't wanted him to be left by himself, and they couldn't afford day care. The solution had been to allow him to live with his dad's brother and wife each summer. Though Ford had never admitted it to his parents, he had always looked forward to his time in Sugar Springs, glad to get out of the cramped apartment they called home.

"There would be logistics involved," he said, looking at his beaming uncle and aunt. "I'll have to check the fine print of my contract. I can't simply call up and quit."

“Of course. You’ll need to give notice to your hospital,” Aunt Sandy said reassuringly. “A couple of weeks. A month, perhaps. It will all work out just fine, Ford.” She smiled gently at him. “And we will be so happy to have you here, honey. You know you are like a son to us.”

His eyes misted as he said, “I’ve always felt that way. I love you and Uncle Rex so much. My entire life, you’ve given me time, attention, and love.”

“Well, why don’t we go look at the office?” his uncle asked. “You haven’t been to it in a good while. I’ve got some new equipment I can show you. Let’s just help Sandy clear these dishes.”

“No,” she protested. “You two go ahead. I can handle things here.”

Ford offered to drive, and they went to his truck. They reached the clinic within ten minutes, so unlike the Houston traffic he fought on a daily basis no matter what time of day it was.

As they rode the elevator to the second floor, Ford asked, “Uncle Rex, why did you ever leave the Victorian house and move the practice here?”

His uncle dug in his pocket for the keys as they approached the door. “That old Victorian had served its purpose. Yes, it was large and close to our house, but I had turned all kinds of rooms into what I needed—examination rooms, an office, reception—and frankly, I just outgrew the place. Sandy and I had been saving up for your college years. When you won that trainer’s scholarship to SMU, that freed up those funds to reinvest in the practice.”

Uncle Rex slid the key into the door and unlocked it. He opened it, and the two men entered, his uncle flipping on lights as they went.

“I decided to sink our money into this new little strip center. Yes, it had the proverbial nail salon and cleaners going in, but it also had the dental practice opening. Since the structure was just going up, it was easier to tailor the place to the specifications I desired. As it is, I was able to lease the entire top floor—and later, I purchased it outright.”

As Ford looked around the clinic, he saw that some remodeling had gone on since his last visit.

“This looks really nice,” he commented.

“You can thank Sandy. She said it was time to spruce up the place a few years ago. Let me give you the guided tour, as if you’d never seen the place before.”

They started in the reception area, which was much larger than the old place. Uncle Rex took him behind the reception desk and fired up one of the

computers, showing Ford the programs they used for scheduling appointments and billing patients.

“Things are a lot easier now since we can do so much by computer. We do still schedule some of our appointments over the phone, but the majority of them are made and any paperwork submitted is done online.”

For the next hour, Uncle Rex guided Ford through the offices, showing him exam rooms and the equipment in each. One room was devoted to X-rays, and it even had a sonogram machine.

“Although a lot of women prefer to go to an OB when they’re pregnant, some of our patients prefer to stick with me. The sonogram machine has come in handy.”

He showed Ford the file room, storage room, and break room. They ended the tour at his uncle’s large office.

“I know there’s not room for you to have a separate office—unless we steal one of the examination rooms for you—but my idea is to make this a joint office which we can share. We could move my desk out to the center of the room and put yours next to it, facing me. If we bother each other, we could always throw up a barrier so we don’t have to look at one another. That way, we could both have a credenza behind us. File cabinets. Whatever each of us wants.”

“This is a wonderful setup, Uncle Rex. I’m getting excited about joining the practice.”

“Sandy and I will be thrilled to have you back in Sugar Springs, Ford. You’re welcome to live with us, but I suppose eventually, you’ll want to get your own place.”

“I hadn’t thought about it, but I’ll need to put up my condo for sale. Supposedly, it’s a seller’s market right now. Hopefully, I can get a quick sale. The money I get from it, I’ll use to make a down payment on a house here.” He paused. “But I wouldn’t mind living with you and Aunt Sandy for several months. I don’t want to rush into home ownership and buy the first house I see. I want to take my time so that I can find exactly what I want.”

Uncle Rex chuckled. “That’s the Ford Carpenter I’m more familiar with. You could’ve knocked me down with a feather when you agreed to come onboard so quickly.”

He shrugged. “When it’s right, it’s right. I’m not a fool. Maybe in the back of my mind, I somehow knew I would wind up here. I simply got caught up in the excitement of emergency room medicine. It has taken a toll on me,

though. As I said, I have zero personal life.”

“Well, you’ve got two good friends who recently moved back to Sugar Springs. They’ve both settled down with wives.”

He shook his head, holding a palm up. “Stop right there. Don’t go thinking I’m ready to get married as Gideon and Walker have done. I want to focus on my career and getting to know the patients in your practice. Let’s talk job first, house down the line, and a distant third would be dating—and possibly marriage.”

“You’re a good man, Ford. Whenever you decide to act upon it, you’ll be a wonderful husband and terrific father. Let’s go home. The fish just might be biting, and we can take the boat out and see.”

When they got home, Aunt Sandy vetoed that idea.

“Are you kidding me, Rex Carpenter? It’s over a hundred degrees today. You are not going out on that boat with no shade and trying to catch fish which are at the bottom of Sugar Lake taking a nap. If you’re looking for something to do, go have a slice of pie at the diner. “

“Not a bad idea,” Uncle Rex said, his eyes twinkling. “I’m still full from breakfast—but I’m never too full for pie. What do you say, Ford?”

“Definitely yes to pie,” he agreed. “Will you go with us, Aunt Sandy?”

“Sure,” she said. “I’ll take my own car, though. This unexpected day off will allow me to get some much-needed shopping done. I’ve already done two loads of laundry while you two have been gone.”

Once again, they took his truck, and Aunt Sandy followed them to the town square, where they parked side-by-side and then entered the diner.

Ida Lou herself hurried to greet them, exclaiming, “Why, if it isn’t Ford Carpenter! I haven’t seen you in a month of Sundays, young man.”

She threw her arms around him. “You here for a few days?”

“Just today and tomorrow,” he replied. “Then it’s back to the ER in Houston.”

He wasn’t ready to announce his news just yet, especially since he would need to resign from his position at the hospital first, and he flashed a look to make sure his aunt and uncle wouldn’t let the cat out of the bag. Both nodded imperceptibly.

“Aunt Sandy made a huge breakfast, and we didn’t finish eating until about ten this morning,” he said. “I’m meeting friends at Romano’s for dinner, so we thought a slice of pie might hit the spot and tide us over until dinner.”

“You know you’ve come to the right place,” Ida Lou said, escorting them to a table.

They sat and Ford looked around, seeing the lunch rush was over. Only a handful of tables and booths were still occupied.

Ida Lou whipped out her pad. “What can I get you folks?”

He spoke up first. “I’ll take blueberry pie if you’ve got it. If not? Apple or cherry will do.”

“I baked two blueberry pies this morning, Ford. I guess somehow I knew you were coming in for your favorite pie.”

Aunt Sandy said, “I’ll take blueberry, as well, Ida Lou.”

“Make it chocolate icebox pie for me,” Uncle Rex said.

“Anyone want a dollop of whipped cream on their pie? Or à la mode?” Ida Lou asked.

“I’ll take both,” Ford said, causing everyone to laugh.

“And to drink?”

They all agreed on iced tea and Ida Lou left, returning quickly with their drinks and pie.

“As much as things change, it’s nice to see the blueberry pie is exactly the same,” he said after taking a bite and savoring it.

They finished their pie and left the diner. Aunt Sandy took off to do her shopping, while Uncle Rex asked Ford if he might like to drive around. They did so, and he saw the new church the Methodists had built and the new community center, which had been completed since his last visit.

“Lots of people rent it for wedding receptions. Baby showers. Anniversary parties. That kind of thing,” his uncle noted.

Next, they drove around Sugar Lake, reminiscing about the many times they had spent here. Ford stopped at the area designated for camping, and the two men got out of the truck, wandering around, recalling wienie roasts and toasting marshmallows.

“I remember how you boys used to sit around the fire, telling ghost stories. Gideon was the best at scaring you. It’s good to have him back as police chief.”

“Tell me about his new wife,” Ford urged. “I know you’ve met her.”

“Hope is everything Melinda wasn’t,” his uncle confided. “I didn’t think Melinda was the woman for Gideon when she was coming down the aisle, but Gideon thought he knew what he wanted. Hope is smart as a whip. Nurturing. Understands animals and people.”

“Sharing the workload with you, it might actually allow me to have time to own a dog. I’ve never gotten one because I didn’t think it would be fair to leave an animal alone eighteen hours a day.”

“We’ve got the humane society. They’ve always got animals to adopt there. Sometimes, if they have spillover, Hope houses a few at her practice. All I can say is, Gideon and Hope look like they belong together.”

“What about Walker?” Ford asked. “I know he’s married now, too, and I’ll meet his wife tonight at dinner.”

“Rory’s an interesting lady,” Uncle Rex said. “She was some famous ice skater before she came to Sugar Springs.”

“Rory Addison?” he asked, naming an auburn-haired American who had dominated figure skating for many years.

“I think that was her maiden name. I know she was in the Olympics.”

“She definitely was,” he said. “I remember watching her win a gold medal years ago. How on earth did she wind up here in Sugar Springs?”

“I’m not sure. Only that she taught at the high school. History, I believe. But she resigned at the end of the school year and is working for herself now. Designing some kind of line of skating costumes.”

“I guess I’ll hear all about that at dinner tonight.”

Ford thought his uncle looked weary and said, “Let’s get out of the heat and go back to the house, okay?”

On the way home, he made certain to turn up the air conditioning and point the vents at Uncle Rex.

They got home, and he said, “You look a little tired. Why don’t you take a nap?”

“Hmm. I am feeling a little worn out,” his uncle admitted. “I think I’ll do that.”

Uncle Rex retreated to the bedroom, while Ford resisted the urge to scroll through his emails. He wasn’t going to think about work today.

Except for his contract.

He went into his phone, searching through his folders and locating it. Quickly, he skimmed until he found what he was looking for. Just as he suspected, he had to give a month’s notice. Since he wanted to get the ball rolling, he emailed the head of the hospital, copying HR on the email, and sent in his resignation. He knew it would take everyone at the hospital by surprise.

Next, he looked up realtors. As he skimmed a list, a name stood out to

him, and he realized she was the wife of someone he'd gone to medical school with. He called her, reintroducing himself, and told her how he was leaving Houston and wanted to put his condo on the market. She got some basic information from him, and they set up an appointment for tomorrow afternoon. It would mean he had to leave Sugar Springs early, but he'd rather the agent see the property and work her magic, getting it listed as quickly as possible.

Now he knew the timeline, he decided to turn off his phone, just in case someone in ER tried to reach him or the head of the hospital called, trying to get him to change his mind about handing in his resignation. As he started to, however, a text came in from Gideon.

We'll swing by a few minutes before six and pick you up. It's on our way.

FORD SENT BACK a thumbs up and then turned off his ringer.

Aunt Sandy arrived with a ton of groceries and other packages, and he helped her bring in everything, putting things away in the pantry. The two of them chatted as they emptied the sacks.

"I think I'll take a quick shower. We walked around at Sugar Lake, and I got a little sticky. I'm glad you nixed us going out in the boat. It was really hot, and Uncle Rex looked tired when we got home. He's taking a nap now."

"I'm so glad you agreed to join his practice, Ford. I don't think he sees it, but I do notice him slowing down some. We can work with Rebecca on the scheduling of appointments. I would like you to take on the majority of them. Maybe we can ease Rex out sooner than seventy."

Ford hit the shower and dressed in fresh clothes. He went and sat in the shade on the porch swing, waiting for Gideon and Hope to arrive. When they pulled up at the curb, he ambled down the sidewalk and climbed into the back seat.

Gideon leaned around, shaking hands with him. "Good to see you, buddy. I'd like you to meet the love of my life, who has made me happier than I ever thought possible. This is Hope."

Ford was floored by his friend's words. Gideon Ross was a man's man.

He had been an outstanding athlete and was quiet and reserved. As most men did, he kept his feelings to himself, never wearing his emotions on his sleeve, much less expressing them. Yet Gideon had just made a bold announcement to his old friend, and he knew how special Hope must be for Gideon to be so open about his feelings.

It also spoke to the volume of Gideon's love for this special woman.
And perhaps the power of true love.

He turned his attention to Hope, and saw she was leaning around as her husband had, offering him her hand. She was an attractive woman, with blond hair and blue eyes, but more than that, Ford saw a kindness in her eyes which told him everything he needed to know about her.

"I'm honored to meet you, Hope." Then grinning mischievously, he added, "If you ever want the dirt on this guy, I'm your man."

She burst out laughing, a warm, rich laugh which he knew Gideon loved.

"So, Walker and Rory are meeting us at Romano's?" he asked.

"Yes," Gideon said. "And I don't know if the Carpenters shared it with you or not, but as of today? Romano's is under new management."

"What?" he cried. "Don't tell me they sold out? What about my beloved pizza?"

"You don't have to worry about the pizza," Hope assured him. "I know I've been hooked on it since the moment I set foot in Sugar Springs. The Romanos have retired. They actually were getting on a plane sometime this morning for Italy."

"Back up," Ford said. "Give me the entire story."

"Mrs. Romano wanted to go live with family in Italy," Gideon explained. "You know she was born there and while she loves Sugar Springs, she's always missed the mountains and rivers of her youth. Her family, too."

"Didn't they have a couple of kids?" he asked. "Damian? No, Dante. That's it. He was a couple of years behind us in school. I remember he played intramurals with us a summer or two. He could hit the hell out of a softball."

"Dante is a chef in Dallas now," Hope told him. "Gideon and I ate at his restaurant. He opened it over six months ago. It was, without a doubt, the best meal either of us has ever eaten."

"His younger sister is the one who has taken over Romano's," Gideon added. "Do you remember Vivi?"

A vague impression came to mind. Ford remembered the youngest Romano having waited on them a few times just before he went to college.

That had been the last summer he'd spent in Sugar Springs.

"Yeah, I think I remember her. She worked at the pizza parlor, didn't she? Dark hair. Unusual eyes."

"Yes, that's Vivi," Gideon said. "She worked in the back making pizzas for several years, from what I understand. Started when she was just a kid. Probably half the pizzas that came out that we ate were made by Vivi Romano. When she was thirteen or fourteen, her mom had her start waiting on customers in the dining room. Vivi worked at a steakhouse for years in Dallas. She agreed to come home and take over for her parents. Today is literally her first day as the new owner of Romano's."

Gideon pulled into a parking space on the square, facing the gazebo. They climbed from the car and walked across to where Romano's sat.

A hostess greeted them and showed them to their table, where Walker and Rory already sat. Ford greeted his old friend with enthusiasm and then turned his attention to Rory, waiting to be introduced. She was visibly pregnant. He figured probably seven to eight months along.

"Ford Carpenter, this is my wife, Rory."

Not only did he hear the love in Walker's tone, but it was written across his friend's face, the same as Gideon. Clearly, these were two men in love with their wives.

"It's nice to meet you, Rory," he said. Glancing down at her belly and back up, he added, "And congratulations. When are you due?"

"Halloween," she said, her eyes dancing. "You thought sooner, didn't you?"

He was taken aback and then it hit him. "You're having twins."

She beamed. "Yes. A boy and a girl, due on Halloween."

Walker slipped an arm about his wife's shoulders. "We are over the moon."

"I remember watching you compete in the Olympics," Ford told Rory. "You were the epitome of grace, style, and athleticism."

She blushed and said, "Thank you."

A server appeared and took their drink orders, beer for the guys and water for the women.

After she left, Gideon said, "We need to clue you in on something, Ford." He took his wife's hand. "Hope and I are also expecting a baby come mid-January."

He wasn't surprised by the announcement and said, "Congratulations to

the both of you, as well. Do you know what you're having?"

"We're going to get a sonogram this week," Hope revealed.

"I'm hoping for a girl who looks exactly like her mom," Gideon interjected. "Hope wants a boy. Actually, we'll be happy with either, as long as it's a healthy baby."

The server returned with their drinks, and they ordered three different kinds of pizzas.

"I've been looking forward to eating this pizza for I don't know how long," Ford admitted. "There's nothing like a Romano's pizza."

"Why, thank you," a voice said.

He looked up and realized this must be Vivi Romano standing next to their table. The shadowy version of her in his head instantly vanished.

Vivi Romano had lost all the chubbiness and awkwardness of her early teenage years and had blossomed into an incredibly beautiful woman.

One Ford was interested in knowing.

Vivi might have sounded confident when she approached Ford's table, but her heart beat wildly in her chest, seeing her girlhood crush after so many years.

Ford Carpenter had grown up to be more than smokin' hot. He was absolutely gorgeous, better looking than male models in magazines, with a lean, fit frame and hazel eyes that drew her in.

As a girl, she had known that he would never notice someone like her during his summer visits to Sugar Springs. To begin with, he was several years older than she was. Boys his age weren't interested in pudgy, plain girls who weren't old enough to date. Still, she had fantasized making pizzas for him, with him telling her it was the best pizza he had ever eaten, insisting upon thanking her father in person.

That's when, in her daydreams, she would step forward and reveal that *she* was the one who had made the pizza for him and his friends.

Vivi had worked in her father's kitchen from a young age, learning at his elbow, until she could make as good a pizza as he could. Mama had insisted, though, that Vivi also receive experience in the dining room, telling her that one day she would be running Romano's since Dante showed no interest in doing so, and Vivi must understand all aspects of the business.

That last summer Ford had come to Sugar Springs to visit his aunt and uncle, he had just graduated from high school and would be off to college that fall. She had waited on him and his friends numerous times that season. While he was always kind and friendly, she knew he hadn't really seen her as a person, just someone who brought drinks and pizzas to his table.

Looking into his hazel eyes now, however, she saw that she had every bit of his attention.

Gideon spoke up. "I was just telling Ford that this was your first day of owning Romano's outright."

She smiled at the group in general and not Ford as an individual as she replied, "Yes, I am fully in charge. I took my parents to the airport in Dallas this morning, and they should be landing around eleven our time. Italy is seven hours ahead of us, so Mama said she would take a sleeping pill the minute they took off and try to adjust to Tuscan time."

Ford said, "I hear you've been working at a steakhouse in Dallas."

Vivi turned to meet his appreciative gaze. "Yes, I worked there for several years, making my way all the way up to sous chef."

When he frowned, she added, "Second in charge of a kitchen."

"I would've thought you might have worked somewhere which served Italian food," he said.

"After I graduated from high school, I did spend three years in Italy, bouncing around between different groups of my relatives. I learned to cook every dish imaginable that is served in Tuscany. I also traveled widely throughout Italy's different regions, eating my way through them and collecting recipes. I have a treasure trove of everything from appetizers to entrées to desserts."

"Do you want to open your own Italian restaurant as Dante has?" asked Hope. "Beyond Romano's?"

"Financially-speaking, I've bitten off enough to chew for now," she told them. "What I am going to do, however, is add to the menu here." She held up a hand before they could protest. "Don't worry. Romano's will always serve our pizzas. I could never disappoint the citizens of Sugar Springs. On Friday and Saturday nights, though, I will be heading up things in the kitchen and cooking Italian specialty dishes. The meals of my heart. I will vary the menu each weekend, testing out dishes and seeing which ones people enjoy."

She grinned. "Although I've been told by my staff that once football season starts, it's pizza only on game nights."

Everyone at the table laughed, and Ford pressed her. "Running a business takes a lot of time. You said you would be leading the kitchen Friday and Saturday nights. Is that the only time you plan to cook?"

Vivi nodded. "Most likely, yes. I know what it takes to run a restaurant beyond cooking. Mama and Papa trained me well over the years. I also did so

in Dallas with my boyfriend. He opened his own restaurant, and I did everything from hiring staff and handling payroll, taxes, and insurance benefits to helping cook in the kitchen. I even ordered the toilet paper and cleaning supplies,” she joked. “I brought one of Dante’s chefs to Sugar Springs with me. If you ask my brother, I stole him. But Lorenzo will head up Romano’s kitchen for the weekly pizza making. He’s been here the last few weeks, learning everything he could from Papa. He makes just as good a pizza as any Romano does.

“On Fridays and Saturdays, though, I’ll take over as head chef in the kitchen. That will be my time to shine.”

“What about your boyfriend?” Ford asked. “Won’t he miss your help at his restaurant?”

She paused, swallowing her emotions. “He died several years ago. The restaurant was sold.”

A silence blanketed the table, and Vivi was ready to go when Rory asked, “What are some of the dishes you’re going to serve? I love Italian food.”

“I’ll do a variety of dishes from Tuscany. *Spezzatino*, a hearty stew with meats and vegetables. *Bistecca alla Fiorentina*, a Florentine-style steak. *Potato toretelli*, which is similar to ravioli or gnocchi, but it’s filled with mashed potatoes flavored with garlic, spices, *Parmigiano*, and tomatoes. Even *castagnacchio*, a gluten-free cake baked with chestnut flour. I’ll also move beyond Tuscany and feature other regions I visited, as well.”

“It sounds as if Rory and I will be eating here on Friday *and* Saturday nights,” Walker quipped, as the table erupted in laughter.

“I hope you will,” she told Walker. “We’ll start in two weekends. I need a little time to give the new menu items a test run and perfect them.”

Vivi didn’t want to spend too much time at their table and so she said, “I need to circulate and talk to our other customers. Thank you for coming in on my first night, though. I appreciate it.”

She couldn’t help but turn to Ford and add, “I hope the pizza is as good as you remember it.”

He gave her a warm smile. “I’m sure it will be, Vivi.”

Just hearing her name on his lips caused a rush of desire to ripple through her.

She went through the dining room, stopping and chatting with people she knew and meeting others for the first time. After she made the loop, she returned to the kitchen to touch base with Lorenzo.

“Business is brisk tonight, Vivi,” her chef commented.

“For a weeknight, I’m pleased at the turnout,” she told him. “Summer can be hit or miss. Sometimes, people are on vacation, while other times, we get a crowd before or after a softball or soccer game.”

She spent a few minutes in the kitchen, seeing three pizzas come out and delivered to the table where Ford sat. She couldn’t help but watch him take his first bite. Satisfaction filled his face.

“I’ll be in my office if you need me,” she told the kitchen staff and retreated upstairs.

This would be the hardest part about owning Romano’s, not being in charge of the kitchen and doing the cooking full-time. If she were, however, she would need someone to manage everything else for her, and she certainly didn’t have the money to pay for a second salary. She would have to wear many hats as the owner of Romano’s. Vivi decided to pull out next week’s schedule and started working on assignments and hours for the staff.

Once she completed that task, she returned to looking at the dishes she was considering serving two weekends from now. This weekend would be too soon to perfect the recipes and practice preparing them, getting down her timing with Lorenzo, especially since the ovens wouldn’t be delivered until Friday morning. She had learned through cooking over the years that ovens could have a mind of their own and bake slowly or quickly. Each one was like a fine wine and needed to be explored. Vivi thought by next weekend, though, they could run with two new entrées to start and hopefully, a couple of appetizers and desserts, as well.

A knock sounded on her door, and she called, “Come in.”

To her surprise, Ford Carpenter entered her office.

“I hope you don’t mind me stopping by,” he began.

She clasped her hands tightly in her lap, trying to keep her wits about her. “No, of course not. Was there something wrong with any of your pizzas?”

“Not at all. They were fabulous. Just as I expected them to be.” He hesitated a moment and then said, “I’m moving to Sugar Springs. Permanently. I just told my friends.”

Her heart slammed against her ribs. “Oh? Where do you live now? And why are making the move?”

“I went to medical school in Houston and remained there for my internship and residency. I was asked to stay on at the hospital where I completed my residency. I’m actually head of the ER there now. I’m going to

go into practice with Uncle Rex, though.”

Vivi nodded, finding it hard to speak, thinking about what it would be like to have Ford Carpenter in town full-time.

Especially since she had sworn off men.

“I’m sure your uncle is pleased that you’ll be working with him,” she managed to say.

“I’m just as pleased to work with him. I spent so many days at his practice when I was growing up, soaking up everything I could. He taught me more than anyone in medical school ever did. In fact, I breezed through med school and my internship, coasting along on what I had learned from Uncle Rex. He’s thinking about retiring in about five years, when he hits seventy, so this will be a transition period. We’ll share the practice. I’ll continue to learn from him. Maybe I’ll go solo once he steps away, or if I have enough patients by then, I might need to think about hiring another physician, or at least a nurse practitioner.”

She frowned. “I’m not quite sure what that is.”

“It’s a nurse who has training beyond their registered nurse training,” he explained. “An NP can see patients. Interpret lab results. Prescribe meds.”

“Well, it seems as if you have time to figure all that out,” she told him. “I’m glad you liked your pizza tonight. I’ll be sure to pass that along to Lorenzo.”

“You said you’ll be practicing and perfecting the menu items you’ll be serving on weekends.”

“Yes?” she said, wondering where this was leading.

“I wanted to volunteer in case you ever needed to try them out on someone other than your staff before you serve them in the dining room to paying customers.”

She felt the hot blush stain her cheeks. “You’re volunteering to be my guinea pig?”

He shrugged, his smile utterly charming her. “I figure I might be able to give you some constructive feedback. And get a free meal or two.”

“What do you think I should place on my first specialty menu?” she challenged.

“I don’t know how many entrées you’ll decide to serve, but I’m happy to sample anything you put in front of me.”

“I’ve decided it will only be two choices each weekend,” she informed him. “I want to take the time during the week to perfect the recipes and for

myself, Lorenzo, and Jimmy to be comfortable with creating the dishes and timing things well. Actually, I may leave Jimmy on pizza and salads and simply let Lorenzo and myself handle the new menu items. I may continue rotating entrées, but I'm also interested in customer feedback and would possibly serve the most popular entrées more often or on a regular basis."

"You could have a contest each week on your website and have people vote," Ford suggested. "A randomly-drawn winner could get one free entrée on their next visit. That would get people interested and possibly pull in new business."

Vivi laughed, shaking her head. "That's one thing I need to arrange. A website," she explained when she saw the puzzled look on his face. "Papa never thought we needed one since all we served was pizza and salad. He said people could either come in and eat, or they could call in an order for delivery or carryout."

"Romano's doesn't have a website? I thought that was unheard of in this day and age."

"Papa was very old school," she explained. "I will be making changes—such as adding to the menu—which he likely would not approve. Then again, he and Mama will be gone a year or two, so whatever I alter will be old hat by the time they return to Sugar Springs."

He thought a moment. "I guess in a way it makes sense. He was right. Everyone knows where Romano's is and what they serve. But I get wanting to put your own stamp on things. Making the place your own and not just your family's restaurant. I know you'll honor the integrity and quality of the Romano name—and still make this place somewhere people of all ages want to eat."

"I do want to create a website. I could feature what the next weekend's new entrées would be and hopefully build anticipation for them. The idea for voting on favorites is a good one, Ford. I'll have to think about implementing that, as well. As soon as I can find a web designer."

He gazed at her a long moment, and Vivi sensed something passing between them. Something she had never experienced before.

Something she desperately wanted to investigate.

"I'm leaving tomorrow morning to head back to Houston," he told her. "I have an appointment with a realtor to put my condo on the market. I'll also need to face the wrath of my boss. I emailed him my resignation letter this afternoon and have kept my phone turned off since then."

“Do you think he’ll be angry or upset with you?”

Ford laughed. “I think he’ll try to talk me out of leaving, but my mind is made up. I was looking for a change. Emergency room medicine is one of the most intense, demanding jobs on the planet. Dozens of splits-second decisions are made every hour. It wears on you. There’s never a dull moment, but there’s never time to catch your breath, either. I routinely work eighteen-hour days. Sometimes longer.”

He paused. “I love being a doctor but I’m in my mid-thirties now. I don’t want to look up and find all I was in life was an ER physician.”

“You’re saying you want a life outside medicine. Outside work. I get that. The restaurant business can be all-consuming, too, especially if you’re in management and trying to cook at the same time.”

“Would you like to have breakfast at Ida Lou’s with me tomorrow morning?” Ford asked out of the blue. “I’d like to hear more about the dishes I’ll be tasting.”

A warmth spread through Vivi, and she smiled at the handsome doctor. “So, you’ve officially made yourself my taste-tester?”

“If you’ll have me. Not that your staff wouldn’t give you honest feedback, but I have no association with Romano’s—other than the fact I’m mad for your pizza. I think I could be objective and help you tweak things before you serve the dishes to paying customers. What do you say, Vivi? Breakfast at seven-thirty tomorrow?”

“It’s a date,” she said and then shook her head. “I didn’t mean it that way,” she said quickly, sensing her cheeks heat.

Ford smiled slowly, a smile which would charm a woman into doing anything.

“I would like it to be a date. If you’re up for it, that is.”

She cleared her throat, trying to be more business-like, and said, “Let’s have breakfast then, Ford. We can talk about food.”

“And maybe a few other things?” he asked, his eyes twinkling.

“We’ll see,” she said primly. “You better get back to your friends.”

“Meet you at the diner, Vivi.”

He left her office, and she was glad she had remained seated during their conversation because her legs most likely wouldn’t have supported her. She picked up her pen, trying to get back to work, and found her hand trembled. She set down the pen.

“This is ridiculous,” she told herself. “Just because you had a massive

crush on him when you were thirteen doesn't mean you need to continue to fantasize about him."

But he *had* asked her out. He did say it was a date.

Vivi shook her head. She had sworn off men years ago after her horrible experience with Beck. Her track record before Beck was riddled with men who had told her how much they cared for her—and every one of them had betrayed her. She had decided after Beck's death to concentrate on her career. Men were distractions who had only caused her heartache in the past. She needed to keep her focus on Romano's and putting her own stamp on the place. Yes, she would let Ford Carpenter taste a few of her dishes, and that would be it. Their relationship would go no further. In fact, there would be no relationship.

She relented. Well, perhaps a friendship. Ford had always been a nice, easygoing guy. It didn't seem he had changed all that much. It would be nice to call him a friend.

Of course, she would not be able to go to him as a patient. She had seen his uncle while she was growing up, but her last appointment with Dr. Carpenter had been before she left to go to Italy after high school. The thought of Ford slipping his stethoscope beneath her blouse had her growing hot all over.

Vivi returned to the dining room and circulated one more time. She saw that Ford's party was paying their bill and would be leaving soon. She passed the hostess desk as the phone rang and decided to get it since Linda was seating a couple on the far side of the room.

"Romano's. This is Vivi. How may I help you?"

"Thank God!" a woman said, her desperation obvious.

Immediately, she was wary and asked, "What can I do for you, ma'am?"

"This is Sandy Carpenter. I've been trying to reach my nephew. Ford Carpenter. Is he still at Romano's?"

"Yes, Mrs. Carpenter. He is—but it looks as if he's about to leave. Would you like to speak to him?"

"Please, get him. I need to tell him something. Something awful has happened."

"Are you all right, Mrs. Carpenter?" Vivi asked, concerned.

"No, Vivi. I'm not. Rex is on the floor next to me." Sandy's voice broke, and Vivi heard her sobbing.

"Should I call an ambulance?" she asked quickly.

“It’s too late for that, honey. Rex must have had an aneurysm. He went just like that.”

Shock ran through her. Quietly, she asked, “Should you tell Ford this news over the phone?”

“I... think he should know before he walks into the house. He needs to prepare himself.”

“Then I’ll get him for you, Mrs. Carpenter.”

She placed the phone receiver down as Linda stepped up. Vivi shook her head and walked across to where Ford now stood.

“It’s your aunt on the phone at the hostess stand,” she said calmly. “She wasn’t able to reach you because your phone was turned off.”

He frowned. “Is something wrong?”

“I think you need to speak with her, Ford.”

He strode across the restaurant, and she turned to the others, who stood watching him.

“Ford’s uncle has passed away suddenly,” she told the group. “Mrs. Carpenter mentioned that it might have been an aneurysm.”

“Damn,” Gideon said. “Where did they take him?”

“She’s at home with him. It happened quite suddenly. I gather so quickly, there was no time to call for help.”

“I’ll get the car,” Gideon said. “And call an ambulance. Have them meet us at the Carpenters’ place.” He hurried from the restaurant.

Vivi looked at the others. “He’s going to need all of you now.”

She turned and saw Ford hang up the phone, a stunned look on his face. Slowly, he made his way back to the table.

“Uncle Rex... is gone,” he said, shaking his head in disbelief. “Aunt Sandy said they ate dinner. They were watching TV. Everything was fine. And then he grabbed her hand and said he had the most excruciating pain in his head. That he was seeing double images. He lost consciousness.” Ford paused. “And... then he was... gone.”

Hope slipped an arm through Ford’s. “Gideon’s gone to get the car. He’s called for an ambulance, just to be sure. Let’s go to the car, Ford,” she urged.

“We’ll follow you there,” Walker said, Rory clutching his arm, tears welling in her eyes.

Vivi watched Ford leave the restaurant. There would be no jovial breakfast tomorrow morning. No flirting over pancakes. Ford would have his hands full, trying to take over Rex Carpenter’s practice and comfort his aunt,

even as he left behind his old life in Houston. She told herself it was a good thing. That whatever had passed between them was over before it had even started.

But her heart ached for Ford. And for herself.
More than she would have thought possible.

Ford escorted his aunt into the sanctuary of First Baptist Church. Every pew was filled, while several people stood in the back and lining the sides of the church.

They took a seat in the first row, next to Gideon and Hope on one side, with Walker and Rory on their other side. Ford was comforted, having his longtime friends present in such a time of sorrow.

Aunt Sandy leaned over and whispered, “Rex would be so moved by the turnout. He touched a lot of lives.”

“Everyone thought a lot of Uncle Rex,” he said, his throat tight with emotion.

The last couple of days had gone by in a blinding whirl. He had helped his aunt in making the arrangements for today’s funeral, and then he’d made a quick trip to Houston, meeting with the head of the hospital, informing him of Uncle Rex’s death, and asking if there were any way to break his contract and leave early.

To his surprise, Dr. Benedict, the head of the hospital, told Ford he had attended medical school with Rex Carpenter, although he’d been a year behind Ford’s uncle. Dr. Benedict talked about how smart and kind Rex was and that Ford was now entrusted with the care of his uncle’s patients. He had immediately released Ford from his contract with the hospital, allowing him to clean out the few personal possessions in his desk. He left the hospital, telling no one goodbye. He didn’t want to get caught up in maudlin farewells, much less explain the circumstances regarding his departure. Besides, the ER was hopping when he left. No one would have had time as it was.

He had texted with his realtor, canceling their original appointment, and then he'd gone by after he left the hospital to sign a contract with her and drop off the key to his place. Ford told her to sell the condo with all the contents included, and they hit upon an asking price. She said the area it was located in was popular and that she would have no trouble selling and closing on the property in a couple of weeks.

He'd stopped by the condo after their meeting, packing his clothes and a few personal possessions and placing them in his truck. As he stood at the door, looking around, he realized it was a generic place. Anyone could have lived here. He had never taken the time to put his own personal mark on it because he was home so little.

Driving back to Sugar Springs after that, he'd known he would be assuming a huge amount of responsibility. He was ready, though. He wouldn't let Uncle Rex down, nor the patients and staff at the practice.

He listened now to the brief sermon giving by the pastor, followed by eulogies from Campbell Cox, who was Walker's father, and Roscoe Hamilton, the former police chief of Sugar Springs. Both men had been close friends of his uncle for decades, and they told several amusing anecdotes, bringing Uncle Rex to life for those gathered here to mourn his passing.

The service ended. No burial was planned because Uncle Rex had felt strongly about donating his body to Southwestern Medical School, the Dallas med school he had attended. The body would be transferred there for study once the mourners vacated the sanctuary.

Ford led his aunt back to his truck, both of them quiet.

The only thing she said on the way home was, "It was a lovely service. Rex would have been so pleased."

As they pulled into the driveway, she said, "I'm going to go to Denton for a few days with my sister, Ford. I need a little time to decompress. I hate to dump everything on you, but I just can't face going into work tomorrow."

"I understand, Aunt Sandy. You come back when you feel you can. We'll get by without you."

"I'll just miss Friday," she told him. "I've already arranged for Sybil Linfield, who works weekends in Tyler, to come pinch hit for me tomorrow. I promise I'll be back by Monday, with my head in the right place."

"There's no rush," he emphasized. "You've just lost your husband, a man who was your best friend and the love of your life. I'll figure out what to do at work."

“No,” she insisted. “I’ll be back on Monday. I’ll *need* to work, Ford. It’ll help me, being where Rex loved to be. Helping others. I’ve got to keep busy. But just for a few days, I want to wallow in my misery. We had so many plans for retirement—and those will never come to pass now.”

They got out of the truck and entered the house. He knew the masses would descend immediately. Anytime a death occurred in Sugar Springs, people gathered, the ladies bringing mountains of food and the men stories to swap about the dearly departed. They’d already had about two dozen casseroles dropped off since his uncle’s death, and he knew more food would be coming this afternoon.

Half an hour later, the house was packed. Ladies from First Baptist had taken over, bringing all kinds of food, including desserts, and were distributing them to those in attendance. Ford ducked into the kitchen, intending to slip out the back door in order to get a few quiet minutes to himself. To his surprise, he found Vivi Romano there. It shouldn’t have startled him. Where there was food, Vivi would be present. He saw her in action, organizing things and giving others instructions on what to do. Where to place things. Whom to feed.

He came toward her and placed a hand on her back. She turned, sympathy filling her eyes.

“Are you all right, Ford? Is there something I can get you?”

“I see you have things running smoothly in the kitchen,” he said.

She shrugged. “Someone needed to step in and take charge.” She turned him so they faced away from others and added, “A few of these church ladies can be pretty darn bossy. Two of them, in particular, were warring to be in charge. I stepped in and helped them make peace by taking over.”

“I appreciate that, Vivi.” He paused. “I appreciate you being here.”

“I wasn’t certain if I should come. I hadn’t seen Dr. Carpenter for a long time. I’ve been away from Sugar Springs a good dozen years or more. But I thought a great deal of him, and I hoped that I could somehow make things easier for you. Your aunt, as well.”

He looked at her wistfully. “I’m sorry we had to cancel our breakfast date. I was looking forward to it.”

“Don’t worry about that,” she assured him. “I was able to test a few dishes on the staff the last couple of days. I got Lorenzo’s blessing, and that means a lot to me. He’s from Italy, a town just south of where my mother grew up. He knows food. We have the three entrées down which we’ll be

trying next weekend. We just need to perfect the apps and desserts now.”

She glanced about. “I would say I’d bring you something, but it looks like you have enough casseroles to last the next couple of months.”

“That’s what Texans do,” he said. “Bring food. To marriages. Showers. Funerals. Every event seems to be centered around food.”

He took her hand and squeezed it. “Again, thanks for being here and helping out. Maybe I’ll come in this weekend and be a paying customer after I’m casseroleed out.”

Ford released her hand reluctantly and stepped out into the back yard, taking a seat on the covered patio so that he was shaded from the bright summer sun. He stayed for several minutes, gathering his thoughts, and gearing himself up again to talk to those who had come to honor Uncle Rex.

He returned and made the rounds again, thanking people for coming, listening to stories they wished to share about their experiences with his uncle. He liked the fact that he now lived in a tight-knit community. He had always experienced a sense of fellowship and belonging during his summers in Sugar Springs, something which had never been comparable to any other place he’d lived. He was ready to weave himself into the fabric of this town, hoping he could be half the doctor, friend, and man Rex Carpenter had been to these people.

Aunt Sandy came to him, saying she and her sister were leaving now to drive back to Denton. That seemed to do the trick, and others started gathering their things and heading out the door.

He carried her small suitcase to the car, kissing her goodbye.

“Call if you need me,” he told her. “Call if you don’t. Call if you just want to talk. Or cry.”

She smiled through watery eyes. “I’m sure I’ll talk my sister’s ear off. You’ve got enough to handle here as it is. I hope you have a good day tomorrow. Your first at your new practice.”

Ford helped her into the car and shut the door, not sure it was his practice. They had yet to meet with Walker to discuss the contents of his uncle’s will. He waved goodbye as they drove away and then told others leaving goodbye, as well.

Walker and Rory stopped. “Let us know if you need anything, Ford,” Rory said. “We’re here for you.”

Gideon and Hope came up, and Gideon echoed the same sentiment. “If you want to get together this weekend,” his friend said, “just holler. If you

need anything done at the clinic or the house, let us know.”

“Thanks to all of you,” he said, his throat growing thick with emotion. “It’s nice to have good friends I can lean on.”

When he entered the house, he was taken by the quiet. For the first time in days, he was alone, savoring the silence. He was used to solitude and didn’t mind being alone, but a wave of loneliness poured through him now, an ache so raw and painful that he knew it would take a long time to grieve for his uncle.

Then Ford heard a noise come from the kitchen and realized he wasn’t alone, after all. He went to it and saw Vivi scrubbing a glass Pyrex dish. She was humming softly to herself.

“I didn’t realize you were still here,” he said.

She glanced up. “There were a few things that needed cleaning. I’ve started the dishwasher, so you can empty it when it finishes. I thought I’d wash a few items that didn’t fit by hand before going.”

“I’ll dry,” he volunteered, picking up a dish towel.

They cleaned the dishes in companionable silence. It didn’t seem awkward having her here. In fact, Ford liked the fact that she was here.

Vivi drained the sink and rinsed it clean of suds, removing the bright yellow gloves she wore, and placing them in the drainboard to dry.

He set down the dish towel and took her hands in his. A rush of emotion swept through him, and he didn’t think he could be by himself.

Squeezing her fingers, he urged, “Stay. Just for a little while. I don’t want to be alone.”

“All right,” she said quietly, gazing at him with those luminous, amber eyes that drew him in.

A sudden longing ran through him. A yearning for something he couldn’t put into words. All Ford knew was that he needed Vivi Romano, more than he had ever needed anyone in his life. He pulled her to him, and his mouth sought hers. The kiss wasn’t a tender one. It was greedy, and Ford released her hands, reaching for her face. He held it as he devoured her, need and greed and want intermingling.

His arms encircled her, holding her tightly against him as he continued his assault on her mouth.

For her part, Vivi gave to him, letting him consume her. He needed more of her.

He needed to be inside her.

He unbuttoned the blouse she wore, sliding it down her shoulders, letting it pool on the ground at their feet. His fingers nimbly removed her bra, and he cupped her full breasts, kneading them. He needed to taste them, and his mouth went to one, sucking it hard, laving the nipple. Frenzied now, he hiked up her black skirt, jerking her panties down. He fumbled with his belt, dropping his trousers, pushing down his boxer-briefs, where they fell to his ankles.

As he ravaged her mouth, his fingers found her core, pushing inside her, finding her wet. He stroked her, hearing her whimpers, her fingers tightening on his shoulders.

Ford backed her against the kitchen door. Grasping her thigh, he pulled it up, stopping himself before he plunged into her.

“I shouldn’t be doing this,” he said more to himself than her, trying to get himself under control.

“Don’t stop, Ford,” she begged, her golden eyes luminous. “I want you.”

She pulled his face to hers, kissing him with an urgency that lit a new fire within him. He plunged into her, thrusting again and again in a wild frenzy of passion.

When he came, he heard her cry out, her orgasm claiming her, tightening around his cock as he emptied himself into her, exhilaration filling him in the moment.

His mouth took hers once more, kissing her until they both were panting. Ford finally broke the kiss and stared at her, still inside her.

“My God, Vivi. I... don’t know what came over me,” he apologized.

He withdrew and stepped away from her, jerking up his briefs and pants, shaking his head in disbelief.

“I’ve never... I’ve never done *anything* like that.” His gaze met hers. “Can you forgive me? I didn’t ask you what you wanted. I just... took from you.” Remorse filled him. “I’m so ashamed.”

She stepped toward him, wrapping her arms about him. “It’s all right, Ford. You’re upset. You’re grieving. Your uncle died unexpectedly—and you never got the chance to say goodbye to him. You needed to affirm that *you* are alive. Sex is a natural way to do so. I get that.”

He framed her lovely face in his hands. “You’re so forgiving, Vivi. But... this isn’t me. It’s not who I am. I can’t believe I took advantage of you like I did.”

She pressed her index finger to his lips, silencing him. “I could have said

no at any time, Ford. I didn't want you to stop, though. I *told* you not to stop," she emphasized." She gave him a rueful smile. "I always had a crush on you when I was young."

"But we had sex, Vivi. It's so out of character for me. I don't rush into things, especially something like this. I got caught up in the moment."

"It's all right, Ford," she reassured him. "If you must know, it's out of character for me, too. I haven't had sex since Beck died. It's been a long time."

Anger at himself raced through him. "I didn't even wear a condom. You could be pregnant." He stared at her a long moment. "I would do the right thing, Vivi. I would take care of you—and the baby—if there is one."

Tenderly, her fingers caressed his cheek. "There won't be, Ford."

"How do you know?" he demanded, his emotions still whirling.

"I just finished my period. It's not a time when I would get pregnant."

He blew out a long breath. "I'm so sorry, Vivi. Truly."

She frowned. "I wish you would stop saying that. I haven't had sex in four years, and it was terrific. Actually, better than any I've ever had," she admitted, a blush staining her cheeks.

"Really?" he asked. "I... well, I haven't had sex in a long time, myself." He cursed softly. "I wanted to get to know you. Over that pancake and sausage breakfast. A picnic. During long walks." He hesitated. "I'd already decided I wanted to have more than breakfast with you, Vivi. I was going to ask if you were willing to start seeing me." Shaking his head, he added, "I just never thought we'd have sex before doing all of those things."

Vivi laughed, a laugh that was deep and rich and full of promise. "It's really okay, Ford. Stop beating yourself up. We had sex. A lot of people have sex."

"Even before their first date?" he asked, chuckling.

"Well, maybe not, but we can't unring that bell. There's nothing to forgive. We needed each other for a little while. It was good. Then it ended. We're fine."

Ford cradled her face in his hands. "It doesn't have to end, Vivi." He bent and kissed her softly.

She pulled away, though. With sad eyes, she told him, "I'm afraid this is the end of the road for us, Ford. No getting to know one another. No dating. And definitely, no more sex."

Ford rose, feeling tired because he hadn't gotten enough sleep. He tried to run through a series of yoga poses and found he couldn't concentrate on holding them. He gave up and attempted to meditate. That, too, turned out to be impossible.

He made his way downstairs and started the coffeemaker, thinking that caffeine would perk him up. As he waited for the coffee to brew, he fixed himself a bowl of oatmeal and sliced blueberries to go on top of it.

Taking his breakfast to the table, he sat, wondering once again why things had gone sideways with Vivi Romano yesterday.

He was still embarrassed that he'd had sex with her. He had never acted so impulsively in his life. He decided he knew why Vivi had shut down things between them. Although she had told him it was the best sex she'd ever had, Ford also recalled her saying it was the first time she'd had sex since her boyfriend died. Apparently, Vivi still loved this man—and his memory haunted her. She probably had felt guilty having sex for the first time while still in love with him. He also knew with Vivi taking over Romano's, that's where her focus would lie. Those were two strikes against him.

But he was determined not to strike out with Vivi in the long run.

He would give her some space for now. They both needed to settle into new jobs and lives in Sugar Springs. Not just new jobs, but ones filled with an incredible amount of responsibility. Vivi was taking over a beloved institution in the community. Even if she had helped run her boyfriend's restaurant in Dallas, she was on her own now. All her attention would need to

be focused on Romano's, especially since she planned to expand its menu.

For his part, Ford was now solely in charge of a medical practice. It would be entirely different from the way he ran his ER in Houston. He would need to not only learn the nuts and bolts of running a small-town practice, but he would also have to gain the trust and respect of his new patients and staff. Uncle Rex had lived in Sugar Springs over thirty-five years. Though Ford knew many people in the town, they didn't have a professional relationship with him.

He hoped Aunt Sandy was going to be okay. She and Uncle Rex had been so close. Especially since they didn't have children, they had been each other's world, working together during the day and then coming home together at night. He was glad she had decided to take a little time for herself, and he would encourage her to take even more if she needed it.

After showering and shaving, he dressed for the day in a golf shirt and slacks, pulling his white medical coat over them. The coat lent a professional air to his more casual dress, but Ford had never been a dress shirt and tie kind of guy. He had worn scrubs in the ER each day, along with his lab coat. He would abandon the scrubs in Sugar Springs, though.

He retrieved the keys to his uncle's office—now his office—and drove to the clinic. He parked in back, where employees did, and he noticed a few cars there, wondering if they belonged to anyone in his office or were those from workers at the donut shop on the lower level.

Ford climbed the staircase and entered the clinic, finding it already unlocked. Lights were on, and he went to the reception area where two women awaited him.

Both rose as he stepped into their domain. He recognized Rebecca, who was in her mid-forties and had been Uncle Rex's receptionist for a good twenty years or more. The other woman, who looked to be close to his own age, was one he remembered from the funeral, though he hadn't spoken with her. He figured her to be Charmaine, who did the billing and filed insurance claims.

"Good morning," he said, smiling at them. "You're early birds. I already know Rebecca. You must be Charmaine. Both of you need to tell me exactly what you do around here. I need to learn the ropes."

Rebecca said, "I place all the appointments on your calendar, including those made over the phone and ones we pick up online. I greet patients as they enter and have them sign in, have them fill out or update their

paperwork, based on if they're a new or recurring patient. I also schedule any follow-ups. I typed up Dr. C's notes and can do the same for you. I'll run copies for you, as well. I put together hard copies for the patient files and make sure their online files are up to date. I also act as the office manager. Handling payroll. Ordering supplies. Handling the cleaning crew. Pretty much anything you ask of me." She smiled. "Even order your lunch if you want me to do so. Dr. C liked to retreat to his office during his lunchtime break and have time to himself with Sandy. He preferred that instead of leaving the office and eating out."

"I'm Charmaine, Dr. Carpenter," the second woman, a trim brunette with a warm smile said. "I handle all the paperwork regarding lab work, insurance, and Medicare. I also help Rebecca out if she needs something. I coordinate between our office and other doctors and hospitals. Sometimes, Dr. C would send patients to a specialist, and I smooth the way." She paused. "We both are so sorry for your loss, Dr. Carpenter."

"Thank you," he said, trying not to become emotional. "I was actually coming onboard to partner with my uncle in a few weeks. My background is in emergency room medicine. I'm coming from a large hospital in Houston, but Uncle Rex wanted me to take over his practice when he retired. He was going to mentor me again while he eased up on his patient load, letting me assume more and more of it until eventually, I was fully in charge."

Rebecca nodded. "He'd mentioned it to me. Dr. C was always so proud of you, Dr. Carpenter, and spoke in glowing terms about you. I know his patients will come to love you as much as they did him, but he will be sorely missed."

He didn't want his emotions to get the better of him, and he brusquely said, "Okay, I want to fit into whatever routine the two of you have. No sense in reinventing the wheel." He paused. "What is the routine?"

Both women walked him through a typical day and what it entailed, including the hours they worked. Rebecca took him to his office and gave him the password, logging him into Uncle Rex's computer.

"I'm sure you'll want to change the password to something you're able to remember easily. If you would, let me know what it is. Just in case an emergency arises."

She explained the scheduling program to him and called up today's appointments so he could review them, as well as giving him a tablet for him to use during examinations. It contained a similar program he had used in the

past, so he was comfortable with how he would be recording his observations and recommendations to patients.

“Here’s the list of patients scheduled for today. Obviously, we also deal with walk-ins and work them into the empty slots, as well as the occasional emergency. I’ll let you familiarize yourself with that. Holler if you need me, Dr. Carpenter.”

Rebecca left the office, and Ford skimmed through today’s appointments. During the block reserved for lunch, he saw the name Cole Johnson and wondered if this were someone Uncle Rex had scheduled as a patient or if he were just having lunch with the man. He would have to ask Rebecca about it. Possibly she would know.

The morning was busy. He had a full slate of patients to see. He dealt with a sinus infection. Removing the cast from a teenager’s arm. Had a diabetes checkup with one patient. Saw cases involving allergies and asthma.

He liked how efficiently things ran in the office, and he was glad that Sybil Linfield had agreed to step in for Aunt Sandy today. Sybil was friendly and professional, very easy to work with. It was obvious she had spelled Aunt Sandy before because she was familiar with the office’s procedures.

After he saw his last appointment of the morning, he said to Sybil, “Aunt Sandy tells me that you work weekends at a hospital in Tyler.”

“I do. I can make as much working weekends as I could if I worked five days a week. It gives me a chance to volunteer at my kid’s schools and be home when they get home every day. I can play mom. Help with homework. Cook them dinner. Then my saint of a husband picks up the slack on weekends when I’m gone twelve hours both days.”

“Well, I want to thank you for filling in for Aunt Sandy today. She said she’ll be back on Monday, but I’m not sure about that. She’s pretty broken up about my uncle’s sudden death.”

“Just let me know, Dr. Carpenter. I’m happy to take any shifts for Sandy. I can always use the extra money. College tuition is looming in the future.”

Sybil left the examination room, and Ford went to the reception area. Charmaine was slinging her purse over her arm and said, “I’m off to run a few errands. Rebecca has already left for lunch. Cole Johnson just arrived with lunch for the two of you.”

“He did?”

“Yes. I sent him to the break room.”

“He does know Uncle Rex passed away, doesn’t he?”

“Yes, Dr. Carpenter. He still said he wanted to meet with you, however.”

“Okay, then.”

Ford went to the break room. Stepping inside, he saw a guy who had to have played football. Cole Johnson was at least six-three, with broad shoulders and a solid frame. He had dirty blond hair and as he turned, Ford saw Cole’s sky-blue eyes.

“I’m Cole Johnson, Dr. Carpenter,” he said, offering Ford his hand. “Head football coach and athletic director for the Sugar Springs Knights. I hope you don’t mind that I kept my lunch date with your uncle, substituting you in his place. Have a seat.”

“This looks really good,” he said.

“It’s from the sports bar on the square. Your uncle acted as our team physician during football and basketball home games. He loved being around kids. That’s the first thing I’m going to hit you up about.”

He bit into his sandwich as Cole said, “I would love to continue that relationship. Having you on the sidelines during home games. Away ones are covered. Same for basketball games. Those are the two sports which seem to be in most need of a doctor readily available on the sidelines. I have a fulltime trainer on staff that would also be there. He covers the other sporting events. I wanted to see if you would be willing to keep your uncle’s arrangements, or if I need to find another physician in the area to take over that responsibility.”

“I spent four years at SMU as an athletic trainer for their football team,” he told Cole. “I worked with the team year-round, both during practice and games in the fall and then during the off-season. I helped supervise their rehabs and worked with them in the training room. I’d be happy to step in and attend the Knights home games. Football and basketball.”

Cole wiped his mouth with a paper napkin, smiling. “That would be terrific, Dr. Carpenter.”

“You can call me that around the athletes. Between us? I’d simply like to be Ford.”

“Sounds good to me.” Cole took another bite.

Over their lunch, they talked about the prospects of the football team for this coming year. Ford said he wanted to come to the high school and see the medical equipment on hand to decide whether or not they would need to update or order anything additional.

They arranged for him to do so after he saw his last patient today, and

then Cole said, “I have something else to run by you, Ford. It was something I was going to hit up Rex about today. The state requires all student athletes—male and female, in all sports—to have physicals before the school year began. The athletes have been on their own regarding this exam. Sometimes, I have to browbeat them into getting it done before they can attend practices and play in games. Sometimes, I think it’s a case of financial troubles as to why they’re dragging their feet.

“Anyway, I’ve budgeted for those physicals to happen at school this year, with the athletic department picking up the tab. I was wondering if you would be interested in conducting them for us. I worked it out, and I think we could get all of them done in five days. It would be kids from both the two middle schools and the high school. What do you say?”

“When would these physicals need to be conducted?” Ford asked, knowing it was already mid-July and that football two-a-days would start soon.

Cole pulled out his phone and brought up his calendar. Turning it toward Ford, he said, “I’d like to try for the third and fourth week of July. Do you think you could clear five days during those weeks to do so? We could even include Saturdays—or even Sundays—if that worked for you, so that you wouldn’t have to block off too many days where you wouldn’t be able to see your own patients.”

“I’d be happy to, Cole. It would be a great way to begin helping the community and meeting new people.”

He pulled out his own cell, jotting a note to himself regarding the dates. “As soon as Rebecca returns from lunch, I’ll put her on this. I can’t guarantee we’d be able to schedule all the days in a row, but I’ll see how close we can come to that. I know it would be more convenient that way.”

“In a row would be ideal because it would streamline the process more. We could set up things in the gym for kids to check in. Maybe even use kids in National Honor Society who could get some community service hours awarded to them for volunteering. We could use the training room, locker rooms, and even the conference room to see athletes. You could rotate between all those places.”

“Okay, then. I’ll let Rebecca work her magic and let you know which days are a go.”

They finished their lunches, and Cole offered Ford his hand. “Thanks for agreeing to stay on in the same capacity your uncle did for us. Rex was a

good man and a fine role model for our students.” The coach grinned. “He was also one of the biggest fans of our teams.”

“I look forward to working with you and your teams,” Ford said. “And thank you again for bringing lunch as a bribe. It was delicious.”

“It’s great to have you in town, Ford. Would you like to come for dinner some night? My wife Nova is a fantastic cook. Our son Leo is interested in a ton of different topics, but lately he’s shown a keen interest in all things science.”

“You want me to come over and talk Leo into—or out of—becoming a doctor?”

Cole laughed. “Maybe you could just answer a few questions he might have about the profession.”

“I’d be happy to do so.”

They exchanged cell numbers, and Ford walked Cole to the reception room, where the coach took his leave. Rebecca had returned from lunch, and Ford ran by her what the athletic director was asking of them.

“What are the dates?” she asked, turning to her computer. “I can make anything work as long as I have them.”

He shared the dates with her, and she called up the two weeks. They peered at the screen, looking at the appointments already scheduled, and decided which days would be best.

“I’ll get on it now, rescheduling the few appointments already on the calendar. It’s better to do something like this during the summer. We don’t see nearly as many patients then. This would be harder to pull off during cold and flu season,” she noted.

“I’ll leave it to you to organize. Cole said he would work with you on the logistics.”

Charmaine returned, and they filled her in on the project. She eagerly volunteered to help with registration and said it would be good if they had an extra nurse on hand. He thought he would ask Sybil. If she couldn’t help, she might be able to suggest someone who could.

Ford finished seeing the day’s appointments, and then he drove to the high school, where he met Cole Johnson in his office. Cole gave Ford a tour of the facilities and then showed him the medical equipment on hand.

As he suspected, Uncle Rex had everything in good working order, and no new equipment would need to be ordered.

They talked about the days Rebecca had already scheduled for the

physicals since she had already contacted Cole.

“Rebecca’s already set up a website and gave me its address for my athletes’ parents or guardians to register for a day and time,” Cole continued. “I sent a blanket email to every student athlete, as well as their parents, this afternoon after she did so. I’ll check in with her daily to see how sign-ups are going.” He paused. “We didn’t talk numbers yet, Ford.”

Cole shared what he would pay Ford and his staff during the five days, and he protested.

“It’s too much, Cole.”

“No. I checked with other AD’s in the state who do something similar. I told you I had budgeted for it. It’s not only for your expertise but the time and inconvenience to you, your staff, and your practice. Don’t try and talk me out of it, Ford. I’m pretty stubborn. Ask Nova.”

He chuckled. “I may do that.”

“I told her I might bring you home with me tonight after we leave here. She makes a mountain of food for dinner as it is. Leo is a typical teenager and inhales everything in sight. He’s a starting wide receiver for me on varsity.”

Ford paused, having thought Leo would be elementary age, but he refrained from asking.

Instead, Cole answered his question. “Nova had Leo when she was very young. Her parents booted her from their fundamentalist home. She came to Sugar Springs to live with Rain, her aunt. When Rain died in a traffic accident, Nova moved back with Leo and took over Rain’s house and art studio.” He smiled broadly. “I’ve recently adopted Leo. He’s the best kid on the planet and eager to meet his new little brother.”

“Your wife is pregnant?”

Cole nodded. “Due the first of October. It’s another boy.”

He couldn’t help but think of all the babies being born around him. Then again, his two friends were a year older than he was and ready to start families with their new wives. Cole seemed a few years younger than Ford, but it didn’t surprise him the coach would want to have children with his new wife, beyond adopting Leo.

Ford couldn’t help but think of having kids of his own. In his ER life, he hadn’t had time to think about that. Here in Sugar Springs, though, the family-oriented community made him stop and ponder that very thought. Of course, he would actually have to be dating someone and marry them before he could think about kids.

Unfortunately, the only woman he was interested in seeing had told him she wasn't interested in him.

Ford wondered what it would take to help Vivi Romano get over her dead boyfriend and want to go on a date with him. Not marry him. Not have his kids.

Just a date. One date.

He decided that would be the goal. One small step.

Hopefully, one which would take him and Vivi in the same direction.

Vivi tried to temper her excitement, knowing today would be a true test of her kitchen skills and the dishes she would serve this coming Friday and Saturday. She had her new friends coming to sample the menu this afternoon. Rory and Hope were already proving to be fantastic friends, and they had introduced her to Nova Johnson, a local artist, and Brynn Mattson, who worked for the school district. The four women would be asked to taste each of the appetizers, entrées, and desserts which would be featured on this weekend's specialty menu.

She had already perfected the dishes and served them several times to the staff at Romano's, but she wanted an outside opinion. She would also be welcoming Sue Smith to this tasting. Sue was a reporter for the newspaper in Tyler and would be featuring Romano's in a story which would be published online tomorrow and in Friday's weekly addition of the newspaper. Vivi had already met with a local journalist for the Sugar Springs *Gazette*, and that feature had run last Sunday in the newspaper's weekly addition.

Everything seemed to be falling into place these past two weeks, in large part to Enrique Martinez. Hope had recommended Enrique to Vivi, saying he had designed her veterinary practice's website and also created ads and a logo for her. Vivi had met with the graphic designer and IT specialist for several hours, working on a new logo for Romano's, which would be used on the website and on the revamped menus. The font she had chosen was Cavolini, which seemed appropriately Italian. Enrique also recommended Steve Pillar, a local contractor, to implement the new logo in the signage outside and on the door as patrons entered the restaurant. Enrique stressed to her to use

restaurant from now on to promote her establishment and not refer to it as a pizzeria or pizza parlor in the future.

The website was easy to navigate, which had been a goal of Vivi's from the start. Besides listing all the toppings for building your own pizza, as well as all the signature pizzas offered by Romano's, it also presented the next four weeks of menu offerings for each weekend, with descriptions and photographs of every food item.

Enrique had encouraged Vivi to do more than list what Romano's served on the website. He said tabs were needed to talk about the history of the restaurant and the Romano family, as well as featuring the staff. Enrique's wife, Christine, who was Hope's receptionist at Keller Critter Care, was a photographer in her spare time. Christine had shot pictures both inside and outside the restaurant, as well as taken individual staff portraits and pictures of every food item Vivi would offer on the weekends during the next four weeks.

While Enrique had designed all the pages on the website, it was Christine who had interviewed all the staff and written the copy for those pages. The website was professional and possessed a warmth which captured the spirit of Romano's. She was incredibly proud of how well it had turned out. Her staff was also excited about the upcoming changes, and they had gone wild over the page where each of them had his or her picture and a short biography of them and what they did at Romano's.

She left her office to go downstairs. Only a few tables remained occupied. She would meet with Sue Smith from one-thirty until two for their interview, then they would go downstairs and she would cook for her friends and the reporter.

Going to the kitchen, she checked with Lorenzo, who clucked his tongue at her.

"Everything is ready for us to cook this afternoon, Vivi. You don't need to worry. It will be—what do you say?"

"All hands on deck," Jimmy provided, causing Lorenzo to nod.

"I'm nervous and excited," she admitted. "I just wish it were two hours from now and everything was over and done."

Lorenzo looked past her and said, "I think your reporter has arrived."

Vivi looked over her shoulder and saw a woman of about forty entering Romano's, looking about with professional interest.

"Wish me luck," she said, hurrying to greet the journalist.

Extending her hand, she said, “Hello. I’m Viviana Romano.”

“Sue Smith.” The reporter offered her hand, and the two women shook.

“Would you like to go up to my office? We can chat there without any distractions.”

They went up the stairs and she had them take a seat on the sofa.

“Can I get you something to drink? Bottled or sparkling water?”

“A sparkling water would be nice,” Sue said. “Any flavor is good with me.”

Vivi retrieved one from the small fridge behind her desk and handed it to the journalist.

“Ask away,” she said, smiling brightly, hoping she projected confidence.

“I’ve eaten at Romano’s before,” Sue began. “The pizza is outstanding. I even spoke to your father at the time, asking if he would consider opening a branch of Romano’s in Tyler. He flatly refused to consider the idea.”

She laughed. “That sounds exactly like Papa. He loved Sugar Springs from the moment he set foot here. He’s always wanted to feed its residents, devoting one hundred percent to his hometown.”

“Would you ever consider expanding?”

“It’s not in my plans currently,” she said thoughtfully, “but I have learned to never say never. I’ll leave that option open for much further down the line. With that being said, Romano’s is a family-run restaurant, and that means attention to detail performed by a family member. I’m not certain I would want to split my time between here and Tyler—or anywhere else, for that matter.”

“But you *are* bringing changes to the menu. Changes your parents might approve? Or would they disapprove?” the journalist pressed.

“Mama and Papa sold Romano’s to *me*, so it’s mine to run as I see fit. I didn’t attend college or culinary school. However, I went to live in Italy with relatives for a few years after I graduated from Sugar Springs High School. I traveled throughout the country, sampling food from every region, adding to my knowledge and list of dishes. I cooked with relatives and put my own spin on their recipes, which had been handed down for generations. I visited with many chefs and was allowed into their kitchens to see what they did behind the scenes. I’m bringing all that knowledge and experience now to Romano’s. The *new* Romano’s.”

Sue was scribbling notes but nodded at Vivi to continue.

“We will continue to serve pizza on our menu the six days a week we’re

opened. I want more, though. More from myself and my staff. Because of that, Romano's will be serving a unique menu each Friday and Saturday night."

"What will it consist of?" Sue asked.

Vivi smiled. "I'm sure you've done your homework. You've seen the entire menu for the coming month listed on our new website. We will serve three appetizers, three entrées, and two to three desserts each weekend. The next weekend, we will change out those menu items in each category to different ones. At the end of four weeks of new offerings, we will allow customers to vote on the dishes they have tried and name their favorites. I haven't decided if the winning dishes will be permanently added to our menu or simply featured once a month, with newer items brought in the other three weekends of the month.

Sue nodded thoughtfully, as she finished writing.

"Basically, it's a work in progress," Vivi added. "I'm open to suggestions from my staff and the public."

"The website has a beautiful design," noted Sue.

"Thank you. That's all thanks to Enrique Martinez, who designed it and has taken over my advertising and marketing. His wife Christine is a talented photographer and the one who took all the pictures on the site. I highly recommend both of them, not just to someone starting a new business, but anyone who wishes to refresh or rebrand themselves and their businesses."

"The website has a history of the Romano family on it," Sue continued. "It's quite a personal look into your family and relatives. I was fascinated by the family pictures going back several generations."

"I think that's one of the things setting Romano's apart," Vivi explained. "Being family-owned and operated, we want a more personal touch. It's not only our expertise in making pizza and other dishes, but the love we pour into our food which sets us apart. We take great pride in what we serve."

"Can you talk about some of the future menu items which you will be preparing in months to come?"

Vivi spent several minutes elaborating on the menu she had set for the next four weekends and beyond, talking about the different regions various dishes came from and describing a few ways in which she would be making her mark upon them.

She concluded by saying, "I would eventually like to spotlight every region in Italy and not merely Tuscany, where we Romanos come from.

When people think Italian food, they usually picture spaghetti or lasagna. The regions of Italy are just as varied as those in the U.S., as far as regional cooking and dishes prepared goes.”

“As the new owner of Romano’s, will you have a hand in management—or will you choose to be in the kitchen cooking full-time?”

“I definitely will be cooking,” she revealed. “It’s a part of me. During the week, our longtime cook Jimmy Sutton will be assisting the new chef I brought from Dallas with me. Lorenzo Grimaldi is originally from Italy, and he has a wealth of experience cooking both there and here in the U.S.”

“Am I right in saying you stole him from your brother’s restaurant?”

Vivi laughed. “If you’re looking at it from Dante’s point of view. Lorenzo was ready for a change and more responsibility than my brother could give him. I’ve been able to provide that opportunity to Lorenzo at Romano’s in Sugar Springs. He’s already taken to the town and tells me he’s never leaving. Lorenzo is in charge of the kitchen during the week. On weekends, though, when the specialty menu is available, he will serve as my sous chef—my second in command—while I will be chef in the kitchen.”

“I think I have all I’ll need for my article,” Sue said. “I’m eager to let my taste buds experience your new menu.”

“Let’s go downstairs, then. I have a few friends I’ve asked to come in for a final tasting before we go live on Friday night.”

The two women went downstairs, the restaurant empty of customers now. At one table her friends awaited them, and she went to greet them, introducing the reporter.

“This is Sue Smith. She’s with the paper in Tyler and will be writing a feature on Romano’s. She’ll be joining us at today’s tasting. First of all, I want to thank you all for taking time out of your busy schedules to be here for this.”

“We’re excited to taste your food, Vivi,” Rory said. “We know how important this is to you, and that makes it important to us, as well.”

“Especially after you brought that heavenly dessert to book club last week,” Brynn piped up.

Sue perked up. “What was it?”

“I’ll yield to Vivi,” Brynn said.

She named the dessert and described what went in it.

“Now, that’s something I would be interested in trying,” Sue declared.

“Then come back not this weekend but the next because it will be on the

menu then,” she replied, teasing the reporter.

Vivi looked at the group. “I’m going to bring you samples of every dish which Romano’s will feature this coming weekend. Hopefully, you won’t fill up too quickly since the portions are smaller than what we’ll be serving.”

“So, like a chef’s tasting menu,” Hope said. “We had something similar when Gideon and I ate at Dante’s in Dallas.”

“Exactly,” she said. “I want to get your opinions on everything.” She glanced up and saw her two servers hovering nearby.

“Lee and Linda will get drinks for you. They will bring wine to those who can have it.”

Nova chuckled, rubbing her belly. “I’m sorry to say I’m out. That’s been the only drawback to being pregnant. I miss kicking back and relaxing with a glass of wine with Cole at the end of a long day.”

Sue cocked her head, studying Nova a moment. “You’re the one who owns the wine and painting place on the square, aren’t you? One of my colleagues wrote a feature on it.”

“Yes, that’s my place. It’s called Playful Painting. You should come sometime, Sue—and have a glass of wine for me as you paint.”

Wanting to help her friends out, Vivi added, “I should have introduced everyone to begin with. This is Nova Johnson. She not only runs Playful Painting, but she is an artist. She paints. Makes pottery. And creates some amazing jewelry. Including these earrings.”

Vivi swept her hair aside to show off the earrings she had bought at Nova’s store earlier this week.

“This is Brynn Matson, who is a psychologist for Sugar Springs ISD. And Dr. Hope Ross, the owner and operator of Keller Critter Care. Finally, this is Rory Cox, a former teacher at the high school, and who now has a new venture. You might want to interview Rory next, Sue, while I excuse myself and go to the kitchen.”

She hoped the reporter would decide to do a story featuring Rory and her budding business of designing skate wear for competitive figure skaters.

Once in the kitchen, Vivi became all business. “We’re on,” she said. “Apps for five, all three. Small portions as we planned earlier.”

The appetizers were prepared, and Lee and Linda collected the plates. Vivi accompanied them to the dining room and as the two servers set the first course in front of her guests, Vivi explained what each was.

“In Italy, we call this the *antipasti* course, while in the U.S., it’s simply

referred to as appetizers. Today, we have prepared for you *Bruschetta Traditional*, a homemade garlic crostini with chopped tomatoes, basil, garlic, *parmigiano* cheese, and a balsamic glaze. A *Carpaccio Di Manzo*, which has beef tenderloin sliced paper thin, cured in lemon and olive oil, with fresh *parmigiano*, capers, basil, and crostini. The final dish is *Portabella Sauté*, sliced portabella mushrooms sautéed in a garlic-marsala wine sauce. It can be enjoyed as I described, but menu options this weekend will include adding spinach, broccoli, or pine nuts to it.”

She paused, nerves running through her. “Enjoy.”

Vivi left the table, wanting her guests to feel free to sample and make the comments they wished among themselves. She would be collecting information from them at the end of the meal, however.

She and her staff started on the three entrées next. She did glance up and see Linda and Lee distributing the questionnaires. She had asked the servers to do so once the diners finished each course so that those sampling could provide immediate feedback while the dishes they had just tasted were still fresh in their minds.

Vivi was in the zone now, using each minute efficiently, her movements precise. She plated the entrées, Lorenzo and Jimmy helping her. When they had completed their task, she looked with a critical eye, seeing every plate looked identical.

“Excellent job, gentlemen,” she praised.

She signaled and her servers came and took the second course to the dining room, where once again, Vivi detailed what was in each dish. She was aware of Sue Smith now using her phone to record Vivi, leaving the journalist’s hands free to eat.

“For your main course, you will be tasting *Tagliatelle Bolognese*, an egg pasta with a rich and flavorful sauce composed of seasoned ground beef and tomato *passata*. The second entrée is Tomato-braised Beef Cheek *Ragu*, which includes wild mushrooms, sweet potatoes, ricotta, gnocchi, and fresh basil. The final selection is *Ossobuco*, a braised veal shank with your choice of *risotto* or *pappardelle*. I’ve included both those side dishes today so you can taste each and see which you prefer.”

She saw everyone’s eyes light up as they studied the dishes and once more, Vivi said, “Enjoy,” before she exited the dining room and returned to the kitchen.

“Let’s prepare the desserts, gentlemen.”

Jimmy had proven to have a real flair for desserts as they had practiced them, and she thought she might expand on the dessert menu because he had a talent in this area. Perhaps desserts could be featured every day at Romano's and not simply on weekends. Papa had always thought pizza was hearty and heavy enough so that no dessert was needed. As someone with a sweet tooth, however, Vivi knew that some people would always make room for dessert, no matter how full they were. That would provide a new revenue stream which hadn't existed before.

She remained in the kitchen, not wanting to hover, and watched the women complete their entrées, taking up pens again and scribbling on their surveys.

Linda and Lee collected the empty plates and returned them to the kitchen.

Vivi went to the dining room to explain the dessert choices as the servers brought them out and placed them on the table.

"You had me at *tiramisu*," Hope declared, as everyone laughed.

"As good as everything has been up to this point," Rory said, "I might have wanted to start with the dessert course first. Everything looks fantastic, Vivi."

"Thank you," she said humbly. "I hope you enjoy the finish to your meal."

After fifteen minutes, she told Lee and Linda to offer them coffee, decaf for the three pregnant women. All of them accepted it and sipped it as they completed their surveys. The servers collected the sheets and told the guests they were welcome to linger.

The only one who rose was Sue Smith, and Vivi went to see the journalist off.

"Thank you again for coming to Romano's this afternoon. I hope you enjoyed what you sampled today. I look forward to seeing what you write about our offerings."

"I normally don't share with people in advance what will be in my article, but I'll let you know that the food was outstanding, Vivi. I thought Romano's pizza was the best I've ever tasted. It still is—but I would come here for any of the entrées I ate today." Sue paused. "I would love to take a little more of the *Torta al Cioccolato* home with me if that's possible. My husband will go crazy for it, chocoholic that he is."

Sue referred to the moist and decadent, three-layer chocolate cake which

was a particular favorite of Vivi herself.

“I’ll have Lee box some up for you.” She nodded to the server, who scurried to the kitchen, returning with a box of the cake.

“I wish you good luck, Vivi. You will see me return as a paying customer. I plan to tell all my friends about Romano’s weekend specials, and I hope my feature on your restaurant will pull in a ton of new business for you.”

“I hope so, too. Bye,” she said, watching Sue leave.

Since the comment sheets had now been collected, Vivi returned to the table and sat with her friends, finally relaxing.

Nova said, “It was fabulous, Vivi. Even better than I expected.”

She held up a hand. “I appreciate you taking the time to test these dishes. Please, talk about anything but food now!”

“I have baby news,” Hope said smiling. “We’re going to have a boy. We’ve already decided on the name William for him, but we’ll call him Will.”

They spent half an hour chatting as friends, and then Vivi stood. “Stay as long as you’d like, but I need to excuse myself. I do have a business to run.”

All the women checked their watches, and Brynn said, “You’ll definitely see Ray and me here this weekend. Maybe both nights.”

The others echoed the same sentiment, and Vivi couldn’t help but smile. She already felt so accepted by these women and the Sugar Springs community. The only hole in her life was one she had not realized was even there before she came to her hometown. But it was huge and gaping.

It was the place a man would fill. Someone who could be her companion. Her friend. Her lover. One she could share things with, about her day and the business and whatever other thoughts she had.

Unfortunately, the only person Vivi could see in that role was Ford Carpenter. The hot doc had gotten under her skin. She had been thinking about him constantly, ever since their quick, explosive sexual encounter after his uncle’s funeral. In hindsight, she should never have had sex with him. She should have stopped him after that first kiss.

But she hadn’t wanted to. It had been like her fantasy had come to life. Ford Carpenter had noticed her. He needed her. And whether she admitted it or not, she wanted him.

The problem now was that she was now addicted. She craved Ford like an alcoholic craved the bottle. And she couldn’t give into that urge. If she did,

Vivi was afraid she would be consumed by it.

By him...

No, she had important things to concentrate on. Many people were depending on her. She wanted to keep Romano's successful, but she also wanted to fill the creative urge within her to cook for others. To draw in customers, ones who would want to come back again and again.

In her world, there could be no room for distractions. She only hoped Ford continued to keep his distance from her.

Because if he didn't, she would be swept away by temptation.

Ford drove to the diner on Saturday morning in order to meet Gideon and Walker for breakfast. He had made certain to stay quiet as he got ready so he wouldn't wake Aunt Sandy.

She had returned from her sister's still feeling blue, but she had told Ford that she had spent many good years with Rex, and he wouldn't want her to mope around for the rest of her life. She shared that she had no interest in ever marrying again, but she would enjoy working for as long as he would have her at the clinic, while also seeing her friends and trying to move on with her life.

The two of them had met with Walker in his office regarding Uncle Rex's will. As Ford had suspected, Aunt Sandy received the bulk of the estate. She was left the house, which had been paid off a few years earlier, as well as all the funds in their checking and savings accounts. She had also received the stocks and bonds and other investments, as well.

Ford had been awarded the medical practice, which included the building it was housed in and the land it sat upon. The latter had surprised him, as he discovered Uncle Rex had purchased both the land and the remaining space within the building from the developer. Walker explained how Ford was now the new landlord and would be collecting rent from the other tenants. It did come with maintaining the building for those tenants, however, and his friend presented him with a list of service providers Uncle Rex had used in the past.

He had thought his uncle might have left half of the practice to Aunt Sandy, but Walker assured him that thanks to the multitude of investments Rex Carpenter had made over the years, his wife would be well taken care of.

For her part, Aunt Sandy had urged Ford to remain in the house for as long as he wished. She had even told him once his Houston condo sold, he might want to take that money and use it as a down payment on the house, explaining that while she loved the place and it had many good memories for her, she had always thought it was much too large for the two of them. Aunt Sandy had said they'd hoped to raise a large family in it, which had never been in the cards for them. She told him she would prefer living in something smaller, telling Ford she could see him raising his own family there someday.

For his part, he thought it was a sound idea and a good investment. He had always loved spending summers in the house and could see how it could be a happy home.

He just needed to arrange for a wife and kids to help fill it.

That led his thoughts back to Viviana Romano.

Ford had deliberately left her alone, not even ordering a pizza for pick-up, since the day of the funeral.

The day they'd had sex.

He didn't know how he could compete with a dead man. In Vivi's eyes, her boyfriend was probably perfect. With a few years having passed since his death, she most like had idealized him and their relationship. Even though Vivi had told him that she didn't even want them to be friends, Ford wanted that—and much more. He hadn't yet figured out a way to convince her to change her mind, wondering if that might even be a possibility.

He shook his head as he locked his car and approached the door to the diner. He loved his friends but was loathe to ask for their advice regarding this matter. Maybe he should, though. He had no idea how to win Vivi over. Perhaps his two married friends would have a magic suggestion for him.

Entering the diner, he saw Walker wave and headed to the table where his friend sat.

"Gideon not here yet?" Ford asked, taking a seat on Walker's left.

"Oh, Gid's here all right. Having to play nice." Walker nodded his head, and Ford saw that Gideon was seated in a booth holding Mayor Tommy Milton.

"Will he be eating with the mayor or us?" Ford wondered aloud.

"Us. He can only handle Mayor Milton in extremely small doses," Walker informed him, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

Ford caught Gideon's eye. His friend must have made his excuses because he got up and shook hands with Milton, heading toward their table.

Sliding into a chair, Gideon said, "Remind me why people elected Tommy Milton mayor of Sugar Springs," he said quietly.

Walker laughed. "Because it's a small town and Tommy Milton is a good old boy? Actually, I think his brother Joe Bob would make for a better mayor, truth be told."

As Ida Lou set three coffees in front of them, Ford asked, "Is Joe Bob still principal at the high school?"

"He is," Ida Lou responded, whipping out her pad. "What'll it be, fellas?"

They placed their orders, and he took a sip of the coffee, seeing it was too hot to drink.

"What are you doing today?" Gideon asked him.

"Same thing I did last Saturday," he replied. "Going up to the office and reading through the files. I'm trying to get familiar with all of Uncle Rex's patients and their aches and ailments. I made some good headway last weekend. I should be able to finish reading everything today."

"How about you come and have dinner with Hope and me tonight?" Gideon asked.

"I don't need to be babysat," he told his friend. "You and Hope work hard during the week. You've even mentioned that she works half a day on Saturdays at the clinic. You need to enjoy your time together, especially before that baby comes."

He glanced to Walker. "Same thing. I don't need pity invites."

"It wouldn't be out of pity if we asked you to dinner," Walker said. "You're our friend. We like seeing you."

"I also know how much the two of you are in love with your wives. You need to soak up all the time with them while you can because your lives are going to be incredibly busy once those babies arrive."

"Maybe if I ask you to come babysit the twins, we'll get to see you," Walker teased. "Seriously, it would be good to see you this weekend. We could order some pizza and simply hang out."

"Speaking of pizza," Gideon said, "the four of us went to Romano's last night."

Carefully, Ford said, "Last night was the start of the new menu offerings, wasn't it?"

"It was," Walker confirmed. "Everything that came out of the kitchen was incredible. It's nice for Sugar Springs to have a place that doubles as a family restaurant and then a weekend getaway for couples."

“I think they did a brisk delivery of pizzas last night, though,” Gideon said. “I saw Mark Jensen leave several times with stacks of pizzas to deliver. It must’ve been families who normally go to Romano’s on a Friday who just ordered takeout because the restaurant was full of adults trying Vivi’s new menu.”

“I read the article featuring Romano’s in the Sugar Springs *Gazette*,” Ford said.

“You should read the one in the Tyler paper,” Gideon said. “Hope and Rory went to a tasting at the restaurant the other day when some journalist did. She wrote a really nice article praising Romano’s. You can see it online.”

“I’ll have to check it out,” he said neutrally as Ida Lou delivered their breakfasts and left.

“Are we going to address the elephant in the room?” Walker asked nonchalantly before looking pointedly at Ford.

“What?” he asked defensively.

“I think you’re interested in Vivi Romano,” his friend stated. “I know she’s busy with the restaurant now, but you need to find a time to take her out. Get to know her. I think the two of you would really hit it off.”

He sighed. “I would like nothing better than that,” he admitted. “But Vivi isn’t biting.”

Gideon frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I expressed my interest in her. She shut me down. Said she didn’t want to be friends, much less go out with me.”

Gideon shook his head. “That doesn’t sound like the Vivi I know. Maybe she just wants to concentrate on getting the new menu off the ground.”

“I don’t think so,” Ford said dejectedly. “The sad thing is, I’m intrigued by her. No one else is on my radar.” He hesitated. “I think she isn’t over the dead boyfriend she mentioned to us.”

Walker slapped him on the back. “Then you’re going to have to figure out a way to get her to move on. I have faith in you, Ford Carpenter. I can picture you and Vivi together.”

The problem was that Ford couldn’t see himself with anyone *but* Vivi Romano. He didn’t know why he was so taken with her. Of course, the sex had been phenomenally hot, but he wanted to get to know Vivi as a person. He would keep to himself, though, what had passed between them. It was the least a gentleman could do.

“So, how are you going to go about winning Vivi over?” Walker asked.

“Obviously, you have to go to Romano’s,” Gideon observed. “It’s where she’s spending the bulk of her waking hours. I say go tonight and have dinner there, Ford. Not only will you get an excellent meal, but it could help put you on her radar.”

“You’re right,” he agreed, not having any ideas on his own. “I think I’ll do that very thing.”

They dropped the topic of Vivi and moved on to other things.

“Aunt Sandy mentioned that she might want me to buy the house from her.”

“She wants to leave it?” Walker asked, his surprise evident.

He shrugged. “I think even though she told me it has a wonderful memories for her, it will be hard for her to move on because of those memories. She probably realizes this is a new chapter in her life, and that calls for a new place to live.”

“Are you even interested in buying something so large?” Gideon interjected. “It would be a terrific house to raise a family in, though,” he mused.

Inadvertently, his friend had directed Ford’s mind back to Vivi.

“Can you swing that financially?” Walker asked. “Not trying to pry or anything.”

“Actually, with me inheriting the practice and not having to pay anything for it, I’m in decent shape. I’ve never been one to run up debt. I pay my credit card balance at the end of each month. The only thing I owe money on is my condo and not much on it. Once it sells—and my agent told me yesterday that she figures some strong offers will come in after today’s open house—I could use those proceeds to put a healthy down payment on the house and then take out a mortgage for the rest.”

“Don’t involve any real estate agents,” Walker advised. “They’ll just take a percentage on both the buying and selling end. I can handle the sale for you and Sandy for free.”

“No,” he protested. “I’ll pay you for your time, Walker.”

“It would be pretty simple and straightforward. Of course, with it being family, that can be a sticky issue sometimes. I would still have an inspector come in and see what—if anything—needs to be done before you make an offer and take ownership. I’m sure you’ll give Sandy a fair price so she can be taken care of and find something for herself. Just let me know once the condo is sold how you want to move forward.”

They finished their meal and went their separate ways. Ford drove directly to the clinic and spent all day there, reviewing patient files. He finished up just before four o'clock, satisfied that he now had a good handle on the people he would be serving in his practice. He had found since he had taken over Uncle Rex's clinic that he enjoyed the slower pace and spending time talking with patients. It was a different way to practice medicine, vastly different from the frenetic pace he'd been accustomed to in the ER in Houston. In Sugar Springs, he was able to take his time and get to know the patient and the reason they'd come in. Aunt Sandy, who sat in on each exam, had done a great job of nudging the more talkative ones along so that he could stay on time, while also helping the more introverted ones speak up about why they'd come in.

Still, he was considering the idea of hiring someone in the future. Whether it was bringing another partner on board who could assume half the practice and its expenses and patients or simply a nurse practitioner to help ease his workload, he would need to think which might be best. He still had plenty of time to make a decision, though. In usual Ford fashion, he wasn't going to rush into anything.

On the way home, his realtor called. He answered, saying, "Tell me you have good news for me."

"It's what I thought. We got four solid offers today, Ford. Two of them over asking. The other two which are quite competitive—and well over asking price."

Briefly, she told him about the two buyers with the highest offers, recommending which offer he should accept and why.

"Do it," he said. "The sooner I can wrap this up, the better. I may be buying something here in Sugar Springs. The sooner I have the funds to do so, the better."

"I'll call the client then and get the paperwork started. I'll keep you in the loop, Ford."

He parked his truck and went inside the house, finding Aunt Sandy reading in the family room.

"How was your breakfast with your friends?" she asked. "You were so quiet leaving the house this morning. I didn't even wake up until after nine o'clock. I never sleep that late."

"They're fine," he told her. "The four of them went to Romano's last night to try out the new offerings."

“I’ve already heard from a couple of my friends who ate there last night. They were raving about the food. I’d ask if you might want to go with me tonight to try it, but I’m meeting a few friends at the sports bar for an early dinner. We’re going over to do a session at Playful Painting after that.”

“Glad you’re getting out. I’ll be curious to see what you paint this time around.”

Aunt Sandy left the house soon after to meet her friends. Ford decided that he would commence his operation of trying to woo Vivi. He changed into a sports shirt and khakis, trying to look a little more presentable, and left for downtown. He had studied the menu, which had appeared on the new website, noting Vivi had listed the next four weekends and menu items to be offered. She had taken his advice, and there was as mention of a reader poll which would occur so that customers could vote on their favorites.

He entered the dining room a few minutes before six, not having made a reservation, and wondered if he would even be able to claim a table. He hadn’t thought about reserving a spot, not realizing just how popular Romano’s new dining options would be.

Louise Sutton, the longtime hostess and wife of Jimmy, greeted him. “Hi, Dr. Carpenter. Just you—or are you meeting someone?”

“It’s just me,” he said. “Do you have a spot for me as a walk-in?”

“You’re in luck. Tonight only, I’m betting. In the future? I suggest you make a reservation if you’re coming on a Friday or Saturday night. Follow me.”

Louise took him to a table for two, and he seated himself, accepting the menu from her.

“Enjoy,” she said breezily.

Ford had deliberately taken the seat which faced the kitchen, which was open to the dining room via a section where plates were placed for the servers to pick up. It allowed him a good view of Vivi in action. She wore her chef’s white jacket and black pants, and she looked efficient—and quite beautiful.

Lee Sommers appeared. He had seen her this week for her asthma. “Good evening, Dr. Carpenter. What can I get you to drink?”

He glanced at the menu. “I’m sure you’ve tried what’s being served this evening. Do you have a favorite dish?”

“Everything’s terrific, but I’m wild about the *Carpaccio di Manzo* because I like my beef. My favorite main dish is a toss-up. I’d suggest the *Ossobuco*, though. I’d never had anything like it before. It’s incredibly tender

and flavorful.”

Ford looked over the wine recommendations. “Okay. I’ll go with your app and entrée suggestions. And bring me a glass of the wine that goes with the Ossobuco, along with a glass of water, please.”

She smiled. “You won’t be disappointed. I don’t think we’ve had a single customer who’s left unhappy after trying our new items.”

Lee left, giving him more time to study Vivi in action. He had complimented Rory about her skating days, having seen her in action on TV. Vivi cooking reminded him of the same thing. She was constantly in motion, a graceful, whirling dervish who was producing a large number of plates of food for the crowded dining room with efficiency.

Then she stopped to sample something, bringing a spoon to her lips. Lips which he had kissed. Lips which he longed for.

At that moment, Vivi looked out at the dining room—and their gazes connected.

Vivi was flush with excitement, that excitement that always came from cooking.

This was *her* kitchen—and tonight was her night.

Last night, the first in which she had implemented her weekend menu at Romano's, had gone extremely well. She felt every dish sent out had her signature on it. She and Lorenzo worked like clockwork, playing off one another. Jimmy had been placed exclusively on pizzas and desserts, which had worked out well. Obviously, the residents of Sugar Springs still wanted their pizzas on a weekend. They simply ordered them instead of coming in to eat at Romano's last night. Mark had made numerous deliveries until closing time, with a few customers coming in for carryout.

Tonight was much the same. The dining room was exclusively adults, or it had been the last time she'd had a spare moment to glance up. Orders were flowing from the kitchen with regularity. With only her and Lorenzo responsible for all the dishes diners ordered, the quality was evident. There were no workers which needed supervising. No plates to throw out or things to rearrange because everything was up to a high standard. Everything was moving quickly. Efficiently. She was tasting as she cooked, Lorenzo doing the same, and both chefs were pleased with the results. Dishes leaving the kitchen were ones she was proud of.

She sensed the dining room to be full now but didn't have a chance to glance around. That's how busy she was. It was early yet, just a little before or after six, according to her internal clock. Friday night had seen a full dining room during the entire service, and Saturday looked to be shaping up

the same. Though Romano's had never been a place which took reservations, a few people had called last night to make one, and Louise had accepted them, jotting them down. Vivi didn't know if word about that had gotten out, but Cami, who was also working the hostess stand with her mother this evening, had let Vivi know the number of reservations had doubled from the previous night. If things continued this way next weekend, they might have to go exclusively to reservations on Friday and Saturday nights in order to accommodate their patrons.

Vivi took a towel and wiped carefully around the edge of a plate, seeing the entrée appeared perfect now.

"Order up," she said, setting two plates on the pass.

She liked that the pass was open to the dining room because it allowed her to see what was going on. While she had walked around each dinner service since she'd taken over her parents' restaurant, stopping to chat with customers, that would be impossible to do tonight since they were so busy and she was cooking, something she hadn't done during the week.

Linda claimed the two plates and smiled at her. "Nothing but raves, Vivi," the server said, turning and hurrying away to deliver the orders.

Vivi watched Linda a moment, taking a breath, as she reached for her bottle of water and took a big swig. Setting it down, she let her eyes sweep over the entire dining room.

That's when her gaze met that of Ford Carpenter's. The hot doc inclined his head, acknowledging her. Her heart sped up so fast that she gripped the counter because she grew dizzy at the sight of him.

Quickly, she turned, breaking the connection between them, and returned to the Bolognese sauce, stirring it as she tried to get her emotions in check.

Lee attached her latest order to the wheel. "Table four. One Brusch, one Porta. Two Tags," she told Vivi. "Table seven. One Carp. One Osso."

Usually, the chef would call out orders to the kitchen staff, but with it being only her and Lorenzo cooking, she had asked Lee and Linda to announce the orders as they clipped them to the wheel.

Last night, she had shared making both apps and entrées with Lorenzo. For their second outing, they were trying him exclusively on apps, while she was in charge of the main course. So far, that method was working better, with Jimmy managing the pizza orders coming in over the phone. Not one dine-in customer had requested pizza tonight.

Her heart sped up as she stirred her Bolognese sauce, knowing Ford was

in the dining room, wondering what he would be ordering. She decided the single order Lee had just called out would be Ford's because she hadn't seen any other table with only one patron.

She wouldn't do anything special for Ford Carpenter. He was merely another customer dining at Romano's this evening.

Yet it was as if knowing a food critic had come in to dine. The chef and kitchen weren't supposed to know when a reviewer landed in their dining room, but sometimes, they were easy to sniff out. Vivi had always tried not to cook or plate a reviewer's food any differently from anyone else who was dining, but invariably, she would take an extra second or two studying the plate or give it a second swipe, making certain it was more than up to the standards of the kitchen.

Linda appeared at the pass. "Party of four. Two Carps. One Brusch. One Port. Two Tags, one Bol, one Cheek." She paused. "And it's Sue Smith's table, Vivi. Just thought you'd want to know. She's here with her husband and another couple. I haven't heard yet who they are."

"Treat them well—but not any differently from anyone else in the dining room," she said brusquely.

"Yes, Chef," Linda said, hiding her smile.

As Vivi worked, she sensed Ford's eyes on her, even though he was a great distance away. She found her fingers fumbling and paused a moment, taking a deep breath.

"Concentrate," she mumbled under her breath.

She managed to get her entrées out, and a slight lull occurred. Since she hadn't had the opportunity the previous night, Vivi decided to take a quick turn around the dining room in order to greet customers.

At least, that's what she told herself. She wasn't doing it because Ford was sitting out there. She wasn't. Really.

"Liar," she said to herself, knowing Ford Carpenter was the very reason she was taking a break from the kitchen.

She downed the remaining water in her bottle and told Lorenzo, "We're caught up. I'm going to go and check on our customers."

"I'll help Jimmy," her sous chef said. "He's been as busy—or busier—than we have been tonight."

Vivi deliberately started at the side of the room opposite of where Ford sat. She breezed along, stopping at a table here and there, accepting a compliment, thanking people for coming in.

When she reached Sue Smith's table, which was one away from Ford's, she paused. "Why, it's good to see you here, Sue."

The journalist said, "I told my husband and editor they were in for a treat."

The other woman seated there said, "I've never heard Sue rave about a place like she has Romano's this week, and I've read every word of hers before I've printed it. After a few bites, though, I understood why Romano's is so exceptional. I've had pizza here before, but I like what you're doing in your dining room, Ms. Romano."

"Thank you very much. I've been eager to run my own kitchen ever since I returned from Italy."

"You cooked there?" the editor asked, her interest clearly piqued.

"I learned how to cook in Italy," she explained. "I spent a few years living with relatives, learning their secrets, and traveling throughout the country, trying to squeeze out secrets from other chefs. My time in Italy was equal to culinary school times ten."

"Where have you cooked since returning from abroad?" the editor inquired.

"I spent the last several years in Dallas. I worked my way up to sous chef at a well-known steakhouse. I also did some cooking at Il Giardino, which was my boyfriend's restaurant."

The woman nodded. "My husband and I ate there twice. My college roommate lived not far from where it was located. She discovered it and knew we would like it. Who was the head chef again? I can't recall his name."

"Aaron Beckham," she said, mustering a social smile. "Beck, to his friends."

"Yes, I remember I spoke to him," the woman said. "I was very impressed with his soup. *Acquacotta* was the name, I believe. And his *Pappardelle alla lepre*. Mmm. That hare was the most tender I've ever eaten, even during trips to Tuscany."

"Thank you," she said. "Both those recipes were ones from my grandmother. I shared them with Beck."

"Oh, you simply must serve those at Romano's," the editor insisted.

"I plan to serve several dishes from my family," she assured the table. "I will rotate the menu each weekend. I've already planned three months in advance." Smiling, she added, "*Pappardelle alla lepre* is on the menu in six

weeks, I believe.”

“We’ll be back for it,” Sue declared.

“Excuse me. I need to return to the kitchen. Thank you for coming in tonight.”

Vivi turned and her gaze collided with Ford’s.

“Don’t stop to chat,” he said amiably. “You’ve been gone from the kitchen too long. We can catch up after you close.”

She could think of no snappy comeback and rushed off, cursing inwardly for being such a coward. She should have stood her ground and told him she wouldn’t be available after closing. That she had plans. Or merely told him she wasn’t interested in any kind of conversation with him—because she was afraid to be alone with him. Afraid she would give in to her desires and throw herself at him. Afraid to let him into her head—or her heart.

Because he might not leave.

She reached the kitchen, and both Linda and Lee stepped up to the pass, each calling out orders and attaching them to the wheel. Thankful she had something to do to keep her attention on cooking and not Ford Carpenter, Vivi shut out everything else, once more returning to the zone, churning out orders with speed and efficiency.

Things finally slowed again. She glanced at the clock in the kitchen, which she hadn’t looked at all evening, relying on her gut instead for the timing of her dishes. It was a few minutes past nine o’clock. She had decided with the more upscale menu that Romano’s would close at nine on Saturday nights, but she wasn’t going to kick out paying customers who lingered over their dessert and coffee. Still, she knew Louise and Cami would make certain to turn away anyone trying to come in and get a table now.

Glancing around, she saw Lorenzo wiping his forehead with a handkerchief. Jimmy was turning off the pizza ovens.

“These other ones, too?” he asked her, indicating the ovens she had recently ordered.

“Yes. Shut down everything. Let’s get busy cleaning.”

Mark, who came in from his final delivery, immediately put on an apron and went out to bus tables in the dining room. When he was out on deliveries, Lee and Linda bused their own tables. She noted her two servers were issuing the handful of customers left their dinner bills or collecting what was owed.

Vivi glanced at Ford, seeing him sipping on a cup of coffee, looking about the dining room with interest. Quickly, she turned away, not wanting

him to catch her looking at him.

Soon, dishes were washed and dried, counters had been wiped down, and the tables and floor were being cleaned in the dining room. Vivi knew some restaurants left their dining rooms to be cleaned the following day, but she wasn't one to walk out with something left undone. She saw Ford with a mop in hand, using long, even strokes as he washed the dining room floor.

Hurrying out to confront him, he gave her that million-dollar smile and said, "Hope you don't mind me helping out a little. I know everyone is eager to get home after a long dinner service."

Stunned, she just looked at him, no words coming to her.

"This side is done, Lee," he called to the server, who was mopping the other half of the dining room.

"Thanks, Dr. Carpenter," Lee said cheerfully. "You've been a big help."

Linda came and claimed the mop from Ford. "Appreciate your help," she said. Looking to Vivi, she added, "You and Dr. Carpenter can go ahead and get out of here. Everything else is pretty much done. Cami took the cash and credit slips up to your office and locked them in the safe."

"I guess we can get out of here then," Ford said, again smiling at her.

That smile could charm the pants off anyone.

Including her.

"I don't want to make a scene," she said quietly. "I'll get my purse and walk out with you. But that's it, Ford," she warned.

Vivi hurried upstairs and claimed her purse from where it sat in the desk's chair and slung the strap over her shoulder. She went down the stairs, her gut churning.

Ford awaited her. He waved goodnight to the staff, who was dispersing, and threaded his fingers through hers. She suppressed the protest that sprang to her lips and walked out of the restaurant with him.

The moment they were outside, she tried to pull her fingers from his.

"I'm trying to free my hand," she told him when his fingers tightened around hers.

He shrugged. "My fingers don't seem to be cooperating." He glanced down at their joined hands and back up at her. "They like right where they are."

"Ford, I—"

"Let's take a walk, Vivi," he suggested, and she found herself in step with him.

Exasperated, she let out a long breath.

Which he ignored.

Okay, two could play this game, whatever it was. She tamped down her exasperation and fell into step with him. It was more a stroll than a walk.

And damn, if her hand didn't feel good in his.

She could smell his cologne now, being closer to him. And the heat which emanated from him. Suddenly, a deep yearning for this man overwhelmed her, threatening to make her do something which might be embarrassing in public.

"I've always liked the town square," he said. "I'd ride my bike to the drugstore with Walker and Gideon and look through comic books when we were young. I got my hair cut at the barbershop. I'd walk to the bakery and pick up something for Aunt Sandy. And I loved getting pizza at Romano's." He paused. "I hear you were the one who actually made a lot of pizzas back in the day."

"Papa put me to work when I was really young. At first, it was just kneading the dough. Gradually, he taught me more and more. How to slice vegetables and where to place them. How much meat should be used. How much sauce to ladle onto each size of pizza. The secret to placing just the right amount of cheese. Before I knew it, I was putting whole pizzas together. I learned to take pride in my work. I especially enjoyed seeing the joy on the faces of customers when they bit into a slice and savored it."

Vivi paused. "I remember watching you. You always had the most expressive face. You seemed truly appreciative of every bite."

"I was," he told her. "Pizza was a Sugar Springs luxury, not something I got at home."

"Your parents didn't like pizza?"

"We couldn't afford pizza," he admitted. "We never ate out. I ate subsidized, free breakfasts and lunches at school. Mom worked double shifts at a restaurant. She would bring home boxed-up, half-eaten portions of food people hadn't finished. I ate it because I always seemed to be hungry."

His words pulled back a curtain from his past. "I didn't know things were so difficult for you at home."

"My parents sent me to Uncle Rex and Aunt Sandy's during the summers because it meant one less mouth to feed. Things were tight. Really tight. We didn't have insurance, so I always tried not to get sick. Or if I did, I tried to hide it. I had some nice clothes to wear because my aunt would buy them for

me in Tyler and send them home with me. We had to juggle paying the bills. Sometimes the lights got turned off. Or the water. I learned to live with it. Being poor.”

They walked across the street to the center of the square, where a beautiful gazebo sat. Mounting the steps, they took a seat on the bench.

“Coming to Sugar Springs each summer meant more than just seeing the friends I’d made and spending time with Uncle Rex and Aunt Sandy. It meant eating three complete meals a day and even snacks, if I wanted them. I got to watch TV. Check out books from the library. Play on a sports team. We went fishing and camping at Sugar Lake. I swam and played pick-up basketball. Got ice cream and pie at the diner.”

Ford glanced out at the square. “Sugar Springs was a world I got to visit for a few months each year. Everything was clean and nice and fun. Coming back here to live and work is nothing short of a dream.”

She’d had no idea how difficult his life had been when he went home each year. Something told her even Gideon and Walker hadn’t known the depths of poverty Ford had endured when he was away from this East Texas oasis.

“I’m glad you found your way back here,” she said softly. And something made her add, “To me.”

He whipped his head around, his gaze piercing Vivi to her soul.

“Do you really mean that, Vivi?”

She wanted to protest. Wanted to hide her feelings from him. But he had been honest with her. She owed him as much.

“I’m happy you’re living here, Ford.” She swallowed. “I’m sorry you lost your uncle, but Sugar Springs has gained a dedicated physician—and a good man.”

“I try to be,” he said, his eyes searching her face. “I know I didn’t prove that to you the day of Uncle Rex’s funeral.”

“Please, don’t say that,” she said firmly. “Whatever you think, you didn’t take advantage of me. I told you that. I had a crush on you from almost twenty years ago. It was nice that you finally noticed me.”

“I wish I would’ve noticed you back then,” he said, his fingers grazing her cheek.

“No, I was too young for you,” she insisted. “You were four or five years older. That’s like twenty-five years difference in age when I was thirteen and you were seventeen or eighteen.”

His thumb rubbed her bottom lip, slowly moving back and forth, causing delicious tingles to zip through her.

“It’s not such a big gap now,” he told her. “I’m thirty-five. Well, thirty-six in a couple of weeks.”

“I’ll be thirty-two next month,” she said, swallowing, wishing he would kiss her.

“You said you didn’t want to get to know me. Date me. Have sex with me. Why, Vivi?”

Her hand went to his, pulling it from her lip before she went insane. How could she tell him that if they began seeing each other it would just turn out to be a mistake? She didn’t want to dredge up her past. All the times she’d tried so hard, and yet the men she had been seeing found her lacking. It had happened in high school. In Italy. Twice in Dallas, the final time being her disastrous relationship with Beck.

“I could see you had finally noticed me. But I’ve just moved back to Sugar Springs myself, Ford. I’ve taken on a huge amount of responsibility, buying the restaurant from Papa and Mama. Actually, Paige, my best friend, is the one who bought it. She’s my silent partner, something I haven’t told a soul. She owns half of Romano’s, and she loaned me the money for my half. I’ve spent a few years climbing out of debt. Without Paige and Tanner helping me out, though, I never could have come back and taken over Romano’s.

“I’m going to pay her back as soon as I can, and I want to buy her out eventually. That’s why I’m so laser-focused on making things a success.” She hesitated. “That means a majority of my time will be spent concentrating on Romano’s. I don’t have time to have a relationship with someone. At least, not the kind of relationship I want.”

He squeezed her fingers. “I’m happy to feed on the crumbs, Vivi. You can’t give twenty-four hours a day to the restaurant. You have to take a little time for yourself.” He smiled gently at her. “I just want to be included in a tiny bit of that time.”

“I’m lousy with relationships,” she said bluntly, knowing that would have to scare him off. “And I think—other than the other day—I’m not too hot at having sex, either.”

Ford smiled, a smile that warmed Vivi to her soul.

“I think you are loyal and thoughtful. Those two things go a long way in building a relationship. As far as sex goes? I think we have chemistry, Vivi.

I'm not ready for us to try sex again. Not for a while, at least. I told you I want to get to know *you*. Vivi, the person. Vivi, the chef. Vivi, the businesswoman. After that, sex would definitely be on the table if you were still interested."

"Oh, Ford," she said, her voice—and resolve—wavering. "I just don't know how much of myself I can give to you."

She felt a tear cascade down her cheek, and he brushed it away with the pad of his thumb.

"Wasn't it Lao Tzu who said, '*The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step?*'" He gazed at her steadily. "Just take a few steps with me, Vivi. We don't have to hurry. We can take our time. Let's simply walk together a bit and see if we're a good fit or not. If we aren't, I promise I'll let go."

"What do you say?"

Vivi felt as if she stood at the edge of a precipice. She could either back up and avoid the adventure that awaited her.

Or she could take a leap of faith.

"I'm willing to give it a try. For a little while."

Ford smiled. "Good."

His hand cupped her nape, steadying her, as his lips touched hers. The kiss was gentle. Sweet. All too brief.

But possibly the start of something which might change her life.

Vivi didn't have Ford Carpenter figured out.
And that bothered her. A lot.

After last night's tender kiss, Ford hadn't attempted another one. Instead, he had laced their fingers together, and they had sat on the bench in the gazebo at least another hour, just talking. She kept thinking he would want more from her physically, but he had seemed content simply chatting, getting to know more about her. He'd pulled a few stories out of her about growing up with Dante and her time in Italy. In turn, he'd regaled her with humorous stories from medical school and his early days as an intern, as well as talking about some of the odd cases which had come through his ER doors.

Today was Sunday, and it was her one day of the week off from the restaurant. Romano's was open from eleven to seven, but Vivi had decided she wouldn't go in on Sundays, preferring to work in solitude on Mondays when the restaurant was closed for business. Ford had asked her if she had plans today, and she had told him she didn't. She had volunteered to cook dinner for him, though. In her mind, food and love were intermingled.

No, she chastised herself. She couldn't use the word love when referring to Ford. Simply because she'd had a crush on him all those years ago and fancied herself in love with him didn't mean she was in love now. Her previous attempts at relationships—stretching back to her high school years—where she thought she had been in love, had proven one-sided, with every boyfriend cheating on her. She thought perhaps she had been too careful, holding back a part of herself, and perhaps that was why each man had found her lacking and went looking elsewhere.

The one time in her adult life she had let love rule both her head and heart, it had proved to be a fiasco she wasn't willing to repeat. She didn't think she would ever be over the hurt Beck had caused her. As good a man as Ford seemed to be, doubt lingered within her. Trust was something she had given easily before Beck, despite being burned by men who'd proven to be unfaithful. Having grown up in Sugar Springs, it was easy to trust those in her community because she knew everyone so well. The same had been true when she ventured to Italy and lived among her Tuscan relatives. Even the chefs she had met during her travels had been so warm and open, sharing their culinary secrets and making her feel as an insider in some special club.

All that had been shattered by her one-sided relationship with Beck—and his overdose. Whether a suicide, a cry for help, or an attempt to guilt her into staying with him, the end result had been Beck was gone. Forever. No do-overs. No second chances. No moving forward. She had been mired in debt. Racked with guilt—which Dante said was undeserved. He had told her time and again that the very selfish Beck had made a choice. She hadn't made him do anything, yet she couldn't help but feel she was partially responsible for his death.

Vivi still trusted a small circle of people, including her brother, Paige, and Tanner. Slowly, she was widening that circle to include people such as Rory, Nova, and Hope.

Yet she had set up an emotionally complicated roadblock when it came to men in general—and Ford, in particular. Yes, he had roots in Sugar Springs and seemed to be genuine, but she was afraid to invest in him emotionally and be torn asunder as she had been before.

Then why had she even agreed to see him?

She told herself it was because if she didn't, Ford would be persistent and pursue her until she gave in. This way, she could go out with him a few times and then tell him it just wasn't working between them. She thought Ford enough of a gentleman to respect her wishes after that.

Since she did have today open, Ford had told her he would pick her up at one o'clock. He didn't say what they would be doing, which intrigued and infuriated her at the same time. She hoped he would take her to a movie in Tyler. That way, they wouldn't need to talk while the movie played. She was already finding him easy to talk to and relaxing in his company more than she should. A movie would prevent too much conversation, which in itself brought closeness.

The doorbell rang, and she rose to answer it, finding Ford at her door, looking more handsome than any man should. He wore a tan golf shirt that caused his hazel eyes to turn a bit green and dark slacks. Her eyes took in his muscular forearms.

How could forearms be so damn enticing?

“Would you like to come in?” she asked politely, trying to get her lust under control.

“Since you’re going to cook dinner for us later, I have an outing planned for this afternoon. Grab your purse and lock up. We’re going bowling!” he announced.

“Bowling?” she asked. “Who goes bowling under the age of sixty?”

“We do,” he told her. “I haven’t been since I was a kid, and I thought it would be something fun for us to do. If I take you to a movie, there’s no interaction between us. It’s too hot to go hiking or fishing. So, bowling it is.”

Shaking her head, Vivi claimed her purse and accompanied Ford to his truck.

Once inside it, she said, “I suppose we’re going to Tyler since Sugar Springs doesn’t have a bowling alley.”

“You are correct,” he said.

Along the way, Ford told Vivi he’d just sold his condo in Houston.

“That was quick,” she commented. “What are you going to do with all your furniture? Put it in storage for now?”

“I sold the condo with the contents intact. The new owner will get the furniture already there, along with whatever odds and ends are in the kitchen and linen closet. I brought back my clothes and a few personal keepsakes after Uncle Rex died. When I purchase a house in Sugar Springs, I’ll start from scratch.”

“Are you thinking about buying one?”

He nodded. “Owning a home makes sense for tax purposes. Privacy, too. I’d rather pour my money into a mortgage each month, versus paying rent somewhere. For now, Aunt Sandy has said I can live with her as long as I wish.”

He paused. “Houses don’t come on the market in Sugar Springs all that often, so I’m going to take my time. That’s something you’ll come to learn about me.”

She wanted to tell him they wouldn’t be spending enough time together for her to learn those kinds of things about him but kept silent.

“I always was very deliberate as a child. I never rushed into any kind of decision,” he revealed. “That’s why it surprised everyone who knew me that I went into emergency room medicine. You have to make so many immediate, sudden decisions in an ER. Seconds can mean the difference between life and death. Your experience and your gut have to work hand-in-hand in order to save lives.”

“That sounds scary. I would hate to have to make those kinds of split-second decisions.”

Ford chuckled. “Maybe I’m an adrenaline junkie and never knew it, but my personality at work was very different from who I am away from the ER.”

“You were the head of it, weren’t you?” she asked. “That’s a lot of responsibility for someone your age.”

“I’ll admit that I was great at what I did. I was ready for a change, though. I had agreed to go into practice with Uncle Rex, as I told you, the day he died. I was going to slowly assume more and more of his patient workload, allowing him to ease out and eventually retire.”

“I’m sorry you lost him.”

“I am, too,” he said. “I still had lots more I think I could have learned from him, and I know he and Aunt Sandy had plans for themselves once he retired.”

He turned into the parking lot of the bowling alley. Cutting the engine, Ford turned and faced her.

“I have spent my entire life living for others and never myself. While I want to be the best doctor I can be and help as many people as I can, I am happy to practice medicine in an entirely different manner now. It’s going to give me the opportunity to have a life outside of work. I spent eighteen hours a day in my ER and was drained when I left. I want more out of life. I want friends—and a family.”

He held her gaze a moment, and Vivi finally forced herself to look away, afraid to be drawn in by him more than she already was.

She said, “Sugar Springs is a wonderful place to raise a family, Ford. I hope you find someone you can do that with.”

Ford remained silent, but she could feel his gaze fixed upon her. Summoning her courage, she turned and looked him in the eye.

“I know this sounds crazy to you, Vivi, but I’ve felt a connection with you ever since I returned to Sugar Springs. I don’t want to frighten you away,

but I hope we can make a go of things. I promise I won't rush you, but I needed you to know that up front."

She shook her head vigorously. "Ford, I don't want to have this conversation. I told you I would try going out with you a few times, but I'm not looking to get serious with anyone. I'm not looking for a husband."

"Why not?"

His question stumped her. Swallowing, she said, "I'm not used to having these deep kinds of conversations with anyone. All I want to do is prove myself at Romano's. That has to be my focus. My only focus. A husband—and kids—would only distract me from that."

She opened the door to the truck and got out. Ford did the same and came around to her side.

Taking her hands in his, he said, "Vivi, you're trembling."

"I'm Italian. We get emotional."

"At least you didn't fly off the handle and yell at me because I let you know I'm interested in you—and having a family."

She jerked her hands from his. "It's early. Give me time to warm up," she said, trying to lighten the mood and move away from serious topics.

Like how Ford Carpenter was interested in a life with her.

"Let's go bowling so I can kick your ass."

"Have you ever been bowling, Vivi?" he asked.

"No," she admitted.

He laughed heartily. "Since I haven't been in a long time, you might actually beat me. I won't brag, but I am pretty athletic. Tennis is my real love, but it was too hot to ask you to play with me today."

They walked toward the entrance to the bowling alley, and Vivi said, "I've never played tennis. I don't even think I've ever watched a match, but you're not the only athletic one, Dr. Carpenter. I played point guard in high school. I'm sure my natural athletic genes will take over today and crush you."

"I wonder if we should place a bet on the outcome," he mused.

"What kind of bet?" she asked warily.

"I don't know. Maybe you cook for me if I win."

She snorted. "I'm already doing that tonight."

His eyes darkened, and she was startled by the heat in them.

"Maybe you would let me kiss you for half an hour if I lose to you."

"I can't imagine kissing anyone for that long," she said brusquely,

thinking how bored Beck would have been doing so. “Besides, that seems as if you would win—even if you lost the bowling match to me.”

“Maybe it would be a win for both of us,” he said suggestively, leading her to the counter to check in.

They rented shoes and paid for three games. Vivi located a pair of shoes which fit her well, and Ford instructed her on the finer points of selecting a bowling ball.

“You’re going to want to be able to handle it—control it—with only one hand,” he told her. “You’ll need to be aware of the kind of weight you can easily manage.”

“I’m strong,” she told him. “Years in a professional kitchen will do that for you.”

She tested several balls, finding one where her fingers fit comfortably in the holes. The ball weighed ten pounds and felt good in her arms.

They went to the lane which had been assigned to them, setting down their balls. Ford walked Vivi through how frames were scored, and then he had her stand in the lane, side-by-side, pointing out the arrows marked on the floor.

“Some bowlers focus on the pins at the end of the lane, but you want to concentrate on the arrows instead.”

Ford showed her how the various arrows lined up with different pins and which two arrows she should aim to throw her ball between.

“You’ll want to bowl straight on for now. We’ll save spins and curves for another time. If you manage to land the ball between those arrows and it heads straight for the target, that means the ball will strike between the one and three pins if you’re right-handed or the one and two if you’re left-handed.”

“I’m right-handed,” she shared.

“Let’s walk through without a ball first, where your hands and feet go as you roll your ball.”

Ford showed her which foot to step out on, telling her when to push her arm straight out, how far to swing the ball back, and how to release it as if she were shaking hands.

She practiced the motions a few times and then picked up her ball, going through the motions several times with him before he told her they would bowl a few practice frames and then begin.

Vivi held the ball to her chest with both hands, conscious of Ford sitting

behind her, watching her. She moved forward, pushing the ball away from her body and swinging it back before bringing it forward and releasing it.

The ball struck on the right side, knocking down four pins.

“Not bad for a first effort,” he told her. “Did you release it between those two arrows?”

“No,” she admitted. “I was off to the right a little.”

“Try again,” he encouraged. “Let’s see if you can hold to a truer course this time.”

She concentrated on her steps and swing, releasing the ball. It rolled between the two arrows Ford had pointed out to her, and it hit the target on the other end, knocking down the remaining pins.

She whirled, squealing, “I did it! It’s a spare!”

Ford had jumped to his feet, applauding her. Without thinking, she threw her arms around him, aware immediately of the intense heat which he generated. She had noticed it before.

When they’d had sex.

Pushing away, Vivi said, “Your turn, Doctor Carpenter. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

Ford picked up his ball, lined up, and with easy, deliberate strides, he swung the ball in a smooth arc, releasing it. It rolled quickly down the lane, hitting the mark.

He turned, making a fist and pumping it. “Yes!” he said, celebrating his strike.

“I think maybe you’ve been bowling more recently than you admitted.”

“Nope,” he said cheerfully. “Bowling is just like riding a bike. It comes back to you. Muscle memory and all.”

“I think we’ve warmed up enough. Let’s play.”

He allowed Vivi to go first in the first game, and she was pleased that she broke into triple digits. She finished with a 120 total to Ford’s 188, proud that her first game proved to be successful, especially when she looked around and saw so many pins left standing in the lanes nearby.

Vivi got hot the second game, bowling five strikes and two spares. Ford had cooled, and it allowed her to beat him.

The third game proved to be a disaster for her, mainly because she was losing her concentration. Her eyes weren’t focused on the pins. Instead, they went to Ford’s athletic frame every time he stepped up for his turn. She remembered that hard body against hers, him driving into her, his mouth hot

on hers.

Those memories rattled her, disrupting her concentration, and Vivi threw three gutter balls in a row during the final game. She didn't even break triple digits the last game, while Ford bowled well over 200.

They changed back into their street shoes and claimed their bowling balls to return to the racks.

Ford told her, "Don't beat yourself up. Bowling truly is a hit or miss kind of game. I think you were so über-focused during those first two games that your mind took a break and wandered during the last one."

She kept mum, not wanting to reveal looking at him—and thinking about sex with him—had been what had broken her concentration.

They returned their balls and rented shoes and as they left the bowling alley, Ford threaded his fingers through hers. Vivi wanted to jerk away. At least that's what her head told her to do. But her body craved the feel of her fingers nestled against Ford's.

He helped her into the truck, and the conversation was easy between them as they drove back to Sugar Springs.

Until it wasn't.

"Would you ever want to go bowling again?" he asked.

"Probably in a group," she told him. "I think it would be a fun activity for friends to engage in."

He chuckled. "Most of the friends you've made since returning home wouldn't be able to bowl these days, being pregnant."

"There's always Brynn and Ray," she said, explaining the couple both worked for the school district.

"I haven't met either of them. But I'm game for a double date with them if you are."

Vivi frowned. "Double dating is for people who've been going out together a long time."

"Who made up that rule?" he challenged. "Have you even been on a double date before?"

"In high school. With Paige."

"But not since then? You and Beck didn't double date with friends?"

"My relationship with Beck is none of your business," she snapped.

"I'm sorry, Vivi," he said quietly. "I didn't mean to pry about your relationship with Beck."

She remained silent as they entered Sugar Springs.

The point was, she would have loved to have gone out with Beck and other friends. How could they, though, when they didn't even go on dates themselves? Everything had revolved around Il Giardino and pleasing him. Vivi was angry all over, just thinking about how one-sided their relationship had been and how her lover had used her. Even though four years had passed since his death, she still resented how he treated her and was angry with herself for the way she had put up with being treated as a second-class citizen.

She stole a glance at Ford and then said, "I'm sorry. I don't mean to take anything out on you. I just want to leave the past in the past."

"Agreed. I won't ask about Beck ever again. You'll have to be the one to bring him up."

That was never going to happen.

"I also won't talk about the dozens of women I've loved and left," he said teasingly, easing the tension between them. "I wouldn't want you to be jealous."

Vivi knew he was trying. She placed a hand on his forearm. "I'm glad you'll keep quiet about your very active love life, Dr. Carpenter. I'll also keep silent about the string of Italian lovers I left behind when I returned to Texas."

"Deal," he said, giving her a wicked look, mischief in his hazel eyes.

They returned to her parents' house, and Vivi told Ford, "You're welcome to watch TV while I prepare dinner."

"Not gonna happen," he told her. "I want to help you cook."

That certainly surprised her. "You cook?"

He grinned sheepishly. "That would be stretching it. I toss a mean salad. I put together an amazing bowl of cereal and sliced bananas. I do a decent grilled cheese. I have been known to make an omelet. You've now heard the range of my culinary skills in the kitchen though I am a great griller of all things red meat. Hamburgers. Steaks."

"Then you can sit and watch," she told him.

"No, I want to do more than watch. I want to learn. I know I'm automatically elevated to sous chef status with there only being the two of us, but put me to work. I want to see up close what you do. I want to try new things with you, Vivi. Cooking is just the start."

Against her better judgment, she said, "Then wash your hands and put on an apron. Mama left several behind."

“Yes, Chef!” Ford said, even as laughter bubbled from him.

Ford wasn't surprised that Vivi was a good teacher. She was skilled and knowledgeable, but she also had a sunny nature and a vast amount of patience.

"We're having *Coccoli* with *stracchino* and *prosciutto crudo* for our *antipasti*," she told him. "It's a Tuscan comfort dish. A little on the heavy side, so we'll share the plate over a glass of wine."

She taught him how to make the dollops of dough, and he caught on quickly.

"Usually, you deep-fry the dough. I'm going for a little lighter dish and will use the air fryer instead."

She had set the air fryer to heat before they began working with the dough. She had him place the pillows, which she called cuddles, into the basket.

"While that's frying, you'll slice the *prosciutto crudo*, and I'll cut the soft *stracchino* cheese."

They worked together, using the kitchen's large island as their workstation. She praised his knife skills.

"I'll chalk those up to my rotation in surgery," he quipped.

Once the dough had a golden-brown sheen, she taught him how to plate the appetizer, and they sat on stools at the island to eat their first course. Vivi had Ford open a wine which she had chilling in the fridge. It was light and crisp, a good balance to the heavy bread.

They finished their *antipasti* and he asked, "What's next?"

"A seafood dish." She looked worried a moment. "I should have asked if

you even like seafood. People seem to love it or hate it.”

“I do,” he assured her. “It’s one of my favorite foods. Living so close to the coast in Houston, I would order it as often as I could.”

She sighed. “I have over two hundred recipes which call for seafood. Notice I didn’t serve any for this weekend’s specialty dishes.”

“I don’t recall seeing any on the website, either,” he noted. “And you have four weekends’ worth of menu items listed.”

“Being this deep into Texas, I’m loathe to serve a seafood dish. It’s different for just the two of us. Usually, you can find a couple of good quality seafood items at McKinley’s, but it definitely wouldn’t be enough to put a seafood item on the Romano’s menu. Quality control is very important to me. I want each customer to have a fabulous dining experience. I simply can’t count on getting good seafood in Sugar Springs, especially because it would be limited to weekends. Even then, I wouldn’t want to serve a seafood dish every weekend, so it wouldn’t be frequent enough for me to find a producer and ink a deal for seafood delivery.”

“I guess I should feel special then, seeing I’m getting a seafood dish out of you tonight. What are we making now?” he asked, curious as to what she would prepare for them.

“*Fettuccine aloo Scoglio*,” she told him. “It’s actually not fettuccine but rather a linguine served with jumbo shrimp and middle neck clams. Would you like me to prepare a white or red sauce? I can do either.”

“Dealer’s choice,” he responded. “Or I suppose I should say chef’s choice.”

She taught him how to make homemade pasta. Linguini was fatter than spaghetti, and what Vivi turned out was thicker and yet still delicate in nature. He watched her finish the pasta as he put on water to boil for it, salting it heavily as she asked.

“Won’t that make it too salty?”

“No. The boiling happens more quickly, and the pasta will taste more flavorful.” She grinned. “Trust me. I know what I’m talking about.”

“Yes, Chef,” he said, enjoying calling her that.

Vivi went with a white sauce so they could continue drinking the same wine. She stripped the shrimp of their shells like the pro she was and told him about middle neck clams.

“They’re a mid-sized clam. They have a very rich, firm texture, with a salty, slightly sweet flavor, which will pair well with the shrimp.”

She had them steam the claims with garlic and white wine while sautéing the shrimp. The white sauce, which she'd put on to simmer before they began anything else with this course, was so flavorful, he could have eaten it by itself. Poured over the fresh linguini and topped with the two types of seafood made it a masterful dish, however.

They continued to eat at the island. His knees bumped hers a few times as he turned and faced her as they ate and talked. Each touch caused a thrill to run through him. But Ford knew to handle Vivi with kid gloves. He wasn't going to push too hard or too fast and have her flee like a hunted doe or rabbit.

He took a final sip of his wine. "Everything was delicious. Thank you for allowing me to help—and I use that term loosely. I had fun."

"Wait. There's still dessert," she told him. "I prepared it this morning so it could set and chill thoroughly."

"*Panna cotta*?" he asked hopefully.

"You guessed right," she said, smiling as she left her seat and removed the dessert from the fridge.

Setting it before him, she said, "It's really quite easy to make. You simply dissolve sugar in warm cream. You can leave the cream plain, but I prefer to infuse it with spices. I also will add rum or vanilla. Sometimes, even coffee to it. Then you dissolve gelatin in ice-cold water and add it to your warm cream mixture. That's it, easy-peasy. Oh, you do pour it into a mold. I used these, which are in the shape of various flowers."

She retrieved two dessert plates and tipped the molds onto them.

"Wait," he said. "What's on top? Or should I say what was on the bottom and now on top?"

"Oh, I like to rev things up. I placed caramel in the bottom of the molds before I poured in the mixture. It gives it that crème caramel texture on top, almost like a flan. We need to garnish it, of course. I have more caramel or even chocolate. Your choice this time, Dr. Carpenter."

"Both?" he asked hopefully. "Would that offend the cooking purist in you? Or maybe caramel on one and chocolate on the other, and we could have a little of both?"

"I like how you think."

Vivi dribbled one of the *panna cottas* with caramel and the other with chocolate, placing the chocolate one in front of him.

Ford took a bite, letting it melt in his mouth. "Perfection," he said, closing

his eyes to experience the dessert fully.

“I’m glad you like it,” Vivi said.

What he liked was watching her place the spoon in her mouth and then slowly pull it out, the little sounds of her delight in the dessert escaping her lips.

Her very kissable lips.

When he had finished half of his dessert, he started to trade with her but changed his mind. Lifting a bite onto his spoon, he said, “Here. Try this.”

She looked startled for a moment but took his wrist, helping him guide the bite to her mouth. She opened for the spoon, and he gave her the bite, slowing dragging the silverware from her.

“Mmm. Very good, if I say so myself.”

“You need to put this on the Romano’s dessert menu. Full-time,” he suggested, feeding her another bite, enjoying the appreciative sounds she made.

“I have thought of carrying a selection of desserts full-time. Not just on weekends,” she shared. “I’m also thinking about changing up Sundays.”

“How so?” he asked.

“Our current hours on Sundays are eleven to seven, but I’ve noticed the past couple of weekends since I’ve been here that no one orders before noon. Sugar Springs is a churchgoing town, and most churches don’t let out until noon at the very earliest. We do get a few customers in the dining room, but most people go home and call in an order for delivery or pickup. Because very few come in for lunch and only a handful for dinner, I’m thinking of closing the dining room on Sundays and simply offering pizza to go so people could eat it in their own homes. It would keep from having a hostess or servers on duty. That would save some money. I’ve even thought about putting in a drive-through window for pick-ups. Yes, that might cut down on some deliveries, but I think it could be pretty efficient.”

“Those are great ideas,” Ford said, accepting a bite of caramel *panna cotta* from her, savoring the sweetness of it.

“I think I’ll have Enrique create some ads this week and place them on our website and in the Sugar Springs *Gazette*. He’s also started a Facebook group for Romano’s and an Instagram account. That should get the word out about the new Sunday options. I’ll give it a test run next Sunday. If it works, we can move to that permanently.”

“You’re a smart businesswoman, as well as a helluva chef,” he told her,

taking his napkin and wiping a bit of *panna cotta* from the corner of her mouth.

Vivi blushed. “Thank you.”

“About our bet.”

Her eyes widened. “What about it? I didn’t even know it was official. We didn’t even set what the prize would be for the winner.”

She looked nervous, and he noticed her twisting her hands in her lap.

“I thought a half-hour of kissing would be appropriate.”

She frowned. “I really don’t see how that much kissing would be... well, it just seems like overkill.”

He smiled at her, hearing her catch her breath. Ford was aware that he had a terrific smile—and he knew Vivi wasn’t immune to it.

“If you’ve never tried it before, maybe you should. I think—with the right person—you’ll see how fast half an hour can go by.”

She bit her lip, causing desire to flair within him. Despite her allegiance to this dead Beck guy, Ford had the feeling he hadn’t treated Vivi like the princess she was.

“All right,” she agreed, her lips pressing together primly. “But we stop when I say to. Is that okay with you?”

Ford knew he could kiss well. “I have no problem with that.” Then he said, “Let’s clean up the kitchen first. I don’t want you worried about anything. I’ll need your full attention, Chef.”

Her cheeks pinkened. She stood abruptly. “I’ll put away the food.”

“I’ll start loading the dishwasher,” he offered.

With the two of them working, the kitchen was spotless in a short time. Dishes were washing. Counters were cleaned. Wine glasses had been washed by hand. The empty wine bottle had even been put in the recycling bin.

Taking her hand, he led her from the kitchen to the family room. Ford took a seat on the sofa, pulling her down next to him.

“So, do you start—or do I?” she asked, sounding nervous.

He smoothed her hair. “Don’t be worried about anything, Vivi.”

“I’m not,” she said defensively.

Ford slipped his cell from his pocket, setting a timer for thirty minutes. He turned the phone so she could see what he had done.

She looked dumbfounded. “You’re really serious. Thirty minutes is a long time.”

“Relax,” he said softly, setting down the phone and cupping her nape,

pulling her to him.

For the next few minutes, Ford kissed Vivi gently, feathering kisses on her mouth. Her eyelids. Her nose and cheeks. Gradually, he returned to her lips.

Her skin had warmed, casting the faint scent of her perfume in the air. He framed her face in his hands and kissed her softly, slowly increasing the pressure. Then the hunger overtook him, and his kisses became longer. Harder. Demanding more of her—and him.

His fingers pushed into her hair, tilting her head back so he could deepen the kiss. He nipped at her lower lip, hearing her mewl, then licked away the sting. His tongue swept over her bottom lip, back and forth, tasting her there and then teasing her mouth open. He ventured within, tasting the wine and the sweetness of the caramel and chocolate she had recently consumed.

But there was more within her, a sweetness that was all Vivi, tempting him to go further. He pushed it away, determined to keep to only kisses. As he inhaled her scent, he kissed her thoroughly, pulling her into his lap just to have her even nearer to him. Her arms wound around his neck, and she began kissing him with as much passion as he was displaying. He would never get enough of this woman, not if he was given a thousand years with her. He could kiss her that entire time and still want more.

The blood rushed in his ears, whooshing loudly, yet still he heard her tiny sighs and moans and feminine noises which let him know she was enjoying this as much as he was. Her fingers now pushed into his hair, kneading his scalp. His hands held her face, his thumbs caressing her cheeks, the smooth skin like silk.

Ford broke the kiss, his lips going to her throat, his teeth grazing her pulse point, which pounded out of control. He licked at it, tasting the slight salt of her skin, wanting so much more of her.

Something told him time was almost up, and his mouth returned to hers, the flames of desire rising, their tongues warring now, both winners in this game.

Then the beep of his alarm sounded. Deliberately, Ford pushed away, ending the kiss and any contact with her. He reached for his phone, silencing it. His breathing was harsh, coming in spurts. Hers was just as unsteady.

He looked at her, seeing her eyes glazed and her lips bruised from their kissing session.

“That was thirty minutes?” she asked, dazed.

“Yes, it was. And now it’s time for me to go.”

Rising, she sprang up next to him. “I don’t want you to go.”

“I don’t want to either, Vivi, but I think I should. I don’t want to move too quickly. I promised you I wouldn’t. If I stay, I’m not sure I could keep that promise.”

“Stay anyway,” she said.

That’s when Ford knew she had to care for him. Yes, she might still harbor feelings for the dead Beck, but Vivi was a passionate, desirable woman who had been celibate far too long, thanks to a ghost. She was discovering it was time to rejoin the world around her. But he wanted to leave her wanting him.

Wanting more...

Clasping her shoulders, he bent and softly brushed his lips against hers briefly.

“Goodnight, Vivi. Thank you for a wonderful time today. I enjoyed every minute I spent with you.” He paused. “Especially kissing you.”

“I... I didn’t know people could kiss so long,” she blurted out. “It didn’t seem like... it was only... it felt like... five minutes.”

He cradled her cheek with his palm. “I look forward to seeing you again. Spending time with you. And kissing you. But I’m going home now.”

“Romano’s is closed tomorrow,” she said. “I work during the day, doing business-related stuff. But I could cook dinner for us again.”

“How about I take you out for dinner? You need to take a break. We can eat here in town. Or go somewhere else. Your choice. Think about it and text me tomorrow.”

“All right,” she said.

Vivi walked him to the door. They paused, reluctant to be parted from one another. Her fingers went to his cheek.

“Thank you for an interesting day, Ford. And the bowling lesson.”

“Thank you for the cooking lesson,” he replied.

He couldn’t help it. He needed a final taste of her. Ford wrapped his arms around her, drawing her to him. His lips touched hers, her mouth opening for him. He kissed her deeply, wanting the memory of this kiss—every kiss—to be etched on his mind.

Finally, he released her. “Goodnight, Vivi.”

Going to his truck, he climbed inside. She still stood in the doorway, and he waved to her. She returned his wave and then continued watching as he

drove away.

When he got to Aunt Sandy's house, he cut the engine and pulled out his phone, quickly typing a text to Vivi.

Sweet dreams, Chef.

FORD WATCHED as the blinking dots appeared on his screen, and he waited for her reply. When it came, it was one emoji.

A heart...

In that moment, he acknowledged to himself that he'd fallen in love with Viviana Romano.

Ford's last patient of the morning was a toddler who had jammed an English pea up his right nostril. He had to console the mother, who was crying from the moment they entered the examination room.

"I'm a terrible mother," she declared. "I never should have let this happen."

"You don't need to worry, Mrs. Hardy. I saw this in the emergency room several times a week when I worked there."

"Really?" she asked through watery eyes.

"You bet. Toddlers get into absolutely everything, wanting to put anything they touch in their mouths or up their noses. Even if you're standing right next to them, they can find trouble and act before you can stop them. Don't beat yourself up about this. Just think of it as having joined the Mom Club."

Ford removed the now-squashed pea, and Mrs. Hardy thanked him, asking, "Does it ever get any easier, Dr. Carpenter?"

"Yes—and no," he told her. "Your little boy will grow out of this toddler stage, but each one has its own unique aspects. Preschool years are when kids really start to assert themselves. My advice to you during those years is to give your boy choices. But limit those choices."

She frowned. "What do you mean?"

"For instance, a lot of parents have trouble getting their child dressed in the morning. Set out clothes the night before. Two outfits. That way, you get up and you ask, 'Which shirt do you want to wear, the red or the blue?' That way, your son isn't standing in front of a closet full of shirts or a drawer full

of them, overwhelmed by the number of choices. He feels he has control over his decision, but you've limited that decision."

"That makes so much sense. Why, I bet I could try that with food, too."

"That was going to be my next suggestion," Ford said. "If you want him to eat fruit? Give him the choice of grapes or bananas. Little ones are just little people, same as you and me. They're learning their way in the world, and decision-making is a gift you can give them. If they make small decisions when they're young, by the time they're older, they'll have experience in doing so. Hopefully, when those bigger decisions come around, they can fall back on their training and be confident in those decisions."

The mother wiped her eyes with a tissue. "Thank you, Dr. Carpenter. Your kids are very lucky to have you as a father."

He didn't bother to correct Mrs. Hardy, merely telling her to have a good day and ruffling her son's hair as they left the examination room.

"She's right," Aunt Sandy said. "You're going to make a wonderful father someday, Ford. Speaking of... how are things with Vivi Romano?"

He had let his aunt know he was seeing Vivi and said, "So far, so good. I'm taking things slowly. We're getting to know one another."

"When will you see her again?"

"I'm trying not to smother her, Aunt Sandy. She lost her boyfriend a few years ago. I gather it was a very serious relationship and his death a sudden one. She hasn't even dated since then."

"How did he die?" she asked.

"I haven't asked her. I'm trying to stay away from pressing her too hard about him or her past. But I will tell you that I am very interested in Vivi."

Aunt Sandy patted his hand. "I hope things work out between the two of you, Ford. Any more news on the condo?"

"Yes, I talked to my realtor again yesterday. I've accepted a bid, and we've moved ahead. In fact, the closing should happen today."

"I know that's one less headache for you. I'm glad you were able to sell it so quickly. I'm off to lunch. See you in a bit."

Ford was having lunch today with Cole Johnson again. They had decided to make it a weekly occurrence, with Cole picking up something on his way to save time.

He went to the break room and found Cole already there, opening a pizza box from Romano's.

"Hey, Ford. Hope you're in the mood for pizza."

He chuckled. “When am I not in the mood for pizza, especially when it’s from Romano’s?”

“It still should be pretty warm, but we can always heat a slice in the microwave if we need to.”

He got paper plates from the cabinet for them and asked Cole to retrieve drinks from the fridge.

“I hear that you’re going to be at Date Night this coming Thursday. With Vivi Romano.”

“Yes. Apparently Playful Painting is the thing for couples to do in Sugar Springs.”

Cole looked at Ford, mischief dancing in his eyes. “And might you and Vivi be a couple?” he asked, biting into his slice of pizza.

“I think we are. I hope we are.”

Briefly, he explained to his new friend how he had asked to see Vivi and that she had been reluctant to start a relationship while she was getting her feet on solid ground in running Romano’s on her own.

“I only know Vivi through Nova, but my wife really likes her. Vivi seems talented and efficient. I don’t see how she would have a problem running her business and seeing you.”

“Let’s hope it stays that way,” Ford said, savoring his next bite of pizza.

“Hello? Are you here, Dr. Carpenter?” a voice asked.

“Who could that be?” he wondered aloud.

Cole smiled. “I think I recognize the voice.” He hollered, “Back here, Freddie. In the break room.”

Moments later, a young man appeared in the doorway, his head almost touching the frame. Ford supposed the teenager to be a basketball player because of his height and build.

“Hey, Coach,” the young man said. “Good to find you here.” He turned to Ford and offered his hand. “Freddie Otts, Dr. Carpenter.”

Ford shook his hand. “Would you like some pizza, Freddie?”

“No, thanks, sir. What I would like to do is run something by you—and Coach, too, since he’s here.”

This teenage boy piqued Ford’s curiosity.

Cole told him, “Freddie will either be running his own movie studio one day—or be sitting in the White House, running the country.”

Freddie grinned shamelessly. “Why not both?”

Cole added, “Freddie just graduated from Sugar Springs, and he is, hands

down, the most outstanding young man I've ever had the pleasure of knowing. Freddie has meant a great deal to the Sugar Springs community, organizing all kinds of events. Frankly, Freddie, I don't know how the high school will open their doors next month without you being there to help run things."

"I'll have plenty on my plate in California," the teenager said. To Ford, he added, "I'm going to be attending college out there, thanks to Tanner and Paige Haddock. They're paying for my education."

"You must have really impressed them for them to make such a huge investment in you," Ford said, recalling that the Haddocks had helped Vivi in buying Romano's from her parents. "How do you know them?"

"I served as an assistant to Tanner when he shot *Shadows of the Past* in Sugar Springs last summer. It was the first time he was directing a film. I won't be modest, Dr. Carpenter. I have a knack for organizing things and bringing people together I'll be majoring in business, with a minor in film. At least that's the plan now. After graduation, I hope to work for the Haddocks' production company full-time. Maybe even run it one day. Producing movies is just one of my life goals."

Freddie paused and glanced to Cole. "I never really gave a thought to getting into politics, Coach, but since you mentioned it?" He shrugged. "Sky's the limit."

"You'd have my vote, Freddie," Cole said. "Our country would be run way better under you than anyone who's been president during my lifetime. But why are you here to see Dr. Carpenter?"

"I know that the NHS has been tapped to volunteer and check in athletes as they arrive for their upcoming physicals. I used to be president of National Honor Society," Freddie explained, "and I think there's one more piece to these physicals that you could add. My understanding is they'll be happening Thursday, Friday, and Saturday of this week and Monday and Tuesday of next week. Is that correct?"

Ford nodded. "You've got the days right. We've scheduled all but a handful of physicals, and we're working on contacting those student athletes now. Coach Johnson knows of two of them who are out of town on vacation now. They can always come to my office once they return to Sugar Springs, though. What's your idea, Freddie?"

"I think this could be an annual community event. It could help some of the small businesses in Sugar Springs, including my parents. They own the

sports bar on the square.”

“I’ve eaten their food,” he said. “It’s really good.”

“There are a few places in town that have food trucks. I think if we had the food trucks turn out for those five days, people would definitely take advantage of that. Parents could drop off athletes and grab a bite to eat while they’re waiting, while athletes coming out of their physicals could head straight over to get something for themselves.”

“That’s an excellent idea, Freddie,” Cole said. “Similar to when Keller Critter Care opened.”

“During the week might be more difficult, but on that Saturday,” Freddie continued, “we could also have a few of the local organizations in town on site. Members from the historical society. The community gardens. The humane society. They could offer signups for fall. Try to get people into book clubs. Signed up for church choirs. Get volunteers for the local playhouse. Adopt an animal. That kind of thing.”

“That’s fantastic, Freddie,” Ford said, clearly impressed by this young man. “The only problem is that today is Tuesday. The physicals start in two days.”

“Leave everything to me, Dr. Carpenter,” the confident teenager said. “I promise you the food trucks will be there all five days. I already know most of the heads of the various civic groups in town and will see how many I can line up to be on site Saturday. It’ll be my last gift to Sugar Springs before I leave for California. Is that okay?”

“More than okay,” he said, excited by the project.

“Then I’m off,” Freddie told them. “Nice meeting you, Dr. Carpenter. Hope you’ll enjoy living in Sugar Springs.”

After the teenager left, he asked, “Has he always been this bright and motivated?”

Cole laughed. “I’ve only known Freddie for a short while, but he truly is one of the most incredible people I’ve ever met. Not teenager. Person. Freddie can pretty much move mountains in record time.”

They finished their pizza, with no slices left.

Ford took out his wallet to pay Cole for lunch, but his friend waved it away.

“Don’t worry, I already charged it to your account at Romano’s since it was your turn to buy lunch.”

“I have an account at Romano’s?”

“Apparently, you do,” Cole confirmed, laughing. “I’ll see you Thursday, Ford. I’ll be there, along with several other coaches from various sports. We want to help things run as smoothly as possible and make this an annual event. With Freddie’s input, I can see this being something the entire town will turn out for, not just the athletes and their parents. Let’s see how it goes this year, and we can start planning for next year, especially since we won’t have Freddie here to wave his magic wand and make things happen.”

Cole took his leave, and Ford was itching to talk to Vivi. They had only texted yesterday, but he decided to step things up and called her now.

She answered on the second ring. “Hello?”

“Hi. It’s me. Got a minute to talk?”

“Sure. What’s up?”

He told her about meeting Freddie Otts and what the young man had suggested.

“That’s a fantastic idea, Ford,” she praised. “Freddie is such an interesting guy. Paige and Tanner have sort of adopted him.”

“I heard they’re paying for his college.”

“They are,” she confirmed. “He’ll also stay summers with them in California and intern at their production company.”

“Cole said that one day Freddie would be a movie mogul or President of the United States.”

She laughed. “Neither would surprise me. I’ve never seen such a motivated teenager. I wish I could’ve gotten hold of him first. He would be dynamite in the kitchen.”

“Cole brought pizza for lunch for us today. We’ve decided we’re going to meet weekly and have lunch.”

“I know you’re close with Gideon and Walker, but I think it’s good that you’ve made a new friend in Cole.”

“I hope to make another one in Ray Barker on Thursday night. Have you booked our session at Playful Painting?”

“I confirmed it with Nova and did invite Brynn and Ray to join us. I’d thought we could have dinner beforehand, but I realize now that you’ll be tied up with the physicals. I’m a little worried that you’ll be too tired for painting and wine.”

“Don’t worry about me. After long, grueling days in the ER, a day of physicals and a night of dabbling with paint will be a piece of cake.”

“Well, the session starts at seven,” she told him.

“That works out fine. We finish conducting the physicals at six each day. Even if I factor in running a little late, I should still be able to make it to Playful Painting by the seven o’clock start. I think we should plan, however, for me to meet you there.”

“Not a problem. I’ll simply walk over from Romano’s.”

“Any way we might be able to see each other before Thursday night?” he asked, holding his breath as he waited for her reply.

“Why don’t you stop by Romano’s tomorrow night? I’ve already put several desserts on our menu during the week. Jimmy is proving to be a whiz at them. I think it’s his new calling.”

“I’d be happy to stop by and sample a few desserts with you, Vivi.”

“Maybe we could set another timer,” she suggested.

Ford’s heart sped up, hoping she meant what he thought she did, but deciding to act dense. “You want to limit the time we try desserts?”

“No,” she said, her voice rich and warm. “I thought after dessert, we might head up to my office.”

“For?” he asked, wanting her to vocalize it. Somehow, it was important to him that she did so.

Vivi sighed. “You’re really making this hard on me, Ford Carpenter, do you know that?”

He laughed. “Maybe. What do we need to set that timer for, Vivi?”

“I want to kiss you again, Dr. Carpenter. Repeatedly. And maybe for even longer than thirty minutes,” she said coyly.

Relief—and desire—trickled through him. “Then it’s a date, Miss Romano. I’ll see you tomorrow night for sweets... and treats.”

“See you then,” Vivi said, breaking the connection.

Ford eagerly anticipated spending more time with Vivi tomorrow night.

Vivi decided to make Italian cheesecake cookies. Ford would be trying other desserts she had placed on the menu, ones which Jimmy already excelled at, but she wanted a little something special just for Ford.

Entering the kitchen around two, the lunch rush now over, she found Jimmy hard at work on desserts for the evening customers. Lorenzo sat, turning the pages of a magazine as he nibbled on olives.

“Hey, Vivi,” Jimmy said jovially. “I’m making some *tiramisu* and *panna cotta*.”

“I’m thinking about baking something new,” she told him. “Italian cheesecake cookies.”

“Sounds interesting,” Jimmy said.

“Sounds like you’re making them for someone special,” Lorenzo said, turning another page as Vivi’s cheeks warmed.

“They’re not hard to make, but I think they’ll have a good payoff,” she said, ignoring her sous chef. “The end result can be cut into bars. They can even be frozen.”

“I’m game,” Jimmy said. “Let’s get what we need so you can show me how to make them.”

They pulled out the items she named, creaming the ricotta and cream cheese together, gradually adding sugar until the mixture was smooth. Vivi added in vanilla, lemon juice, flour, and some cornstarch, beating well. She showed Jimmy how to beat in the eggs, one at a time, and then slowly added the butter he’d melted for her.

“Sour cream must go in last,” he noted as she blended it in, as well.

“That’s it,” she told him, pouring the mixture into a 9x13 pan. She’d already set the oven to the appropriate temperature before they started and told him, “The different thing about this recipe—and why we need to prepare it during a slow time or after hours—is that after you bake the cookies for an hour, you turn off the oven and just leave them for a couple of hours.”

“Huh? Never heard of that,” he said. “You’re right. This would be better made in the early morning or the slow afternoon time.”

“We’ll cut them into squares once they finally come out of the oven,” Vivi explained. “I’ve eaten them topped with blueberries. Strawberries. You can even use cherry pie filling in a pinch. They really do freeze well, so if we made a huge batch, we could take out a pan of cut cookies a day and serve it throughout the week.”

“I’ll handle the toppings for you,” Jimmy said. “Should I have Lee and Linda tell customers about the new item tonight?”

“No,” she hedged. “I’ll have the staff try them first and get their feedback. And I’ll want a couple of cookies reserved. Ford is coming in to sample some of your desserts.”

Lorenzo made a noise, which she ignored.

“The new Dr. C,” Jimmy said. “I’m hearing good things about him, Vivi. You serious about this guy or what?”

She shrugged. “We’re just seeing each other casually.”

“Not on his part,” Lorenzo chimed in, closing his magazine and setting it aside. “He likes you, Vivi. I see things. I read people.”

She knew Lorenzo did have a gift with people and asked, “You think so?”

“I *know* so,” Lorenzo proclaimed. “And that is a good thing. Before you know it, you’ll have a little *bambino* running around the dining room, begging for pizza crusts.”

“Wait a minute. Don’t rush things.”

Her sous chef shrugged. “Sometimes, you just know. I see you together. You can keep him dangling for months—years—but he’s the one for you, Vivi.”

“I’ve got some orders to place,” she said, excusing herself.

Returning to her office, she closed the door and sank onto the sofa.

Was it really true? Did she and Ford belong together?

She admitted that she was certainly attracted to him. What woman wouldn’t be? He was handsome. Fit. Charming. Easy to be with. And a doctor, no less. Mama would be beaming, having her daughter marrying a

doctor. Even if he weren't Italian.

But could she see herself marrying Ford? Living together. Settling into a routine. Having children.

The thought excited her—and terrified her.

She still innately mistrusted men. She didn't mean to lump them together, knowing there were good ones out there, such as Gideon Ross and Walker Cox and Papa. But giving herself—all of herself—to a man again? Vivi had protected herself ever since Beck's death. She had closed herself off from anything that hinted of men and romance.

Until Ford came along and had given her the sexual ride of her life.

Could she commit to one man?

She refused to decide now. Ford hadn't asked her to marry him. He wasn't in love with her. She certainly wasn't in love with him. Her girlish infatuation was over. They were merely getting to know one another.

Yet she couldn't deny the chemistry between them. But sex alone wasn't enough to have her thinking about making a commitment. Actually, it was off the table, according to Ford himself. Vivi told herself that she would continue to see him for a little while. Definitely kiss him. She hadn't known people could blissfully kiss for so long. Beck—and none of her previous boyfriends—had done so. Every single man she had been with had all been about the main event. Yet she could have kissed Ford all day and into the night, knowing he would be content to do just that. She was already looking forward to being with him physically this evening, the thought of those hot kisses causing heat to rise within her.

She fanned herself, standing and claiming a bottled water from her tiny fridge and guzzling it down.

She would test desserts with Ford tonight and then bring him upstairs and kiss him. Hopefully, for longer than half an hour. But that was all she would plan on. The idea of committing to him terrified her.

Sooner or later, Vivi would have to tell Ford Carpenter she didn't see a future with him in order to protect herself. She had learned after so many heartbreaks that the only person she could rely on in the long run was herself.



VIVI WENT HOME and freshened up, taking a quick shower and changing

clothes. She wanted to look her best for Ford without anyone making a big deal. Already, Lorenzo's sharp eyes had picked up on her feelings for Ford, making Jimmy aware. Now that Jimmy knew, he would blab to the rest of the staff. A kitchen was like a small town. Gossip flew fast and frequently. Knowing that, she didn't want to stay with Ford too much longer because the residents of Sugar Springs would see them as a couple. She needed Ford to move on and find someone else more suitable for him than a damaged Vivi Romano.

In the end, she opted for black capris and a white, scalloped, eyelet ruffled top, simple and tasteful. She returned to the restaurant, seeing the dining room about a third full. Glancing at her watch, she saw it was just past five-thirty. Ford had said he saw his last patient at five each day. She didn't know if he stayed at the clinic and dictated notes or if he were ready to leave once that last patient was out his door.

Going to the kitchen, she asked Jimmy, "How did the cookies turn out?"

Grinning, he said, "Ask anyone. Or everyone. Because we've all sampled them. And don't worry. I saved you and the doc four. I also made up a tray of desserts since he's here to sample some."

"Thank you, Jimmy," she said gratefully.

Lee stepped to the pass and said, "One large works. One medium sausage and peppers. And Vivi, those cheesecake cookies are to die for."

"What topping did you have?" she asked.

"Strawberry. But any fruit would be good. Cami had blueberry because she's wild about them. I think you have a winner with those cookies. Put them on the menu as soon as you can. Linda and I can talk them up to customers. Once people try them, those cookies will sell themselves."

She turned to Jimmy. "Since they seem to be a hit, I'll have Enrique list them on the website." Quickly, she texted him, stopping to take a couple of pictures that he might be able to use.

"I'll make a big batch tomorrow when lunch starts slowing," Jimmy told her. "That way, they'll be available for dinner tomorrow night."

"Great."

"He's here," Lorenzo said, causing Vivi to turn and look out at the dining room, seeing that Cami seated Ford in the same spot where he had eaten dinner Saturday night.

"Could we get two large salads?" she asked. "I don't want to fill up on pizza and not have room for dessert."

Lorenzo shook his head. “Everyone always has room for dessert. But two salads coming your way, Vivi.”

She joined Ford, who rose as she appeared at the table. He clasped her arm and leaned in, kissing her cheek, before pulling out a chair for her. The gesture surprised her. Beck had never greeted her so sweetly, much less thought to help seat her. Vivi told herself to stop think about her worthless lover and enjoy the time she had left with Ford.

He seated himself as Lee appeared. “What can I get you to drink?”

They both asked for iced tea, and the server disappeared, quickly returning with their drinks and the two salads.

“This looks great,” Ford said.

“I thought we’d do salad for dinner. I wanted you to have enough room to try several of the desserts.”

They talked about their day. Vivi shared she had already heard from Freddie. While Romano’s wouldn’t participate with those who had food trucks, she told Ford that they would bring in pizzas for his staff and the NHS students volunteering.

“You don’t have to do that,” he said.

“I know. I want to. The kids deserve a reward for the time they’re putting in. It’ll give your staff a chance to get off their feet for a few minutes and eat in peace and quiet, without having to stand in line at the food trucks. Besides, it might have to fill you up since I doubt you’ll have time for any dinner between physicals and meeting me at Playful Painting.”

He speared an olive. “You’re right. But let me pay for the pizzas. Cole is already compensating us well for performing the physicals.”

“No,” she said firmly. “My contribution to the community.”

They finished their salads, and Lee took their bowls away, returning with the tray Jimmy had arranged.

“This looks amazing,” Ford praised. “I don’t know where to begin.”

“I’ll tell you,” Lee said. “Start with that. It’s new. Italian cheesecake cookies. Vivi made them this afternoon, and the entire staff has gone nuts over them.”

“Duly noted,” he said, picking up one of the recommended cookies as the server left.

Ford bit into it, his eyes closing a moment. When he opened them, he smiled. “You’ve done it. This could be Romano’s signature dessert. It’s light. Fresh. I see you’ve used different fruits as toppings.”

“You really like it?” she asked anxiously.

“I love it.” His eyes glowed at her, causing her to warm. Vivi reached for a cookie and took a bite, agreeing with him. “It is really good. But try something else.”

He sampled one of everything on the tray and then said, “I’ve got to stop, or I won’t be able to make it up the stairs to your office. We’ll have to make out in my truck,” he teased.

That thought intrigued her. “I’ve never made out in a car. Or a truck.”

“You haven’t? I thought all the guys took their girls to Sugar Lake to make out in high school. I know Gideon and Walker both mentioned that to me ages ago.”

Vivi shrugged. “I know Dante always took his dates to Sugar Lake. If he would have caught me up there? He would have smashed my date’s nose.”

“So, Dante was a protective big brother?”

“Yes. Very protective. Very *Italian*. That’s the epitome of protective.”

Ford took her hand and glanced around. “I don’t see him here. Wanna go make out?”

She giggled. “I thought you’d never ask.”

He took out his wallet and placed a twenty on the table.

“You don’t have to do that,” she protested. “Tonight was on me.”

“Tonight I hope *you’re* on me,” he said, waggling his brows, making her laugh.

Ford caught her hand and pulled her to the stairs leading up to her office. They only made it a few steps, out of sight of any customers, before he stopped and kissed her. Hard. Vivi’s heart slammed against her ribs. She pushed her hands into his hair and kissed him back.

He broke the kiss, his eyes smiling. They made it a few more steps, and then he kissed her again.

That became the pattern. Kissing. Moving up a couple of steps. More kissing. More steps. Finally, they reached the top, both of them out of breath.

He fell onto the sofa in her office, and she tumbled down after him. Ford pulled her into his lap, his eyes searching her face.

Then he said, “Let me get my cell.” He pulled it out and cocked his head. “Hmm. Thirty minutes? Forty-five?”

“An hour. Minimum,” she declared.

“An hour sounds about right,” he said, tapping the screen and then tossing the phone aside. “Now, where were we?”

His fingers pushed into her hair, holding her head in place as his mouth assaulted hers. Their tongues warred with one another, fighting for control, yielding to the other, and then taking up the fight again. His kiss gentled, and he feathered soft ones against her cheeks. Her temples. Her neck. His teeth then found her earlobe, tugging on it, nibbling, licking, sending fevered chills through her.

Vivi loved the feel of him beneath her. The taste of him. His clean, masculine scent. She lost herself in their kisses, wanting more but accepting what he offered, knowing she couldn't take things further when she would soon let him go.

Before she knew it, his cell chirped. Ford broke the kiss and silenced it.

"I want to throw your phone across the room," she muttered.

He laughed softly. "Now, why would you do that?"

"I don't think you set it right, Ford. It was like only five minutes passed."

"Five minutes. Five hours. I could kiss you through eternity, Viviana Romano," he proclaimed. "Maybe a bonus round is in order."

Ford kissed her again, and she became lost in the kiss. Lost in him. Time no longer had any meaning for her. There was here and now. Ford and her.

When he broke the kiss, he rested his forehead against hers. "I need to leave, Vivi. Or else I'll want more than kisses from you."

"Don't go," she pleaded, her resolve weakening. "I want you, Ford."

His eyes reflected his resolve as he said, "I know you want me physically. I feel the same. But I need you to want me emotionally, Vivi. Until then, I refuse to take things any further."

He slipped her from his lap and stood. She shot to her feet, wrapping her arms about his waist.

"Really, Ford. Don't go. You could come home with me."

"No, sweet Vivi." He brushed a soft, tender kiss to her lips. "I'll meet you at Playful Painting tomorrow night. And I hope to see you coming my way with a pizza box tomorrow. Goodnight."

Once more, his lips touched hers for a brief moment. Then Ford said goodnight and left her office.

Frustration filled Vivi. She wanted to run after him. Leap into his arms and wrap her limbs around him. She wanted to have sex with him in the worst way. She had never craved sex with Beck.

But she did with Ford Carpenter.

Yet he wanted a commitment from her. Something she wasn't able to

give to him. Something she wasn't sure she would ever be able to give him or any other man because of her past. She wouldn't budge from her position, and she knew Ford would be just as stubborn.

They had definitely hit an impasse.

Ford got to the Sugar Springs High School gym at six o'clock, surprised to already see numerous cars in the parking lot, as well as three food trucks. He followed his nose to one, seeing the name *Rolling Scones* running across the top of it. He had seen the same name on a bakery on the square.

A man scurried about inside, and Ford asked, "Are you open for business?"

He flashed a smile. "You must be Dr. Carpenter. You favor your uncle." Thrusting a hand down to Ford, the man said, "Jason Fletcher. My wife and I run the town bakery. Jessica is there now, while I'm on duty to sell as many damn donuts as I brought."

"What kinds do you have?"

"Glazed. Chocolate glazed. And cinnamon sugar. I thought I'd test run those basic three this morning and get a feel for tomorrow. Thanks again for inviting us to come to the party, Doc."

"You need to thank Freddie Otts," Ford replied. "He's the brainchild behind this."

"All I know is Jessica talked to him, and Freddie talks a good game. The thing is, he's one of the few people I know who actually comes through. Sugar Springs will miss him while he's in California."

"I'll take three dozen donuts, a dozen of each kind. I'll distribute them to my staff and the students who are helping out today."

As Jason boxed up Ford's donuts, he said, "Sugar Springs is good about lending a helping hand to others. Cole Johnson tells me you'll take over as

team doc this fall.”

“I can’t let Uncle Rex down,” he said. “He was a huge fan of the Knights.”

Jason handed over the three rectangular boxes. “Enjoy, Doc. Good meeting you.”

Ford made his way to the gym’s entrance, seeing the other two food trucks were opening up, as well. He told himself he would buy breakfasts from each of them over the next few days. He made a point of stopping at the one with the sports bar’s logo on it and introduced himself, learning it was Marvin and Leah Otts running it.

“You’re obviously Freddie’s parents,” he said. “I see where he gets his height and good looks. Thanks for turning out today.”

Leah smiled. “Freddie was thrilled to do one last thing for the town. He leaves for California this weekend. Earlier than we would like him to be going, but the Haddocks wanted him to come out a month before his classes started. He’ll be working at their production offices, gaining some real-world experience. They’ll pay him, so that way he’ll have some pocket money to start the year.”

“I would say it’s generous of them to be funding his college education, but after meeting your son? I think they’re the ones who are getting the real bargain. Freddie said he’ll be interning summers for them, as well.”

“Yes,” Marvin said. “We’ll try to get out and see him then. He’s promised to come home for Christmas and Spring Break each year. And Leah has demanded at least one FaceTime call a week.”

“Smart mom,” Ford said. He indicated the donut boxes in his hands. “Are you going to be doing breakfast the next few days? If so, I’ll be sure to pick up something from you tomorrow.”

Marvin shared the two breakfast sandwiches the food truck would be selling over the next few days.

“Then I’ll be in line bright and early tomorrow. Good luck to you.”

He was met by Freddie at the doors.

“Good morning, Dr. Carpenter,” the teenager said. “The NHS students are already in the gym. Everything’s looking good. I see you stopped at Rolling Scones.”

“I thought I’d bring some sustenance to the people working. I’ll be sure to patronize your parents’ food truck tomorrow morning. How is Saturday shaping up?”

“Great,” Freddie said. “We’ve got the groups I mentioned to you in attendance, along with the library bookmobile. They’ll be selling books donated in the last book drive. A dollar for hardbacks and a quarter for each paperback. They should do pretty well. And First Methodist Church will have a booth that will give out information about their Mom’s Day out program for toddlers and preschoolers. I think Saturday will be a great day for Sugar Springs.”

“Thanks for all your hard work, Freddie. You turned something required into quite the party.”

“Thanks, Dr. Carpenter. I’ve got to go now. I’ve got class.”

“Class? I thought you’d already graduated.”

“I’m taking an online Mandarin class. Just over one billion people in the world speak Mandarin. I told Tanner that we need to get onboard. His movies already do well around the world. I’d love to get a foothold in China. If I’m fluent in Mandarin by the time I earn my bachelor’s degree, we’ve got a better chance of negotiating some lucrative deals. See you.”

Ford thought he had been a go-getter, but he didn’t come close to Freddie Otts. He would definitely follow Freddie’s career and see what the young Renaissance man made of himself.

Inside the gym, he saw Freddie was good to his word. Things were already set up with students ready to roll.

Cole approached him, another coach in tow. “Ford, this is Ray Barker. I hear you two will be at Playful Painting this evening for Nova’s Date Night.”

Ray shook hands with Ford. “Nice to finally meet you. Brynn has made friends with Vivi. The girls are looking forward to tonight.”

“What about you? Are you a painter?” he asked.

Ray laughed. “Not by any stretch of the imagination. But being with Brynn is always fun. I have done a session at Playful Painting before, though. Cole had all the coaches and their significant others try it for a team building exercise. My picture looked like something a five-year-old would paint, but the company was good.”

“I guess I’ll see you there tonight, Ray.”

By now, Rebecca and Charmaine had arrived, and Ford offered both women donuts. Charmaine took the boxes from him and walked around, distributing them to the students at the tables. They went quickly, and he made a mental note to buy more the next time. He even grabbed a student and had him go buy another two dozen, so he’d have something to offer Aunt

Sandy and Sybil when they arrived.

Ford met Joe Bob Milton, who was just over six feet, balding, and about fifty years old. The principal thanked him for arranging his schedule so that the physicals took place over the next several days.

Then the rush began. The system Rebecca and Cole had worked out did the trick, though. Athletes were checked in and assigned to various rooms. Ford was in constant motion, first skimming the paperwork each student's family had been asked to complete, which was a history of the athlete's general health, as well as the family's health. He'd already read all the information, but he refreshed his memory before meeting with each athlete.

Ford examined a student's overall physical fitness, hearing, and vision, as well as testing their reflexes and flexibility. He paid special attention to athletes who'd experienced previous injuries in their sports, reminding them about potential risks of injury, and also asking what treatment they'd previously undergone. He was especially mindful of the handful of athletes who'd experienced concussions and cautioned them not to take any unnecessary risks during practice or games.

The morning shot by. Rebecca had left a forty-minute window for the staff and volunteers to eat. Good to her word, Vivi showed up with Jimmy and Mark in tow, distributing pizzas to the volunteers and his staff. He sat in the bleachers, eating a slice, watching her as she made certain everyone had something to eat. He loved watching her. Loved being around her.

He simply loved her.

Ford had never been in love. Oh, he'd been in lust. Quite a few times. But never in love. In high school, he hadn't dated much, but once he got to college, he found several women enrolled in the athletic training program, and more than a few had caught his eye. He wasn't one to kiss and tell, but suffice it to say, he'd enjoyed his college years at SMU. *Really* enjoyed them.

He'd also had enough sex during med school, his internship, and residency to keep him satisfied. The sex had been lusty. No commitment expected. Just a nice way to blow off steam when he was under intense pressure. It was only after he became a doctor and head of the ER that his sex life dried up. Dating was impossible. He had too few hours away from the hospital, with most of those being devoted to sleep. Even then, he'd been sleep deprived.

He was ready to settle into life with one woman, though. Yes, he knew he was likely being influenced by the happiness he saw on Gideon's and

Walker's faces. Cole Johnson's, too. All Ford knew was that he was home in Sugar Springs, a place where he wanted to sink deep roots and start a family.

With one woman. Vivi Romano.

He could sense that Vivi still wasn't ready to commit to anything long-term with him, much less marriage. Yes, they had fiery chemistry—but that wasn't enough. He needed more than a physical relationship with Vivi. He needed to be her friend. Her confidant. Her soulmate.

Ford told himself he could wait, but it was sure getting hard. Every time he looked at her, he wanted her. The quick, hot, amazing sex they'd had that one time only fueled his fantasies. The next time they came together, though, it wouldn't be sex. He would make love to Vivi with everything he had.

Ford only hoped she would get on the same page with him sooner rather than later.



FORD FINISHED up with his last physical a few minutes after six. The football player thanked him, as they all had. He wondered if Cole Johnson had given them instructions to do so, or if it were the fact he was now in a small town, where parents emphasized good manners.

He returned to the gym to find the student volunteers still present, and he addressed them as a group.

“I want to thank you for your time and service today. This process went smoothly, in large part, due to you. You kicked things off the right way and kept everything moving. I appreciate your efforts.”

He went down the line and signed their service sheets, which noted the volunteer hours they had put in today. A few of them told him they would be back tomorrow and would be able to talk the new volunteers through the process.

Once the teenagers had left, Ford thanked his own staff. “I’m grateful for you putting in longer hours these next few days. It’s for the good of our community, and I know Sugar Springs thanks you as much as I do.” He smiled. “Expect a little bonus in your next paycheck.”

As they started to leave, he touched Aunt Sandy’s shoulder. “I won’t be coming straight home. I’m headed to Date Night at Playful Painting.”

She smiled. “Oh, Ford, you’re going to have so much fun. I’ll see you in

the gym tomorrow morning, bright and early.”

He went to his truck and drove the short distance to the town square, parking near the gazebo and walking across the street to Playful Painting. Nova greeted him as he entered.

“I’m so glad you could come tonight, Ford,” she told him. “I’ve already talked with Cole, and he said things went like clockwork today.”

“Between what Cole and Rebecca worked out between them—inserting Freddie Ott’s contributions into that equation—things were fantastic. I’m assuming they’ll go even better tomorrow, now that we know what to expect and have our routine down.”

“Vivi is already inside the studio, along with a few other couples.”

He thanked Nova and entered the large room, seeing several long tables put together in a U-shape. At the open end of the U was an easel covered by a cloth. He assumed that would be the painting they would try to replicate this evening. He wasn’t an artist by any means, but he didn’t think he would embarrass himself tonight. Ford thought he could imitate whatever was there, with Nova’s pivotal instruction guiding him.

Ford went to Vivi and kissed her cheek.

She held up a large Ziplock bag of mixed berries. “I knew you wouldn’t have time to eat dinner, so I thought you could nibble on these while we paint.”

“Thank you. That was thoughtful of you. Too bad they don’t come on top of one of those cheesecake cookies,” he joked.

“Did I hear cheesecake?” a voice asked.

He turned and saw Ray Barker and the woman who must be his date approaching them.

Ray introduced her. “This is Brynn Mattson, Ford. Our district psychologist.”

Brynn was a stunner, blond and a few inches under six feet, with mesmerizing green eyes. In the past, she would have gotten his attention—and kept it. Now, however, he merely smiled at her, glad that she was seeing Ray.

Because no woman held a candle to Viviana Romano in his eyes.

“I hear you’ve had quite a busy day, Ford,” Brynn said, as he opened the bag and popped a couple of blueberries into his mouth.

“Cole had a great idea,” he told her. “It makes sense to streamline the process and conduct all the physicals at one time, in one place.”

“I left my office today to go over to the food trucks,” Brynn said. “I love a good food truck meal. I hear it was Freddie Otts’ idea to turn these next few days into more of a celebration of Sugar Springs.”

“Yes, that young man is impressive,” Ford said. “I hope, for his sake, that there will be a great turnout on Saturday.”

“What’s happening Saturday?” Ray asked.

He explained some of the different civic groups which would be on hand, while he finished up the bag of fruit.

Brynn said, “It looks like we’ll be starting soon.”

“Then I better get us a sweet snack for us to eat,” Ray said, smiling at her.

As Ray went to the far corner of the room, Vivi explained, “People sometimes bring snacks to go with the wine they’ve brought. Rolling Scones Bakery provides an opportunity for people to buy snacks to make it a little easier.”

“I’m sorry, Vivi. I didn’t even think about bringing wine.”

She grinned. “Don’t worry, Dr. Carpenter. I did. In fact, I need to go ahead and open it for us.”

“Then I’ll grab us something to eat. Any preference?”

“No. Surprise me.”

He followed Ray to the corner and saw a familiar face. “We’ve got to stop meeting like this, Jason,” Ford joked.

The bakery shop owner laughed. He indicted the woman next to him. “This is Jessica, my partner in crime. Honey, this is Dr. Carpenter.”

“Ford,” he said, shaking hands with her.

“It’s so nice to have you in Sugar Springs,” Jessica said. “I hear you used to come here as a boy.”

“I spent every summer with my aunt and uncle. It was always a treat to visit here.” He glanced at the offerings and said, “I think it would be easier to hold one of those cookies while trying to paint. Would you give me half a dozen? Any kind will do.”

Jessica placed two chocolate chip cookies into a small box and then added one each of oatmeal raisin, sugar, peanut butter, and M&M. Ford paid her and returned to where Vivi was sitting. He handed over the box of cookies, while she gave him a glass of red wine.

As he bit into a cookie, he said, “I’m going to have to up my workouts. I think I’ve eaten more sweets this past week than I have the last year or two.”

“You said you like to play tennis. All that running and racket swinging

would help work off those calories. Will you have time to play here?”

“If I can get Walker on the court. He’s the tennis player. Gideon has the athletic ability for the game, but he calls tennis boring. He prefers racquetball and a smaller court. He thinks that’s more challenging and interesting than tennis.”

Ford then put on a bland expression and then slowly turned his head from side to side, as if he were watching a tennis match from the stands. That got Vivi laughing.

Nova went to the front and said, “It’s time to start Date Night—and painting. Some of you are familiar faces returning, while some of you are newbies to painting parties. The important thing is to have a lot of fun. It doesn’t matter if you are artistically inclined. You’re here with someone you want to spend time with. Playful Painting is a different activity for couples to enjoy, whether they’ve just begun dating or have been married many years. Too many times, we get into a rut. The default is dinner at the same restaurant, followed by a movie.

“Playful Painting lets you interact with your date the entire time, as well as those around you, all while you are producing your own original art. I’m here to guide you into making it the best it can be.” Nova paused and looked at Ray. “That includes you, Ray Barker.”

The room chuckled as Ray said, “You know I don’t even draw a decent stick person, Vivi. But I love coming here and spending time with my girl.”

Ray clasped Brynn’s hand and kissed it, causing a few women in the room to sigh.

“Shall we see what you’ll be painting tonight?” Nova asked.

She removed the cloth hanging over the painting, and Ford saw that it was actually two canvases sitting side-by-side, making up one complete landscape. It had water and a shoreline of trees with a night sky filled with stars. In the center, with both panels pushed together, a heart formed.

“You’re my guinea pigs tonight,” Nova announced. “Usually, we all try to imitate the same painting. Tonight, one of you will work on the left side of it, while the other will complete the right. You may have seen panel paintings before. They usually come in duos or trios.”

“This is a good idea,” a woman said enthusiastically.

“Thank you, Becky,” Nova said. “I was hoping it might be a fun thing for us to try.”

Vivi leaned over and whispered, “That’s Becky Pillar. She’s the

receptionist for Steve, her husband. He's a local contractor. Really good at what he does from what I hear."

Ford listened as Nova walked them through the different brushes available to and then helped them mix their paints for the water, the first part of the painting that they would tackle.

"You can mix on one of your palettes and share or try to match colors on each of your palettes. Frankly, for consistency, I would recommend using one."

"Let's use mine for the water," he told Vivi.

Over the next two hours, he really enjoyed himself. It was fun trying something new, along with working as a team with Vivi. They were seated next to Ray and Brynn and also talked with them quite a bit. Ray groaned a lot, apologizing to Brynn for being so hopeless.

"That's all right, honey," she said. "Not everyone can have my outstanding artistic talent," she teased.

Ford limited himself to a single glass of wine, but he wound up eating four of the six cookies he'd bought.

As he bit into the last one, he said, "These are really delicious. Jason was out this morning in a food truck. I hope he thought to make and bring cookies to sell."

He and Vivi worked on trees, stars, and the night sky. They actually were the first couple to finish their panels and called over Nova to view their effort. She had circulated the entire time, walking the group of Date Nighters through the various stages by demonstrating on a blank canvas at the front, so they had the finished product to go by, as well as what she had done.

Nova studied their artwork and then made a couple of suggestions, watching them as they added a bit more depth to the water and used a few additional brushstrokes on the shoreline.

"It looks terrific," she complimented. To Ford, she added, "You won't be taking it home tonight. The paintings will need to dry overnight." She gave them the hours in which the panels could be claimed over the next few days.

"I'll pick them up," Vivi volunteered. "You'll be tied up at the high school. Besides, I'm just right across the square."

"Leo will be getting his physical tomorrow," Nova shared. "He's also working tomorrow and Saturday to earn some of his NHS service hours."

Ford had liked meeting the Johnsons' son the night he had dinner with them, answering numerous questions about medicine for Leo.

“You can sit and relax a few minutes until everyone else finishes,” Nova said. “We’ll clean all the brushes at the same time.”

He reached over and took Vivi’s hand. “This was fun. I’m glad you suggested we do this. How often does Nova hold sessions?”

“She usually does Tuesday and Thursday nights during the week and then a couple of times on the weekends. She could book more sessions if she wanted to, but she’s mindful of not neglecting her own art or family. Nova may have to cut back some once the baby comes, though. Or maybe she can hire a local artist to assist her and lead the nighttime bookings. I should ask her about that.”

Ten minutes later, the other couples had finished their paintings, and Nova asked them to do an art walk, where they strolled by each canvas. Ford thought he and Vivi had done the best job of any couple present, while Brynn Mattson’s half of the painting was by far the best in the room.

“You can hang your half, Brynn,” Ray said, shaking his head. “I’m afraid my side is an eyesore. Maybe Nova will let you come back in and paint over it to match your half.”

“Not a chance. I see you in every brushstroke of your mess, Ray Barker.” Brynn smiled at him.

Ray took Brynn’s hands and dropped to one knee. Brynn—and several of the women in the room—gasped.

“I’ve thought of us as a team from the first time I asked you out,” Ray began. “I don’t want anyone but you on my team, Brynn. I love you. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Despite my lack of art expertise, I do have other things to offer you, so what do you say? Will you marry me?”

“Yes!” cried Brynn.

Ray pushed to his feet and gave his new fiancée a long kiss as the couples gathered applauded.

Ford saw Nova had her cell out, snapping a few photos, and he wondered if she had known the proposal was coming.

The kiss over, he and Vivi were the first to congratulate the newly-engaged couple. The others present did the same, and Nova said in delight, “This is our first engagement at Playful Painting! I’m definitely adding this to my website.”

She told everyone to go ahead and head for home and that she would clean up. Brynn and Ray thanked Nova and left.

Vivi said to Ford, “Let’s stay behind and help Nova,” which he agreed to

do.

The three of them got the brushes cleaned, and the women worked on wiping the tables while he swept the floor.

“Thanks for being on cleanup duty,” Nova said.

“Let us walk you to your car,” he offered.

Nova locked up, and they walked her to her vehicle.

“Thanks again for a terrific evening,” he told the artist. “It was more fun than I had expected it to be. Throw in a surprise proposal, and the entertainment value went up even more.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed yourself, Ford. Hope tomorrow goes well for you,” Nova replied.

Ford then walked Vivi across the square to her own car.

“It was a good idea, going to Playful Painting,” he said, tucking a lock of her hair behind her ear.

“I’m glad you enjoyed it and got to meet Brynn and Ray.” She hesitated and then said, “You need to get going, Ford. You have an early morning tomorrow and for the next few days.”

“I’m not busy on Sunday,” he said. “Can I see you then?”

She hesitated a moment, looking as if she warred with herself. Finally, she said, “Yes, I’d like that.”

He bent and gave her what he would call a medium kiss. Not brief, but not hurried, either.

He waited for Vivi to start her car and watched her drive away before he went to his truck. Seeing Ray and Brynn become engaged had been quite moving.

Ford only hoped that it got Vivi to thinking about what was possible in their future.

Vivi and Ford were driving back from their Sunday date in Tyler. Ford had flipped the script of a usual date of dinner and a movie, changing it to an afternoon matinee, followed by an early dinner. He walked her to the door and gave her an all-too-brief kiss.

“I had a nice time, Vivi. Glad you understand that I’ve got two more hectic, long days ahead, so that’s why I’ll head home now.”

She had never wanted a man so much in her life.

She burned for him.

“Let me know how things go,” she said brightly, inserting her key into the lock and heading inside, telling herself to shut the door and not make a fool of herself by leaping into Ford’s arms and pleading for him to come in and make love to her.

She watched out the window as he returned to his truck and drove away. Today had not gone how she had expected at all. Ford told her he’d played tennis with Walker that morning before he’d picked her up for their date. She had assumed he would come in now and hoped the date would continue for several hours. In fact, she had been so sure it would, she had worn her best matching bra and panty set. She was desperate to have sex with Ford again. At least once before she ended things with him. She needed the memory of their bodies in motion, dancing as one.

Because she didn’t ever plan to be with a man after that.

Vivi decided she needed to do something special for Ford. He had mentioned his birthday was coming up. She believed it was this next weekend. Before he could get home, she decided to contact Sandy Carpenter

and see what Ford's favorite foods were.

Not having Sandy's number, she quickly called Rory and asked, "Do you have a phone number for Sandy Carpenter?"

"I don't, but I think Walker might. Hold on."

Rory returned a moment later. "He had it. Got a pen?"

Her friend fed her the phone number and she said, "Thank you. I'll fill you in soon."

Quickly, Vivi dialed the nurse's number and after Sandy answered, she said, "Hi. This is Vivi Romano, and I have a favor to ask of you."

"Why, hello, dear. Ask away. I'm assuming this has something to do with my nephew?"

"His birthday is coming up soon, isn't it?"

"Yes. It's on Sunday."

"Are you planning anything for him?"

"No, I hadn't yet. I just assumed the two of you would have plans. You seem thick as thieves these days."

The nurse's words gave Vivi pause. Her gut was telling her it was time to cut ties with Ford before either of them were in too deep and got hurt, but she wanted to do something special to recognize his birthday, the first one since he'd been back in Sugar Springs.

"I'd like to have a dinner party for him and his friends. What is his favorite meal? I hope it's not Italian, because I've fed enough of that to him lately."

Sandy chuckled. "Ford eats pretty much everything, but I would say his favorite meal would include meatloaf and mashed potatoes. Anything beyond those two items he would consider a bonus."

"Thanks for the info, Sandy. Please don't say anything to Ford. I want this to be a surprise. I'll plan for Sunday."

"Your secret is safe with me, Vivi. I do feel I need to mention, though, that I have never seen Ford happier. I knew it would be difficult for him when we lost Rex, but you have been a bright light shining in his life. I thank you for that."

Her eyes misted with tears as she came to the realization this would most likely be the last time she saw Ford. The connection between them was growing too strong. It was time to cut ties and give him a chance to find a woman who could be everything he needed.

"Thank you, Sandy. Ford has come to mean a great deal to me in a very

short amount of time.”

She called Rory again.

“What’s up?” her friend asked. “I assume it has something to do with Ford since you wanted his aunt’s number.”

“His birthday is a week from today. I’d like to have his friends over for a dinner party. I wanted to ask Sandy what his favorite meal might be. Would you and Walker be available next Sunday?”

“Of course. Would you like to hold it here?”

“Hmm. I’m not sure. I could have it at Romano’s. The dining room isn’t open on Sundays anymore. That would give us a lot of room. Then again, if my staff gets wind of this, they’d want to come in and wait on us. I don’t want them to do that. I could just have it here, I suppose.”

“Work out wherever you want to have it. Just count us in. I’ll be sure to let Walker know not to spill the beans to Ford.”

“Thank you.”

Vivi thought a few minutes and decided it might be more of a surprise if they did have the party at the Coxes’ house. She could do a majority of the cooking there and then return home, having Ford pick her up here. She could find some excuse to stop by Rory’s house and when they went inside, all Ford’s friends could be waiting for him.

She texted Rory, letting her know she was accepting her friend’s offer to host the dinner party. She mentioned she would need to bring things over and do some cooking Sunday afternoon.

Rory texted a thumbs up, and Vivi made a quick list of whom to invite and what she would serve. She texted those on the list, inviting them to the birthday celebration for Ford, asking they not mention anything to him since it would be a surprise.

Gideon asked if he could bring a gag gift, and she told him that would be fine.

Vivi planned to make herself Ford’s gift later that night.

The week went by swiftly. She only saw Ford once for dinner, when he stopped by Romano’s Thursday night to share a pizza with her. He was full of news, having been busy that week, not only with finishing up the athletic physicals, but arranging financing for a house. He told her his aunt had decided to move to somewhere smaller and would be looking for something to go on the market. In the meantime, he would help move her into a garage apartment at Lizzy Lou’s on Saturday, where Hope had stayed when she first

came to Sugar Springs.

Vivi had asked when Sandy was putting the house on the market and when Ford would start looking for his own place to live. That's when he shared that he was going to purchase Sandy's house. He had already arranged for an inspection, which had taken place, turning up no problems. Sandy had accepted Ford's offer and had gone on a tear, boxing up things and donating several items to charity, with others to go in a storage unit while she waited for the right house for her to become available. Sandy would eventually take some of the furniture with her once she found a smaller, more manageable place. For now, Ford would keep everything she left behind in trust for her.

Buying his aunt's house would be a commitment on his part. Vivi knew the house was a large one and that Ford would want to fill it with children. She wanted to speak up and let him know she wasn't the woman for him. That he would need to find someone else to marry and have babies with because she was too flawed.

Yet the thought of letting Ford go caused a deep ache within her.

She felt guilty that she had let things go on between them as far as they had. She was determined this birthday celebration be the last time they would be together as a couple. Ford needed to look beyond a broken Vivi. Reluctantly, she slid birthday sex off the table, knowing if they did so, it would only complicate things further.

She knew after they parted that she might never heal, but it would be the best thing for him.

On Sunday afternoon, she drove to Rory's, bringing the birthday cake she'd picked up at Rolling Scones. In the Coxes' kitchen, she worked on putting together the meatloaf. Ford probably liked a basic one with crumbled crackers and tomato sauce, but Vivi had to put her own spin on it, layering bacon on top and including Parmesan and parsley mixed into the ground beef. She would also jazz up the mashed potatoes with a hint of garlic. For sides, she would be making honey-glazed baby carrots and green beans with sautéed mushrooms and onions.

Vivi prepared everything as far as she could, telling Rory she was sliding the meatloaf into the oven.

"I need to run home and jump in the shower," she said, giving Rory a hug. "Take out the meatloaf when the timer I've set goes off. Ford and I will probably be here by then, but just in case we're not here by then, you'll know what to do. The meatloaf needs to rest several minutes anyway."

She had told Ford that she would be making dinner for him at Romano's since the restaurant would be closed. He was to pick her up at six.

Vivi chose a sundress in a deep shade of red and sandals, pulling her dark hair back in a high ponytail. Inside, her emotions were topsy-turvy. She was excited to have put together the party for Ford and hoped everything went well. At the same time, she could feel a curtain of depression descending upon her, knowing that she would be ending things with him later tonight. She paced nervously until the doorbell rang. Picking up her purse, she tossed the strap over her shoulder and answered the door.

Ford had never looked better to her. She wanted to run her fingers through his thick, light brown hair, pulling him down for a kiss that would never end.

Vivi blinked and turned, locking the door. Facing him, she smiled brightly.

"I hope you're ready for an Italian feast."

"I can't wait to see what you've come up with for this old man. Thirty-six came pretty fast."

He took her hand and led her to his truck, helping her inside it.

Once he was behind the wheel, she asked, "Do you think we could stop by Rory's a quick minute? She's finished the book we're reading for book club and wants to pass it along to me. I'd rather get it now since I don't know how late we'll be at Romano's. From what I gather, she's going to bed pretty early these days because of the twins."

"Not a problem," Ford said easily, turning right at the stop sign instead of left, heading to the Coxes' house.

He pulled up at the curb and said, "Stay here. I'll run up and get the book for you."

Vivi agreed cheerfully, watching him stride up the sidewalk, his long, lean, athletic frame making her heart turn over. She saw Walker open the door and usher Ford inside.

Once they were out of sight, she got out of the truck and headed to the front door, pushing it open and slipping quietly inside. As she did so, she heard voices call out, "Surprise!"

Making her way to the family room, she saw Ford standing in the doorway. Everyone she had invited was in the den. She slipped an arm about his waist. "Surprise," she said quietly.

He grinned down at her. "I guess we're not going to Romano's after all,

are we?”

Ford bent and gave her a light kiss before walking around the room and greeting the guests.

Vivi set down her purse and headed to the kitchen, Rory following.

“What can I do?” her friend asked as Nova appeared in the doorway.

“It’s time to take out the meatloaf so it can rest a few minutes,” she said, seeing the timer was about to go off. “I’ll start working on the final touches on the vegetables.”

“Put me to work,” Nova said. “I can do pretty much anything in a kitchen. I’ll start with getting that meatloaf out, so Rory doesn’t have to lift it.”

Rory uncorked a couple of bottles of wine and removed sparkling water from the fridge, along with iced tea. By now, Hope and Brynn had also made their way to the kitchen to see if they could help.

“I heard through the grapevine that you got your ring yesterday,” Nova said, taking Brynn’s hand and lifting it so everyone could see.

Vivi turned and saw the modest diamond solitaire ring on Brynn’s finger. Brynn beamed at it.

“Ray and I went to a jewelry store in Tyler yesterday and picked it out together.”

All the women admired it, and then Hope asked, “Have you chosen a date?”

“We think we’d like to get married over our Christmas break from school. With Ray involved in coaching football, it would be impossible to do it before then. We’re trying to decide now if it should be before or after Christmas Day.”

Hope took Brynn’s hand. “I’m just so happy for you and Ray. I always knew you belonged together.”

Vivi had to turn away, swallowing the lump in her throat. All her friends were so happy, with good men in their lives, ones who loved them. She wanted to be one of them, and yet she didn’t feel as if marriage and family would ever be in the cards for her. She believed Beck had ruined her for anything like that. As much as she liked Ford and thought she could trust him, a small voice in her head nagged at her, telling her she’d been an idiot before in trusting a man and would continue to be one if she allowed Ford Carpenter into her heart.

She whipped the potatoes, and Nova helped her put the vegetables in serving dishes. Rory had suggested they place everything on the kitchen

island and have the guests serve themselves, buffet-style.

Rory called the guys in, and once everyone had filled their plate, they seated themselves in the dining room.

Ford lifted his glass of wine and said, “I want to thank all of you for showing up to celebrate my birthday. Some of you have been in my life for many years, while others are new and already dear friends. I can’t think of a better group I would want to be with tonight.”

He turned to Vivi. “Thank you for putting this together. You are a very special woman, Viviana Romano. I’m grateful to have you in my life.”

She smiled at him, an ache beginning to grow inside her.

They ate, with everyone complimenting her on the meal.

Ford asked, “Did you happen to talk with Aunt Sandy? When you told me you were cooking dinner for me, I didn’t quite see meatloaf on the menu. Although you did put a nice spin on it. It’s the best meatloaf I’ve ever eaten. The bacon makes it.”

“I did talk to Sandy,” she admitted. “I was afraid you were growing tired of eating Italian every time we were together. I wanted you to have your favorite meal on your birthday.”

He slipped his hand around hers. “The food and company are all wonderful, Vivi,” he said quietly. “But all I really need is you.”

He lifted their joined hands and pressed a kiss against her knuckles. It took everything she had not to burst into tears at the romantic gesture.

Rory said, “Walker, come help me with the cake.”

When they appeared with the cake, Rory had placed lit candles in it, and they all sang happy birthday to Ford. He smiled and blew out the candles.

As everyone applauded, he leaned close and whispered in Vivi’s ear, “I think you know what my wish is. And I hope you’ll make it come true when I take you home tonight.”

A shiver ran along Vivi's spine as Ford's lips brushed her earlobe. Then he withdrew.

She shouldn't have sex with him. She was going to break up with him in the next hour, for goodness' sake. If she did this, it would be wrong on every imaginable level.

And yet if she didn't?

She would regret it for the rest of her life.

She had been salivating at the thought of having Ford Carpenter inside her ever since the day of his uncle's funeral. She had agreed to start a relationship with him, not wanting—or expecting—it to go anywhere. She'd simply wanted to feel wanted. Desired. Just for a little while. To have that rush of both a physical and emotional combined. Ford was handsome. Caring. Hot as hell. She had always known when they finally did have sex again, he would take care of her. He was man who knew his way around women, and he would satisfy her unlike any other man had ever done.

Vivi wouldn't think of the consequences of having sex with Ford. She had always been a person who gave to others. In the case of Beck, she had given and given and given until she had been bled dry. For once, she was going to be the selfish one. Take what she wanted. Revel in every moment of Ford's hard body against hers, his mouth on hers, his hands everywhere. She would take—but she would also give back. The memories from their coupling tonight would be ones she would live on for the rest of her life.

Because she never would be with another man after Ford.

She couldn't think about how hurt he would be. If anything, Ford was

resilient. He would bounce back and had all the friends in this room to help him do so. He would easily be the most eligible bachelor in Sugar Springs after tonight. Women would flock to his doorstep. Replacing her would be easy.

Forgetting him would be hard.

“Why are we wasting time here?” she asked him, enjoying the look on his face.

Ford stood. “It’s a work night. We all have busy days tomorrow. Let’s get things cleaned up.”

“I see old men need to get to bed—because they have things to do,” Gideon teased, waggling his brows suggestively.

Vivi felt the blush spreading across her cheeks as everyone laughed. It was obvious to the group what Ford and she would be doing when they left here. For a moment, she didn’t want to leave. She wanted to stay with these friends, enjoying this moment, freezing it in time. She looked about the room, seeing smiles on the faces of the friends she had made. Most likely, most of—if not all—these friendships might implode once she refused to move forward in her relationship with Ford.

For a brief time, she had felt a part of this circle, this kind, funny, thoughtful, friendly group of people. They would move on with their lives. Having babies. Growing as couples. Moving forward in their careers. Her gut told her this core group would remain close for many years to come, becoming as close as family.

She just wouldn’t be a part of it.

Romano’s would have to be enough. She would pour her heart and soul into it. Its employees would be her family.

“No need for you two to stay,” Rory said happily. “We can clean up. After all, you are the birthday boy, Ford. I’m sure you have another present to unwrap.”

Now, Vivi’s face flamed as everyone roared with laughter. Ford gave her a sheepish shrug and said, “I think I may have one more present left. Thanks again, everyone, for a great night.”

He took her hand and led her from the dining room. She barely had time to claim her purse before they were out the door.

Inside the truck, Ford hooked a hand behind her nape and pulled her to him for a hungry kiss.

Breaking it, he said, “That’s just a preview of what a thirty-six-year-old

man can do.”

Guilt flushed through her. Vivi was going to have to shut this down. She couldn't go through with it.

He slipped his hand around hers. It was as if he stabbed her in the heart.

Vivi couldn't talk. Her throat was thick with unshed tears. Ford didn't notice, concentrating on the road and getting them back to her house.

She allowed him to step around and hand her down from the truck. This conversation would be better had inside. Unlocking the door, she moved into the foyer.

But the moment Ford entered, he closed the door and wrapped her in his arms. His kiss was demanding, making her giddy and hot. She knew it was wrong, but she kissed him back with everything she had. All thoughts of taking the high road fled.

She wanted Ford Carpenter. She was going to get Ford Carpenter.

For one final, glorious night.

Vivi shoved her fingers into his hair, pressing her body against his. Electricity sparked between them. He hiked her up, and her legs went around his waist. She held onto his hair tightly, their tongues mating and warring. He tasted divine and smelled even better. She told herself she would find the cologne he wore and dribble a bit on her pillow in the future to remind her of this night.

Breaking the kiss, he rasped, “Bedroom?”

“Hallway. There,” she panted as she pointed. “End of it.”

While she had moved into her girlhood bedroom once she'd returned to Sugar Springs, she had decided to use the primary one since her parents were going to be gone for so long. Their king-sized bed would come in handy now.

Ford carried her down the hallway, her ankles locked behind him. They kissed the entire way, hungry for one another. He bumped against the wall several times, bouncing off it like the silver ball in a pinball machine.

When they reached the bedroom, he fumbled for the light, finding it and turning it on. The bright overhead light hurt her eyes.

“We don't need it,” she mumbled against his lips.

“I need it,” he told her. “I want to see—not just feel—every luscious curve of your body.”

“Then use the one beside the bed. This is too harsh.”

He grinned at her. “Oh, you want me to see you in good light?” He kissed her again. “You would look good in any light, Vivi Romano. I have pictures

in my mind of making love to you in front of a fire. By the light of a Christmas tree. With—”

She slammed her mouth against his, not wanting to think about the future. They had here. Now.

It was all they would ever have.

He reached and found the light switch again, turning it off and stumbling across the room with her still clinging to him.

“Bend a little,” she murmured.

He did so, and she found the switch to the bedside lamp, clicking it once so that it was on low. When she looked back at him, Vivi saw the heat in his eyes. The need.

Need for her...

His mouth sought hers again as they tumbled onto the bed. Oh, she could have kissed him for hours—but she demanded more from him. She began searching for his buttons, frantically wanting her skin against his.

“Stop,” he commanded.

She did so, questioning why he did so with a frown.

“The last time we had sex was a rough and fast tumble. We’re heading that way again. I don’t mind hard and fast, but I want you to know I also need to explore you. Every part of you. So, what’s it going to be? Fast and furious now? Take a break and then do a slow dance? Or do you want to slow things down now and go from there?”

“Slower,” she managed to get out.

Because she wanted to touch him everywhere and savor every moment.

Ford pushed off the bed. He offered her a hand, and she took it, coming to stand next to him.

He framed her face in his hands. “You are so very beautiful. I don’t know what I did to deserve someone like you, Vivi. You’re absolutely perfect.”

“I’m far from perfect,” she protested.

“Maybe. But you’re perfect for me.”

He undressed her then, taking his time. Ford removed her sandals first. Her dress came next as he untied the spaghetti straps and unzipped the sundress, pushing it to her waist. He kissed her neck and bare shoulders, bringing a rush of warmth through her as his hands moved up and down her arms.

Without warning, Ford whirled her around, his arms going about her waist, holding her to him as he nibbled her nape. She thought he would tire

quickly, but the hot doc was one determined man. His hands did slip under her skirt, though, stroking her thighs and belly. Vivi began trembling in his arms.

He splayed a hand on her belly, holding her in place, as his other hand dipped into her panties. One finger stroked her, long and slow, and her legs seemed to turn to rubber. Ford held her up, though, his breath hot on her neck as he kissed it again.

His mouth moved to her ear. "I'm going to touch you, Vivi. You're already wet for me. I want to feel you drenched with desire."

She swallowed, the blood rushing to her ears in a loud whoosh.

Ford yanked hard, and her panties were no more, just a scrap of cloth which floated to the floor. He still held her to him as he teased the seam of her sex, moving back and forth until she panted, begging him for more.

Then he pushed a finger inside her, and the jolt of desire struck her like lightning. She cried out his name.

Chuckling, he added a second finger, caressing her deeply. Vivi began to whimper, moving against him, meeting his fingers, the pressure building inside her until she exploded. The orgasm was liquid heat, pouring from her as she cried out, her body shuddering.

"Go with it, Vivi," Ford encouraged. "Ride the wave."

She did exactly that, experiencing something she had never felt before.

Tears blinded her. She realized she had gone and done something horribly foolish.

She had fallen in love with Ford Carpenter.

That wasn't supposed to happen. She was only supposed to go out with him for a while. Then end things and let him find the kind of woman he deserved.

She was limp now, the orgasm having torn through her. He must have sensed that she was about to collapse because he swept her into his arms and gently placed her on the bed. He removed her strapless bra, tossing it over his shoulder with a wicked grin.

"I seem to have neglected these amazing breasts," he rasped, his mouth going to one and weaving a spell of magic as he caressed and kissed and sucked each of them.

By now, she was a puddle of nothingness. This man had touched every inch of her flesh, stroking and teasing and kissing his way everywhere.

He kissed her mouth tenderly and smiled at her before standing and

removing his clothes in record time. Vivi could only stare at his body, lean and long and absolutely perfect.

His body covered hers, his mouth seeking hers once more. Soon, he had worked her into a frenzy again, and she was begging for him to take her.

Ford tore open a condom which seemed to appear from nowhere and quickly slipped it on his cock. He kissed her again, possibly the best kiss they had ever shared, as he entered her in a single thrust. Slowly, he began the dance of lovemaking, touching her, whispering to her, kissing her until she was flying higher and higher.

Vivi's orgasm sent her soaring into the heavens as she clung to Ford, who made some very satisfying sounds of his own. Slowly, they came back to earth. He collapsed atop her, driving her into the mattress, still kissing her.

He moved them, though, rolling so they faced one another. He broke the kiss, gazing into her eyes. She felt treasured in that moment.

Then he ruined everything by saying, "I love you, Vivi."

In an instant, Ford knew he had made a mistake. Vivi's body stiffened. He couldn't read what he saw in her eyes.

Fear? Panic?

He should have kept quiet and not voiced his feelings for her, yet how much longer was it supposed to take? While he had always been a deliberate man, he found himself anxious. Ready to start a future with this woman. He'd never been someone to waste time.

And every moment when Vivi wasn't his was definitely wasted.

"I need to speak to you from my heart, Vivi," he began.

His hand rested on the curve of her bare hip, and he could feel the tremors running through her.

"I've never been someone in my personal life who rushed into anything. So those words I just spoke to you weren't said lightly. A great deal of thought—and feelings—go into the emotions I am experiencing for you."

She opened her mouth to protest, and he placed a finger against her swollen lips. "No, hear me out," he pleaded.

"I love you, Vivi. I'm not ashamed to tell you that. I know we haven't known each other that long, but I do know what's between us is real. Right. I understand that you still love Beck. I'm not him. I'll never be him. I'm not asking for you to ever stop loving him, but think of it like this. Your parents had Dante, and they lavished all the love in the world upon him. When they had you, they didn't stop loving him. They just opened their hearts more. Because they still had more love to give.

"I'm not asking you to love me now, Vivi. I'm not asking for the words

from you. But I do hope you can come to love me. That you'll find you have room for the man you once loved and built a life with—and also me. I want so much for us, Vivi.”

Ford lowered his finger, their gazes still connected.

“I’m sorry that I’ve led you on, Ford,” she said softly.

Her words felt like a slap in the face.

“What do you mean?” he asked, dreading to hear what she would tell him, hope for what he wanted for them suddenly slipping away.

“I didn’t think we should go out, but you pressed me to do so. I agreed, thinking we might have some fun together. Enjoy each other’s company as we began new chapters in our lives in Sugar Springs.”

She swallowed, tears welling in her eyes. “But I was never in this for the long haul, Ford. You think we’re on the same page—but we’re not. I don’t want to get married. I don’t want children. We are on very different paths in life.

“You turned your life upside down by leaving the emergency room in Houston and taking over your uncle’s medical practice. It obviously is something you wanted to do, Ford. You love this town. You’ve talked about how it was a second home to you. I know you’ll do great things here.”

She pushed her hair back from her face. “I, on the other hand, was reluctant to come home again. Papa had been at me to do so for more than a year. I returned to Sugar Springs out of guilt. My parents worked long hours and days. It was time they retired and were able to enjoy life together without the worries of running a pizza parlor. While I have a knack for the business end of managing things, I have missed being in the kitchen full-time. That’s one of the reasons I wanted to do the specialty menus on Friday and Saturday nights. I’m at my best when I’m in the kitchen. It’s what I was born to do. I don’t want to stay home and raise children. I’m only me when I’m cooking.”

Her hand cupped his cheek, her thumb stroking it gently.

“I do like you, Ford. I think you are a wonderful man. You’ll make a very lucky woman a good husband. You’ll be an excellent father, and I can see your house filled with children and happy times.” She paused. “But you’re going to have to find that with someone else. Not me.”

He had never been rejected, much less so unexpectedly—and he wasn’t ready to walk away from this woman. A woman he loved.

“I thought we had something, Vivi. Not just something physical—but an emotional connection.”

She smiled sadly, shaking her head. “I told you I liked you, Ford. I’ve enjoyed the time we’ve spent together, but I see it was wrong of me to continue to see you when I knew our paths would diverge. I hope we can part friends, but I understand that won’t be possible. You have terrific friends here in Sugar Springs. Old ones you treasure and new ones you’re coming to cherish. Your entire circle has the same life goals. You have a family among them, Ford, and you’ll find a woman you can bring into their midst. They’ll come to love her as much as you do.

“I just can’t ever be that woman.”

Anger flared within him. “Then why did you let us make love just now, Vivi? Were you just using me?”

“Yes,” she said bluntly, throwing him for a loop.

Yet Ford saw something in her eyes, an immense sadness.

“I’ll admit that I was selfish, Ford,” she said apologetically. “That first time we were together? It was incredible. Just now? Making love with you will probably be the highlight of my life. But I can’t continue to lead you on. I’m sorry I did. It was wrong of me. I never should have let things go as far as they did tonight.”

Vivi’s hand fell away from his face, and an emptiness consumed him.

“So, that’s it? We’re done?”

She nodded solemnly. “I wish the very best for you, Ford.”

He wanted to scream at her. Shake her. Make her realize they were meant to be together. He saw that no matter what he said or did, though, Vivi was not going to budge. He had gone into this relationship with her, only seeing what he wanted to see. He had been all in—not bothering to understand that she would never commit to him.

Or anyone else.

Ford rose from the bed, feeling dead inside, and dressed without speaking. He couldn’t look at her. He couldn’t think about her. He had never been so deeply wounded in his life. Not even Uncle Rex’s death had affected him as much as being played false by the woman he loved.

And despite everything, he was still fool enough to love her.

Finally dressed, he turned and faced her, thinking how beautiful she was on the outside and yet how twisted she must be on the inside to have led him on the way she had. He had given his heart and soul to Viviana Romano, and she had trampled on both without a care.

“I’ll let myself out.”

He retraced his steps, images flashing in his mind of Vivi in his arms. His mouth on hers. Driving into her, feeling the greatest satisfaction of his life. Making love for the first time with a woman he loved. It had taken thirty-six years for Ford to fall in love. He dreaded the thought of it taking another thirty-six years to fall out of love with Vivi.

As he left her house and headed for his truck, he supposed he had an inkling of how she felt—still felt—about Beck. Ford still didn't know how her lover had died, but if Vivi felt a tenth for Beck what Ford felt for her, he could understand why she still was in love with a ghost.

He started his truck and then drove to the house he had bought this week. The house he had thought he had been buying for Vivi and him. The house he'd thought they would fill with their children.

Ford didn't know if he could stay in Sugar Springs now. He doubted Vivi would be going anywhere, having bought her family's restaurant. He couldn't imagine driving by the square and seeing the Romano name each time he did so or running into her in town.

He wouldn't make any sudden decisions, not when he was so raw and aching. That had never been his nature. He had a thriving medical practice and the ink on the deed to this house wasn't even dry yet. He couldn't simply chuck it all and leave Sugar Springs.

Ford would give himself six months to see if he could co-exist in a world where Vivi would always be present. She was friends with his friends' wives. He wouldn't expect those women to take sides and choose him over her. It wouldn't be fair to rob Vivi of their support.

Parking his truck, he went inside the still, rambling house, grateful he had moved Aunt Sandy to the garage apartment yesterday. It gave him the chance to mourn in solitude and not be seen by anyone as he came apart, weeping for a life with the only woman he would ever love.



VIVI LAY IN BED, hot tears falling as she pulled the pillow toward her. The one where moments ago Ford's head had nestled. She inhaled deeply, thinking she might never wash this pillowcase again.

Making love with Ford had been everything she could have imagined, and yet it was still so much more. Because she loved him. He was a thorough,

generous lover.

Then she had toppled his entire world with her lies.

Regret washed through her. She was an awful person for having done so. She should never have agreed to start seeing him, much less allow things to progress as far as they had. She could still see the hurt and shock on his face when she had lied to him.

Of course, she wanted a life with him. She would have given anything to have had his children, and she could see little boys with innocent faces and his hazel, inquisitive eyes. But Vivi knew inside there was something wrong with her. Every relationship she'd had, failed miserably. Even if Ford loved her now and she loved him, too, she believed marriage between them would have been doomed. She had never proven to be enough for any man. They all left her. She didn't know what was wrong with her, but she could no longer inflict pain on herself by pretending she could be like others and find her happily ever after.

Yes, she had cut Ford to the quick. He would be miserable for a while, but he was single, extremely good-looking, and a doctor. He would be a hot commodity in Sugar Springs. Once the single women in town knew Ford Carpenter was available, they would be vying for him, fighting one another like gladiators in a Roman arena.

She always thought she had recovered from the hurt different men had put her through. Vivi realized now that she had only compartmentalized it, boxing up each failed relationship and pushing it to the far recesses of her mind. She wouldn't be able to do so with Ford because his presence in Sugar Springs would be a constant reminder of the love she had lost.

She wondered if it might take leaving Sugar Springs altogether before the healing could occur.

Her parents would be appalled if she sold Romano's, but Vivi didn't know if she could stay here, running into Ford unexpectedly at various times, having her heart torn out again and again and again with each encounter.

Maybe she could leave the restaurant in Lorenzo's hands without selling it. Romano's could return to what it had been, a beloved pizzeria for the residents of Sugar Springs. If she retained ownership, she could simply pay Lorenzo more to also manage the place. At least while her parents were gone, she wouldn't tell them what she was doing because Papa would race back to Texas and take over again. Legally, though, he couldn't do so because she owned Romano's now.

Vivi climbed into the shower, staying until the water ran cold, tears still hot on her cheeks. She slipped into her robe and curled up on the bed, tightly hugging the pillow Ford had used to her.

A calm descended upon her. It was the right thing to do, leaving Sugar Springs. The friends she had made were ones who were married to Ford's friends. She couldn't ask them to choose sides. The result would be awkward socially and divisive in their marriages. She didn't want these couples to argue about their loyalties to Ford or her. It would be best for everyone if Vivi simply left town.

She decided to call Lorenzo in first thing tomorrow morning since the restaurant was closed. She would offer him the chance to run it. They could go over the books together. Vivi had created detailed documents of what she did on a daily, weekly, and monthly basis. Lorenzo could use those to guide him in operating Romano's from a business standpoint.

Since he had already signed an apartment lease, she thought she could earn some extra money by leasing her parents' house. She would contact a realtor tomorrow about that possibility.

For now, all Vivi wanted to do was escape into sleep.

Vivi was glad no one would be at Romano's this morning. Although she had placed a cold compress over her eyes, they still looked swollen from all the crying she had done. She didn't feel like bothering with makeup, simply running a comb through her hair and throwing on a T-shirt and baggy pair of shorts.

She arrived and parked in back, letting herself into Romano's and silencing the alarm. The restaurant was quiet. She surveyed it, thinking how it was all hers.

And how she was going to give it up.

No, she would retain ownership. She simply would turn over the day-to-day cooking and management to Lorenzo. At least she hoped she could do so. If he refused, Vivi would have to remain in Sugar Springs.

Going up the stairs to her office, she opened the fridge, selecting a can of sparkling water and holding it over her right eye. Her head throbbed from lack of sleep.

And a broken heart.

She set down the can and opened it, sipping from it as her computer booted up. Routine matters consumed her for an hour, and then she called Lorenzo.

When she got a sleepy, "Hello?" Vivi said, "I'm sorry if I woke you, Lorenzo. I've got something important to talk to you about."

"Vivi?" he asked groggily. "What? It's only eight o'clock. What do you need?"

Again, she apologized and then said, "I'd like you to come in and discuss

something important with me.”

“It cannot wait?” he asked grumpily.

“No. It can’t.”

She was afraid if she put off this conversation, her resolve would wilt, and she would stay in Sugar Springs. Already, she was so miserable she had trouble functioning. She couldn’t see continuing to live and work here when she might run into Ford at any moment or have to hear about him from someone.

Or see him with someone else. Someone who would become his wife. Bear his children. Make him happy and whole again.

“All right. Give me an hour. No, make it two.”

“I’ll be in my office, Lorenzo. Thank you for coming in on your day off. I hope to make it worth your while.”

He hung up without a goodbye. She knew he was irritable before he got a couple of cups of coffee in him. She realized he might have had a late night, knowing he could sleep in this morning. She hoped he would be in a better mood by the time he arrived.

Calling up the Chamber of Commerce site on her computer, Vivi found a local realtor who was a member of the organization and dialed her number.

“Hello, this is Tamara Heath.”

“Hi, Tamara, this is Vivi Romano.”

“Oh, my goodness. Vivi! I ate dinner at Romano’s Friday night with a few friends. Your food was spectacular—and just what Sugar Springs has needed for a long time.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it, Tamara, but I’m calling regarding a little business.”

“Of course.” Tamara’s tone changed from gushing to brisk. “What can I do for you?”

“I’m considering renting out my parents’ house while they’re gone to Italy. It’s really too large for one person,” she told the realtor, not ready to play all her cards just yet.

“How long will they be gone?” Tamara inquired.

“At least a year. Possibly two. They’re visiting family and simply enjoying a slower pace of life after working at Romano’s for decades.”

“Well, Sugar Springs has always appreciated your parents and their pizza.”

“Do you think renting it is a possibility? I’d prefer someone who stayed

long-term, say six months to a year. Is there a market for rentals for that length of time in Sugar Springs?”

“It can depend. I would need to see the property before I could give you an idea about how much it might rent for and if it would be feasible. Are you free now? I have a showing in an hour, but I could squeeze you in before it.”

Knowing Lorenzo wouldn't be here for a while, Vivi readily agreed, providing Tamara with the address. She left Romano's, locking up again, and hurried home to make sure everything looked neat. Normally, she made the bed and put breakfast dishes in the dishwasher, but she hadn't done either this morning, not being able to summon up the energy to do so.

Once home, she tidied up and changed, slipping into a T-shirt dress and belting it, hoping she appeared a little more put together now. She heard the doorbell ring and answered the door, greeting Tamara.

“I can tell you right off the bat that this is a lovely neighborhood,” the realtor said. “That's a plus in your favor as far as renting goes. Why don't you walk me through the place? I may take a few pictures along the way if you don't mind.”

“Not at all.”

Vivi did so, pointing out a few of the features of the house that she liked. The wood-burning fireplace. The pot filler above the stove. The two, spacious linen closets.

“Yes, this is very nice. I can understand why you would want to have a renter in for a longer period of time.”

Tamara named a figure, warning Vivi that it was only an estimate for what the property might bring in for a month.

“Do you have a timeline in mind?”

“No,” she said. “I'm only considering renting it. I'll make up my mind probably by the end of the week.”

“Not a problem,” Tamara said. “Just let me know if this is a step you wish to take. I don't currently have any clients who are looking for something such as this, but things change quickly. Especially with school starting soon, there might be a family wishing to rent a house for the entire school year.”

“I appreciate you coming by and viewing the house,” Vivi said as Tamara handed her a card.

“Give me a call, either way. I can also help you find something smaller if you're interested. I can see how this would be hard to maintain by yourself, especially with you running Romano's and cooking, as well.”

“Thank you.”

Vivi walked Tamara out and drove back to Romano’s, returning to her office. She got a little work done before Lorenzo showed up. He hadn’t shaved, but he was dressed neatly and carried a tumbler with what she supposed was coffee.

“Come have a seat,” she said, inviting him in.

He took the one in front of her desk. “What’s up, Vivi? This is my day off. You, of all people, know how sacred that is to those of us in the business.”

“I’m sorry to call you in, but I wanted to discuss something with you without anyone else around.”

His expression changed. “I’m intrigued. Go on.”

“How would you like to run Romano’s?”

Lorenzo frowned. “I already run the kitchen most days when I’m not your sous chef.”

“Let me clarify my offer. Would you be interested in being the only chef, as well as managing the business end of things?”

Wariness filled his eyes. “Is this a trick question? What would you be doing?”

“I wouldn’t be here. You would have *carte blanche* to run Romano’s as you see fit. If you merely want to be its chef, I can see about hiring someone to act as the manager. Of course,” she added, sweetening the pot, “it would involve a substantial bump in salary if you took on both positions since you would be totally in charge of both the kitchen and business end of things.”

The chef rubbed his chin in thought. “Why?”

“Why what? Ask you to run things? You’ve proven yourself in the kitchen to me. I can teach you the other part. I’ve assembled a good number of lists on how to organize and keep things running smoothly.” She paused. “I think you can do this, Lorenzo. It would be a good step for you.”

“What would your papa say? And your mama?” he pressed.

“They aren’t here,” she said firmly. “I am the one who owns Romano’s now.”

He shook his head. “But why would you wish to leave?” Then his eyes widened. “Has something happened with you and the *bel medico*? Have you quarreled?”

She didn’t want anyone to know about what had passed between Ford and her and said, “It’s surprised me, but I’ve missed Dallas. The big city. The fast

pace. And I've missed cooking on a daily basis. While I don't mind the management end of things, my heart and soul belong in the kitchen."

His soulful eyes pierced hers. "Then why not simply cook here? You could set a menu during the week. Offer the more popular dishes and then keep to a specialty menu on Friday and Saturday. If you were busy in the kitchen, that should fill the need in your soul."

"Are you turning me down, Lorenzo? I need to know," she said curtly.

He stroked his chin. "This is a big decision, Vivi. Huge. May I have time to consider it?"

She had never thought he would need time, and she was afraid to push him too hard.

"Of course. There's no rush," she told him. "Shall we say the end of the week?"

"Yes, that will give me time to think on things. Do you already have a kitchen to go to in Dallas?"

"No, I wanted to wait and see if you were interested in taking over for me before I made a few calls and sent out my résumé."

Lorenzo stood. "Then I will consider your most generous offer."

Vivi rose. "Thank you, Lorenzo. Please, don't feel as if I am pressuring you. If you wish to stay solely in the kitchen, I can always find someone to help manage Romano's. Perhaps Cami. She's bright and organized."

"Hmm. Cami would be good. Wait to mention anything to her, though, Vivi," he cautioned. "I will have my decision for you in a few days."

The chef left, and Vivi felt drained. She thought if she buried herself in work, it might help. She doubted she had the concentration, though, to stay focused.

Cooking would help. Cooking had been her solace from the time she was a little girl.

Her cell buzzed, and she saw it was a message from Rory.

Need a break from designing. Could actually use your opinion on what I'm working on now. Want to grab lunch today in town? Or maybe you could bring something here.

BEING with her friend was just what Vivi needed. She wouldn't cry on Rory's shoulder, but it would be nice to have some company.

Sounds great! Text me what you want to eat & I'll pick it up. That way, you don't have to get out in this heat. It's already brutal.

RORY MESSAGED BACK that she was up for anything and mentioned they still had some birthday cake left if Vivi wanted something sweet. Vivi told her friend she would be over in half an hour.

She went to the kitchen and decided to make two different sandwiches. Rory could choose the one she wanted, or they could split both and have a taste of each.

Deciding to go light with the first one, she thought to make a *Caprese* sandwich. She sliced fresh tomatoes and mozzarella, placing them on bread and sprinkling basil atop the cheese. She mixed a little salt and olive oil and drizzled it along the sandwich's fillings. It would be juicy, with a mild creamy flavor. As an afterthought, she placed a few bits of arugula in it to give it a nice, peppery flavor.

For the second sandwich, Vivi grilled some portobello mushrooms. The big, meaty mushroom cap would act as a burger. She topped it with baby spinach, fresh mozzarella, and quickly mixed up a red pepper tapenade, spreading it atop the cap.

She wrapped both sandwiches and placed them in a large to-go container and drove to Rory's house. She paused a moment as she walked up the sidewalk to the door, thinking how she had made this same trek less than twenty-four hours ago and how things had changed drastically since then.

Rory greeted her with a hug and urged Vivi to come inside.

"You're right about the heat. I've been trying to walk every morning around six. I only made it halfway through my walk this morning. Even at that early hour, the heat was already starting to get to me."

"I hope you're drinking plenty of water."

"I am. I do like to get a little bit of exercise, though. The doctor says it's good for me and the babies."

They went to the kitchen, where Vivi opened the sandwiches as Rory exclaimed over them.

“I didn’t mean you had to make us lunch. But these look heavenly. What are they?”

She shared what she had made, and Rory said she had to sample both sandwiches. Vivi cut them in half and placed one of each kind on their plates, taking them to the kitchen table.

Rory eased into a chair and sighed. “I’m already as big as an elephant, and I have three more months to go. Of course, the doctor has warned me about how twins can come earlier than their due date. Or how I might need to go on bed rest or even be hospitalized for the last of my pregnancy as a precaution.”

“Everything is going well, though?” she asked anxiously.

“Yes. I’m almost through the second trimester. That’s the honeymoon phase of pregnancy. Supposedly, you feel better. Food tastes good again—and you can keep it down. You have more energy.” Rory sighed. “I’m still awfully tired. I guess my body is preparing me for being tired when I lose sleep once the twins come.”

Rory bit into one of her sandwich halves. “Oh, my gosh! This is fabulous, Vivi. Every time I eat something you’ve made, I think you should put it on the menu at Romano’s. You got here pretty quickly, so I’m thinking this isn’t too difficult to put together?”

“No, it’s really easy and tasty.”

“Then you should add sandwiches to the weekday menu in addition to pizza. This would be so easy to grab and go.”

The thought of adding things to a menu of a place she no longer worked caused her eyes to mist over.

“Are you okay?” Rory asked, concern in her voice.

Vivi decided the news was bound to get out. She owed it to her friend to give her a heads up and not hear anything through the gossip mill.

“Ford and I aren’t seeing each other anymore,” she began.

“Oh, honey. I’m so sorry.” Rory put down her sandwich and took Vivi’s hand. “Are you sure things are over? I mean, all couples fight. You two just looked so happy together last night.”

“It was my choice,” she explained. “We want very different things out of life.”

Her friend frowned. “Like what? You both are two of the nicest people

I've ever met."

"Ford needs a woman who will give him kids. He loves Sugar Springs so much. He needs to become a part of the community."

Rory frowned. "You're a part of this community. Romano's is a key place in Sugar Springs." She paused. "You don't want children? I know Ford has mentioned that he does."

Vivi swallowed. "I don't think I'm cut out to be married, much less have kids."

"That surprises me. I think you would be a fantastic mom."

She withdrew her hand from Rory's and decided to let her bombshell hit. "I'm thinking about going back to Dallas. To cook."

"What?" Rory shook her head. "There's more—a lot more—than you're telling me, Vivi. If you're comfortable enough, I'd love to talk out things with you."

She hated to lie, but Rory would never accept the truth.

"I've moved on from Sugar Springs," she explained. "I'm used to the exciting life in a big city. I miss cooking every day. I want to go back to Dallas—or maybe even Houston or San Antonio—and just cook. Not be distracted by bookkeeping and ordering supplies and managing employee schedules and insurance. I've always wanted to be a chef at a name restaurant. Women already have a few strikes against us. The world of fine cuisine is dominated by male chefs. If I'm going to succeed at that level, I need to commit myself totally to the kitchen. A husband and kids aren't a part of that."

Vivi paused, letting Rory absorb the information.

"I'm the one who ended things with Ford. His life is here in Sugar Springs, surrounded by family. My life is meant to be very different."

Rory's gaze met hers. "I call bullshit, Vivi. I don't believe a word of what you just said."

Her friend's frankness startled Vivi. Then anger surged within her.

"You don't get to tell me how to feel," she said defensively. "How to live my life. I thought you were my friend."

"It's *because* I'm your friend that I can speak openly and honestly with you, Vivi," Rory said gently. "Would you do me a favor? Would you come back over tonight? Don't make any big decisions until then."

"Why? What's going to happen tonight? If you think you can have Ford here and force us to talk things out, that's not happening, Rory."

Vivi stood. Rory caught her wrist.

“Just show up. I want to ask Hope and Nova to come over. This is a big move you’re making, leaving Sugar Springs. You’d have to leave Romano’s in someone else’s hands.”

“Lorenzo is perfectly capable of handling things. He makes as good a pizza as I’ve ever eaten.”

“Please stop by,” Rory begged. “Just talk it out with us. Let us hear what’s going on. Saying things aloud, bouncing them off others—that can be really helpful.” She paused. “You need your friends, Vivi. We want to be here for you.”

“I don’t want any of you to be in the middle of this... breakup,” she explained. “You’ll be the ones left in Sugar Springs. Your husbands are all friends with Ford. I don’t want to cause any strife in your marriages. I don’t want you stuck choosing sides. Besides, you should be on Ford’s side. He’s the one who’ll still be here.”

Rory squeezed Vivi’s wrist. “But we’ll always be friends. Or are you cutting ties and leaving us behind, too?”

“I...” Her voice trailed off.

That’s exactly what she had thought. Still, she probably owed it to these women who had been so welcoming to her. Vivi decided she would do her best to give them an explanation before she moved on.

“All right,” she agreed. “I’ll be back at seven tonight. We’ll talk about things. But I’m not changing my mind.”

“Thank you,” Rory said. “Now, sit. We need to finish lunch.”

Vivi shook her head. “I’m not that hungry, Rory. I’ll see you tonight. I can see myself out.”

She left the kitchen and returned to Romano’s, savoring the solitude. Tonight would be difficult. It would be hard walking away from the friends she had made in such a short time. More than anything, she wished Paige were here. Her best friend would understand why Vivi was leaving. Paige had listened to Vivi pour her heart out over the years when so many relationships had soured. Paige would get why Vivi wanted to guard her heart.

She did worry, though, about how Paige and Tanner would feel about her walking away from Romano’s. After all, it was an investment they had made. Still, Lorenzo was an excellent chef. Even if he didn’t keep with the specialty menus on the weekends, patrons would always be able to get their fair share

of pizza. The Haddocks wouldn't lose their investment. Romano's would always thrive.

Vivi would meet with her Sugar Springs friends this evening—and then she would come home and call Paige, telling her everything.

Vivi changed into a sleeveless linen shirt and capris, her stomach churning. She went to the kitchen to claim the *piccolo pasticceria* she had spent the afternoon baking. Being in the kitchen always soothed her, and it had allowed her to go on autopilot so that she wouldn't think about Ford or tonight's discussion with her friends.

She took the food storage containers and stacked them. Inside were the small pastries filled with cream, fruits, and jelly. The dessert was popular in northern Italy, and she had spent a week with a pastry chef in Bergamo, perfecting her technique.

Going to her car, she placed the containers on the passenger's seat and then drove to the Coxes' house, where a couple of vehicles were parked at their curb. Thankfully, Ford's truck wasn't one of them. Vivi parked across the street and then took her desserts to the front door, knocking, trying to quell the nausea inside her.

Walker opened the door, giving her a sympathetic smile. "Hi, Vivi. Can I take those for you?"

Seeing him threw her into a panic. She hadn't thought of Walker being home when she came. He would be solidly in Camp Ford, and she didn't want him around as she talked with her friends.

"Sure. Thank you," she said, pushing the stack at him as she stepped into the entryway.

"I'll take these to the kitchen. Anything special I need to do? Put them in the fridge?"

"No. In fact, you can bring them to wherever everyone is. They're just

small pastries that can be eaten in a bite or two. I'll stop by the kitchen and get some plates and napkins."

Vivi went to Rory's kitchen, knowing where everything was after having cooked Ford's birthday dinner in it. She pulled out some small plates and fetched napkins. No silverware would be necessary. She took them to the family room, where she heard voices.

As she stepped inside, she came to an abrupt halt. Walker was seated on the sofa. Gideon was also there.

"No," she said, shaking her head. "This isn't what I signed up for."

"Please, come in, Vivi," Walker said.

Reluctantly, she moved into the room, setting the plates and napkins on the coffee table, not taking a seat as she crossed her arms defensively in front of her.

"I agreed to talk with my friends," she said stubbornly.

"Hell, Vivi, we *are* your friends," Gideon admonished her. "But yes, we're Ford's friends, as well. As his closest friends, Walker and I will be the ones picking up the pieces of what's left of him. We'd like to hear what you have to say. We understand it's in confidence and that we aren't to repeat anything to Ford." Gideon paused. "We just want to make sure *you're* okay. We want to see things from your perspective."

"Would you sit?" Rory pleaded. "This isn't an intervention. We're not ganging up on you. We just want what's best for you."

Vivi moved to an empty wing chair and sat, still feeling blindsided by the men's presence. She was debating whether to stay or go.

Hope looked at her with sympathetic eyes. "Rory told Nova and me that you had ended things with Ford. How are you?"

"I'm fine," she said, tight-lipped. "I'm not sure what Rory thinks tonight will accomplish, though."

Rory spoke up. "I told the others that you are thinking about leaving Sugar Springs."

"I am leaving," she said, determination filling her. "I hope you didn't gather everyone here, thinking you could change my mind about that."

"We're here to support whatever decision you make," Nova told her. "Tell us what's going on. I'll admit we all thought you and Ford were perfect for each other."

"It's like I told Rory," she said, sticking to the script in her head. "Ford is tied to Sugar Springs. He has his uncle's medical practice. He's bought his

aunt's house.”

That caused the air in the room to change, but to their credit, no one said anything.

Vivi continued, “He wants to be a part of a place that always made him happy. He wants a wife and children. He has longtime friends here, and he’s made new ones. He’s weaving his way into the fabric of this community.”

“And you?” Hope asked.

“I know I was brought up here, but I did spend three years in Italy. I did a lot of traveling. Caught a bit of wanderlust. I wound up in Dallas and really thrived at the steakhouse where I worked. Then I helped Beck—my boyfriend—start his own restaurant. I love the excitement of a big city. I live to cook. If I’m ever going to make my mark in the culinary world, I need to be somewhere besides Sugar Springs.”

“Aren’t there small restaurants with Michelin stars that are in the French countryside?” Walker asked. “Out of the way spots where critics and customers have traveled to? You don’t have to be in a city with a million residents to gain a reputation as a great chef. You’re already doing that here in Sugar Springs, Vivi, with your weekend menus.”

“I agree,” Gideon interjected. “Everywhere I go, I’m hearing from people who have dined at Romano’s. They’re wild about what you’re doing there. Your cooking would hold up in any city. New York. Rome. Tokyo. You don’t have to leave here to make your mark in the culinary world.” His eyes softened. “I think it’s more. I think you don’t want to be where Ford is. If you didn’t care for him, Vivi, you wouldn’t be so dead-set on leaving town.”

“What if I do want to leave?” she asked, her Italian temper flaring. “Yes, I like Ford. And yes, it would kill me to stay here. To see him dating someone else. Marrying someone else.”

“If you care for him, why leave?” Rory asked. “As Gideon and Walker have said, you can cook at an extremely high level, right here in Sugar Springs. Why can’t you have a career as a well-respected chef—and Ford, too?”

“Because I suck at relationships,” she admitted, deciding to come clean and then make her escape. “As much as I want what all of you have with your spouses, I can’t have it.”

“Why not?” asked Nova. “If you love Ford, you need to fight for that love. Fight for your happiness.”

Tears filled her eyes, blurring her vision. “I can’t,” she said. “I am

hopeless at relationships. Ask Paige. If she were here, she would tell you how god-awful I am at them. I have never satisfied a single man I've been serious about. There's something lacking in me." She began wringing her hands. "I don't know what. If I did, I would try and fix it."

Hope left her seat and came to Vivi, kneeling next to her and taking her hands. "Were you having problems with Ford?"

"No," she said, tears rolling down her cheeks. "Everything was going really well. But I know he would eventually leave. *Every* man leaves me. I don't want to let go and give everything I have to Ford—and then watch him walk out the door."

"You don't know that would happen," Hope said.

"It would. It always happens. I can't let myself love Ford—marry Ford—and then lose him. I'm already so messed up and broken inside. If I... If I..."

Vivi burst into tears.

Rory brought a box of tissues. Nova got her a glass of water. Everyone sat patiently, watching her bawl like a baby.

"I *do* love him," she revealed. "But I can't go through this again. My high school boy friend dumped me two weeks before senior prom. We'd dated over a year, and I loved him so much. He told me I was no fun and that he'd been seeing two other girls behind my back. He'd even gotten one of them pregnant. He took her to prom while I sat home that night."

Vivi blew her nose. "Then there was the guy I began seeing in Italy. Vincenzo. He complimented me. Brought me flowers. Cooked for me. Told me he loved me."

She paused. "I had visions in my head of becoming a dual citizen. Living in Italy part of the year and the rest in the U.S. I thought about having kids who would be bilingual, comfortable traveling between two countries and their different cultures.

"But do you know what? Vincenzo had a wife. And *two* kids! And... he had gotten his girlfriend pregnant. She was supposed to deliver twins."

Vivi blew her nose loudly, wiping it with a tissue.

"So, your high school boyfriend was a jerk, and your Italian boyfriend was an asshole," Nova said. "We've all dated someone in our past who proved to be morons. I say good for you that you found out they were idiots, and you didn't get stuck with them."

"Twice, and I might have been able to get over it," she said. "But it gets a lot worse, Nova."

She looked out at her friends and said, “When I came back to Dallas, I met a guy through a server at the restaurant where I worked. He lived in her apartment building, and she really talked him up. I was reluctant to have a blind date with anyone, much less start up a relationship, but Richard was handsome. Attentive. Smart. Ambitious. He seemed perfect in every way. Slowly, I let my guard down, thinking I had struck out twice before. I wasn’t about to go for three. Instead, I swung for the fences.

“And screwed up. Again.”

Hope stood and perched on the armchair, slipping an arm around Vivi’s shoulder. “What happened, honey?”

“It was the same thing all over again. Richard cheated on me. Blah, blah, blah. He told me that I just wasn’t fun enough. That he needed more excitement in his life. He dropped me like a hot potato and started seeing another server at my restaurant.”

Vivi wiped her cheeks with the backs of her hands. “For all I know, he was seeing her even before he broke up with me.” She snorted. “You think I would have learned after that, but I didn’t. I met Beck. And that was the worst of all.”

She began to sob. Hope rubbed her back and stroked her hair. Rory and Nova both came to her, sitting at her feet, holding her hands, trying to comfort her.

“Beck didn’t compliment me much. He was grumpy. Self-centered. I thought he was merely being himself around me. That made me think he was normal. That he liked me for me. I won’t go into the whole sordid story, but basically, he used me. I wound up sinking everything I had into his restaurant. I paid his bills. The monthly mortgage. Utilities. I worked shifts for free, cooking, hostessing, hiring staff, doing paperwork. He walked all over me. I let him—because I loved him.”

Vivi mopped her eyes with a tissue, embarrassed and ashamed of what she was sharing with her friends, but knowing she had to make them see she was radioactive when it came to men and why she had to escape Sugar Springs.

“Finally, Dante convinced me I deserved better—and so I confronted Beck. Told him I was moving out the next day and that he’d have to find another sugar mama to pay for everything. No more free rides or free labor. He was on his own.”

She hesitated, deciding she might as well spill all. “He OD’d that night.

That goes to show you how little I knew about him. I had no idea he was addicted to hard drugs. That was why he didn't have any money. So, I had the police banging on our door because the fight we had about me leaving was so loud, a neighbor had called in the disturbance. One of the cops checked on Beck and found him dead. There were EMTs. An ambulance. More cops. Crime scene people. For a little bit, I think they even thought I might have been responsible for his death."

"You have been through the wringer," Rory said, shaking her head in disbelief.

"Oh, that wasn't all. I couldn't stay in the house that night, trying to sleep in the bed where Beck had died, so I went to Dante's apartment. The next morning when I returned to pack my things, Beck's parents were already at the house with their lawyer. Mrs. Beckham, who hated the fact that her spoiled, rich little boy was dating a poor, uneducated Italian girl, had dumped my clothes all across the lawn. I had been the one paying for everything. His mortgage. The utilities. Tons of stuff at the restaurant. Yet I lost it all. I wasn't allowed by the attorney and the Beckhams to even enter Il Giardino. They wound up selling the restaurant soon after. All the staff lost their jobs."

Vivi shook her head. "I'd signed anything that Beck pushed in front of me because I loved him and wanted a life with him. That foolishness wound up putting me into a lot of debt, which took me the past four years to pay off while I worked double shifts, seven days a week. Once again, I wound up on the short stick of things. This time, it ruined my credit and my life."

She sniffed. "Every man I have cared for has found something lacking in me. I've never been enough for anyone."

"I don't think Ford sees you that way," Hope said quietly.

"He may not now—but that shoe would drop sooner or later," she said, not bothering to disguise the bitterness in her voice. "I'm not willing to put myself out there anymore. I just can't do it. My heart has been trampled. Broken. I am damaged goods."

Vivi looked at her friends. "Yes, I love Ford. But love has never been enough. Even if things seem ideal now, I'm sure that day would come when he would discover that he wanted more than me. Someone better. Smarter. Prettier. I can't stay. I can't be near him. I don't want to marry him—and then be devastated by a divorce. So, I chose to be pro-active. I decided I'd be the one to leave first. I was the one in control. I'm the one who walked away."

Vivi pulled her hand from Nova's and reached for the water on the table

beside her, guzzling the entire contents of the glass.

She sighed. “Now, you know my whole awful history. There’s something wrong with me. Something I don’t know how to fix. All I do know is that I can cook. Cooking is my salvation. My solace. My livelihood. I plan to devote my entire life to it. To building a career in the culinary world. It’s a place I know. It won’t throw any curve balls to me. I know where I stand in a kitchen.”

She tried to blink back the fresh tears. “All of you are so happy and in love with your spouses. I don’t think I could stay here and remain your friend because I would be eaten up by jealousy. Each of you have been wonderful to me. So kind and generous. Gideon, Walker, you have as well. But I’m damaged goods. Ford deserves better than me. In the long run, this will give him a chance to be with someone he deserves.”

Vivi saw Walker and Rory exchange a look that only married couples did, and it was like being stabbed in the heart. It was the perfect illustration of what she referred to. She couldn’t keep her sanity and be around people so happy and in love without withering away.

Walker cleared his throat. “All of us in this room have faced some pretty trying times, Vivi. I’m not pushing aside or demeaning what you have suffered, but I think you need to hear some of our stories. Because sad as they are, and as much as we’ve all been hurt by others—we have come out on the other side of things. Everything hasn’t been sunshine and rainbows for anyone present. We’re examples of how you can go through hell and back and when you find the right one for you, everything finally falls into place. Are you willing to listen?”

She dabbed her eyes with another tissue and nodded. Nothing anyone said would matter or change her mind. If it made them feel better to talk about something that had happened before they found their soulmates, she would let them. The people in this room had been kind to her. Since this would be the last time she would see any of them, she would indulge them.

Rory and Nova returned to their seats, and she looked up at Hope. “That can’t be easy sitting there. I’m fine. Why don’t you go take a more comfortable seat?”

Hope returned to the loveseat where Gideon claimed her hand.

Vivi faced the room. “All right. Who wants to start? I’ve already kicked this pity party off in spectacular fashion. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

Walker laced his fingers through Rory’s and said, “I’ll begin.”

Walker's gaze met hers. "I never struggled with anything. Frankly, I lived a charmed life. Grades came easily to me. Girls, too. My dad made a decent living as a lawyer. My mom taught at the high school. I always had friends. We never had financial woes. I got into the college of my choice. Same with law school. I went to work at a firm with a sterling reputation. Made great money. Got married."

Vivi sucked in a breath. She hadn't known Walker was married before.

"Christine was a fellow lawyer. I know now I was blinded by the physical attraction between us because I sure didn't know what a snake she truly was. After a whirlwind romance, I found myself married to a stranger who admitted she married me for political and career reasons. She didn't love me and never had. I'd confused love and lust. The marriage didn't last six months. I had huge trust issues with women after that. I doubted I would ever get married again."

He looked lovingly at Rory, taking her hand and kissing it. "Until I met this woman. She healed the hurt inside me and taught me more about love than I knew was possible."

"I'm glad you and Rory found one another," she said sincerely.

"I was married before, too," Gideon spoke up, again taking Vivi by surprise. "I came from a family which struggled to make ends meet. Won a football scholarship to college and became the conference's golden boy. An All-American. Started dating a campus beauty. I suffered a horrific knee injury my senior season, though. Wasn't even drafted. I did sign on with a pro team, but the knee—though I'd gone through a painful, successful rehab

—would never hold up at the pro level. So, those career plans of fame and fortune went out the window.”

Gideon raked a hand through his hair. “Sugar Springs had been good to me and taught me how important community was. I wanted to give back to Dallas, my new community. I became a cop. That was a huge turn-off to Melinda. Her family was wealthy. Her idea of a good day was spending it being pampered at an expensive spa with her friends from the Junior League. She was embarrassed by the fact I was a cop. Horrified at the low salary I made. I still hung in there five long years, trying to make things work between us. We divorced—and she married a wealthy attorney she’d dated before me only three months later. I suspect she’d been seeing him for some time.

“Like Walker, I didn’t really date for the next decade. I was married to my job, especially after I was promoted to detective. Being offered the job of chief of police in Sugar Springs was a dream come true, but I never thought I’d come to my hometown and find love.”

He turned to Hope. “And I give thanks every day that I met you.” Gideon softly kissed his wife and then glanced back to Vivi. “Walker and I will leave you with the ladies now. We just wanted you to see that lots of times, relationships don’t work out. You think you know the other person when you really don’t. But Walker and I are decent, loyal, hardworking men. There wasn’t anything lacking in us. What was off? We chose the wrong partners the first time around. But that didn’t mean we didn’t have something to offer. That we couldn’t be a good husband to the right woman.”

Gideon stood and came to Vivi, taking her hand. “You are an incredible woman, Vivi. You’ve suffered through your fair share of assholes. But that doesn’t mean there’s something wrong with you. It was them. Don’t sell yourself short.”

Walker rose. “I hope you know how special you are, Vivi. If you don’t, I hope your friends here will convince you of that fact.”

The two men exited the room.

“I get it,” she said. “They picked bad partners for their first marriage. They were lucky they found the perfect women for them down the line. I’m happy for Walker and Gideon.”

“We all have stories of our pasts, Vivi,” Nova said gently. “We’ve all thought something was wrong with us. Or someone told us that. My parents certainly did.”

Nova took a sip of her water. Vivi could see she was struggling.

“You don’t have to share anything with me, Nova.”

“I want to. I *need* to.” Taking a deep breath, Nova said, “I know you’ve realized that I was a very young mother, seeing my age and Leo’s. I was raised in an extremely religious, fundamentalist household. Homeschooled. And believe it or not, very unloved by my so-called Christian parents. I snuck out of the house and went to a traveling carnival, where I met Leo’s father. I’d never even been kissed.”

Nova blushed. “We did more than kiss. I can say because of my naivety, I didn’t really know what we had done—or what might result from it. When I figured out that I was pregnant, I tried to get in touch with Ace. I learned that he’d recently been killed in a motorcycle accident.”

“Oh, Nova,” Vivi said, her heart aching for her friend.

“My parents didn’t want my immoral behavior to reflect on them, so my father dropped me off in downtown Dallas and left me there. I was on my own.”

All three women gasped, and Vivi understood that Nova had never shared this story with the others before now.

“Fortunately, I called my aunt, who was the black sheep of the family. Rain lived here in Sugar Springs. Even though we hadn’t seen one another in years, she dropped everything and came and got me. Let me live with her. Treated me as her daughter and Leo as her grandson. Saw that I had artistic talent and taught me all she knew. I left Sugar Springs for Austin when Leo was five, ready to take on the art world.”

Somehow, she knew there were worse turns in Nova’s story.

“I devoted myself to Leo and my art. I didn’t trust men for years, and then I finally gave one a chance. We moved in with Jagger. Like you with Beck, he didn’t treat me right. I stayed too long and took too much from him. He was petty. Jealous of my talent. He didn’t like Leo, which should have been the red flag that made me flee. Nope. I stayed, thinking Jagger would magically change. That I just needed to keep giving him another chance. And another.

“Until I came home and caught him in bed with a friend and fellow artist,” Nova continued. “He admitted he’d been having sex with many other women—and men. He didn’t fight to keep me. I was humiliated. Depressed. Embarrassed. Angry. Especially because Leo had tried to warn me about Jagger. He’d been the only guy I’d been with after Ace, and he betrayed me

in the worse way possible. I knew then I would never be able to trust another man. I even began to dread the lonely life ahead of me because Leo was already fifteen by that point, and I knew he'd only be around a few more years."

Nova's gaze met and held Vivi's. "Cole changed everything. I understood, through him, that there were good men in the world. Men who respected women and knew how to treat them right. I thought Jagger had taken lovers because I hadn't been enough for him, but Cole said I was perfect—for him. He helped give me back my confidence and self-respect."

She rubbed her belly. "I feel so lucky to be having a child with him. Cole also embraced Leo from the beginning. He understood we were a package deal."

"That had to be hard to live through, Nova," Hope said. "Thank you for sharing it with us."

"Vivi needed to hear it. She needs to learn—just as I did—she is wonderful the way she is. I don't know if I could have ever trusted anyone other than Cole. But he was the man Leo and I needed."

"It seems like trust is a common theme with the stories we're sharing this evening," Rory said. "I'll admit I had my own issues with men." She paused. "Hope and Nova know I used to be an ice skater. I don't think Vivi knows what I went through at the end of my career, though."

"I'm afraid I don't," she admitted. "I kept up with football in high school because I had friends playing on the team. I played basketball myself. I really didn't follow sports after I graduated from high school." She shrugged. "Food was my life. Restaurants were my very small, close-knit world. The hours are insane, so pretty much everything else goes by the wayside."

Rory nodded. "Then you don't know I was an Olympic and world champion. I performed successfully at the highest level of my sport."

Shock ran through her. "I had no idea, Rory. I knew you'd taught at the high school and had skated before that. That you were designing skate wear now. But the Olympics? Really?"

"Walker wants me to display my medals. He tells me I should take pride in my accomplishments. For a long time, though, I couldn't even look at them because of what they reminded me of." She took a deep breath and expelled it. "I was shot by a stalker during a competition."

Vivi shivered. Her mouth grew dry at the thought.

"Talk about trust issues," Rory said. "Nothing like launching yourself

into the air and having a bullet slam into you as you come back to the ice. The impact of the bullet caused me to land completely wrong. I broke my ankle. I knew the minute it happened how severe the break was. It wasn't an injury I could ever come back from and compete at the level I had been. I rehabbed for almost a year and decided to go to college, where I earned my teaching degree."

Rory shook her head. "My first job—before I came to Sugar Springs—was even more hellacious than the stalker."

She couldn't see how things could be worse, but she knew her friend wouldn't exaggerate.

"I'll make a long story short. I fell in love with a fellow teacher. A wrestling coach at the high school where I taught. We became engaged. I thought the rest of my life would pass by in ordinary happiness. Until the news broke that Bradley had slept with numerous girls he'd coached."

Vivi gasped. "No!"

Rory's lips pursed. "Oh, yes. And since I was his fiancée, I had to know, right? Wouldn't you know if the man you loved was twisted? People thought I had protected him. Lied for him. They painted me with the same brush they did him. I became a pariah at school, with both staff and students. I literally had no one to talk to. No one who believed I had nothing to do with the situation. My only friend in the world was Granny Bea in Tyler, and she was three hours away. It was an incredibly lonely time for me, even worse than all the time I spent rehabbing my ankle and shoulder. I resigned at the end of the academic year and was fortunate to land a position on the Sugar Springs faculty. So, to say I had trust issues with men? That would be an understatement."

Determination filled Rory's face. "But Walker changed everything. He was transparent. He didn't want any secrets between us. It was Walker who taught me to trust again. Love again. In a healthy way. He's my everything." She patted her belly. "And these babies will be raised in love."

"You've been through so much, Rory," Hope said. "You're so blessed now to have Walker and the twins coming." She sighed. "I suppose it's my turn now."

Hope's eyes hardened. "I also had a stalker and did what any strong woman should do. I shut him down." She grimaced. "In return, he cost me my job at a veterinary practice.

"And he murdered my parents."

All three women listening to Hope cried out, “No!”

Hope waved a hand, and they fell silent.

“It was the most horrifying, frightening time in my life. I was extremely close to my parents. To lose them in an instant was horrific. My guilt was overwhelming.”

“But you didn’t do anything wrong, Hope,” Nova protested.

“I understand that now. But at the time? All I could think of was that I had caused their deaths by rejecting Cris Calder’s advances. A year later, I went to his trial every day and rejoiced when the State of Texas put him behind bars for a very long time.”

Hope hesitated. “I even changed my name. I wanted to cut ties with everything in my past. I became introverted. Wary of everyone. I came to Sugar Springs to work at Dr. Bisch’s clinic. I wound up buying it instead.” She smiled, cradling her belly. “I only wanted to be around and nurture my furry patients. I had no plans to let a man into my life, much less fall in love with him. Gideon changed everything in my world. He helped to make me whole again.”

Hope looked at Vivi. “You’ve heard how the three of us had terrible experiences with men. Gideon and Walker also suffered emotional abuse from the women they first married. But we’ve all learned to trust our guts. When the right person came into our lives, we didn’t push him or her away. We slowly entered a new relationship, walking gingerly. We all discovered there *is* life after a disastrous relationship.”

Rory took up the banner. “You need to trust your instincts, Vivi, even though you believe they’ve led you astray in the past. Don’t do as Granny Bea always told me and cut off your nose to spite your face. Ford has never given you any reason to doubt him, has he?”

“No,” she said, her throat thickening with unshed tears. “Never.”

“I think Gideon is a good judge of character,” Hope said. “All those years in police work and being a detective. He reads people well. He’s been friends with Ford for three decades. If he thought something was wrong with Ford—or if Gideon thought Ford would hurt you now or in the future—he would speak up.”

“Ford is a good man,” Nova echoed. “Cole trusted him from the moment they met. He’s not one to instantly make friends. I get that you broke up with Ford to protect yourself. You’re also running away from Sugar Springs to protect yourself.” She paused. “Why don’t you run *to* Ford instead? You can

protect each other.”

Vivi burst into tears. Immediately her friends comforted her. She listened to her gut, something she had been afraid to do because her instincts had led her astray so many times.

What it was telling her now, though, was that she needed to give Ford Carpenter a chance. Yes, he might not be the one for her permanently, but she believed in her heart that he would never betray her as so many others had.

“What if he won’t give me another chance? What if I’ve driven him away for good?”

“Do you love him?” Rory asked. “Does he love you?”

She bit her lip. “He told me he did. That was the catalyst that made me push him away. But I do love him. With all my heart.”

“Then he needs to hear that from you. Now,” Nova said. “Call him.” She hesitated. “Well, maybe after you wash your face. You’ve got mascara streaks running down your cheeks. Even Freddy Krueger might be frightened by you.”

Despite everything, Vivi laughed, along with her friends.

In a matter of minutes, Rory had used eye pads to remove Vivi’s eye makeup. She washed her face and felt ten times better.

“You’re gorgeous without makeup,” Rory told her. “But a little blush and mascara wouldn’t hurt.”

“I’ve got some lip gloss,” Nova said. “A touch of it would be nice.”

Within a few minutes, Vivi looked as good as she could. Her eyes were still puffy from her tears, but overall, the image in the mirror reflected a beautiful woman—with hope in her eyes.

“I don’t think I can call him,” she said, turning away from the mirror. “I’m so nervous.”

“Text him,” Hope suggested. She glanced at her watch. “It’s almost nine. Will he still be up?”

“He should be,” Vivi said. “I’m afraid to go home and sleep on it. I’m afraid if I do, I’ll wimp out. I need to go now. Before I lose my courage.”

“Then don’t even text,” Rory recommended. “Just drive over now.”

“What if he won’t see me?” she said, doubt filling her. “I hurt him. I really hurt him. If I were Ford, I wouldn’t want to see me.”

“You said that he told you he loves you,” Nova pointed out. “He’ll want to see you.”

“Okay,” Vivi said shakily. “I’ll go.”

Her three friends walked out to her car with her. They each embraced her, telling her to text as soon as she left Ford's.

"I hope I don't get that text until tomorrow," Rory said, giving her a knowing look. "I hope you two make up and have hot sex all night long."

Vivi's cheeks burned, thinking of the last time she'd had sex with Ford.

"Wish me luck," she said, getting into her car.

By the time she reached Ford's house, nerves flitted through her so badly, she thought she might actually throw up. Vivi got out of the car, seeing the porch light was on. No lights shone from the bottom level, but she did see a light in a window on the second floor.

She went to the porch. Every time she reached to ring the doorbell, fear overwhelmed her. She had rejected Ford. Harshly. He might never want to see her again. It was a mistake coming. She had hurt him too badly. He wouldn't want to have anything to do with her.

As she vacillated, the door suddenly opened. Ford stood there. He looked at her gravely, a sadness in his eyes, something she had put there.

Gathering every ounce of courage she could muster, Vivi asked, "May I come in?"

Today had been the longest day of Ford's life. He had gone to work, pasting a smile on his face, playing the role of caring, competent, small-town physician. He tended to a middle ear infection. Back pain. A sprained wrist. Diagnosed a patient with diabetes. Dealt with a skin rash with efficiency. No one would have guessed how much he hurt inside. He couldn't imagine how difficult each day in the future would be without Vivi in it.

Ford had never been in love before. He wasn't foolish enough to think that every relationship worked out. Somehow, millions of people throughout the span of history had found a way to move on from a broken heart when a love affair ended.

He wasn't sure he would be able to do so.

He was grateful he wouldn't have his weekly lunch with Cole tomorrow. They were having to put those lunches on hold since two-a-days were starting, and Cole needed to be at school, holding working lunches with his staff as they prepared for the upcoming football season. Ford wondered how long he could keep the news from Cole and his other friends regarding his breakup with Vivi.

Frankly, he didn't know how he would even be able to be around his friends. With Hope, Rory, and Nova all pregnant, his friends would be busy with the birth of their first child, or in Walker's case, children. On the rare occasions they would be able to get together, they most likely would want to be around other parents, going through what they were experiencing, talk of babies dominating the conversation. Ford loved his friends as if they were

family, and he refused to let his envy show. He supposed he would eventually have to ease away from his group of friends.

After some thought, he'd rejected the idea of abandoning Sugar Springs and practicing medicine elsewhere. Uncle Rex had left Ford his practice for a reason. He entrusted his nephew to step into his shoes and serve this community as one of its doctors. He would throw himself into that task, along with attending the football and basketball games Cole had asked him to be at, serving as the team physician. He decided to keep so busy that he wouldn't have time to think about Vivi and all that had been lost with her walking away from him.

He went around the bottom floor, turning off lights, moving to the stairs and going up them. He turned back the comforter, pushing aside thoughts of Vivi in this bed. Ford peeled off his clothes, tossing them in the laundry basket inside his closet, and slipped into pajama pants. Glancing at the clock, he saw it was only nine-thirty. He didn't want to get into bed and toss and turn, thoughts of *what if* keeping him awake for hours.

Knowing he shouldn't rely on self-medication, he decided one drink couldn't hurt and went downstairs again, going into his uncle's study. Uncle Rex had enjoyed a nightcap each evening of fine whiskey. While Ford usually didn't go in much for hard liquor, he went to the sideboard now and poured two fingers into a crystal tumbler. He took a seat in the chair by the window, sitting in the darkness, brooding.

He was lost in thought when the flash of headlights caught his attention. A car pulled up to the curb in front of his house and stopped. His heart began beating rapidly when he saw Vivi emerge from it.

Ford watched her walk up the sidewalk, and he set down the glass tumbler, heading to the front door, waiting for her to ring the doorbell.

It didn't sound. He looked out the peephole in the door and saw Vivi standing on the porch, nibbling her bottom lip anxiously. He stepped away, waiting. Waiting.

Until he could wait no longer.

Ford opened the door, seeing Vivi standing there, drinking her in, pain filling him. He looked at her longingly, but he refused to make the first move. Call it stubbornness. Pride. But he needed to know that Vivi was there for him.

For them...

"May I come in?" she asked.

He moved back a step, opening the door wider, and Vivi entered the house. She paused and then faced him. Simply looking at her brought such raw hurt and longing that he had to turn away. Ford closed the door and then looked in her direction, ready to hear whatever she had to say.

Though no lights shone near where they stood in the foyer, rays from the porch light came through the window above the door. He could see her face. The pain in her eyes.

“I’m surprised you let me come in,” she began. “I don’t think I would have been so generous if someone had trampled upon my heart the way I did yours.”

He tried to reply, but no words came out. Ford looked at her helplessly.

“Let me say what I have to say, Ford, and then you can let me stay—or tell me to go. If you do ask me to leave, I promise I’ll never come back.”

He didn’t utter a word or move toward her, afraid she was a mirage who would vanish or if real, that anything he did might frighten her away.

She ran her fingers through her hair nervously. “This is going to be hard for me.”

“Take your time,” he said quietly, nodding encouragingly at her, a faint ray of hope building within him.

“I was never the star in my family. That was Dante. He was the one who attracted others to him with his larger-than-life personality and looks. It was obvious from an early age that he’d inherited Papa’s cooking skills and Mama’s business sense. Dante never wanted to stay in Sugar Springs, always saying he was destined for bigger things.

“I, on the other hand, was a people pleaser. I tried to please my parents. My teachers. My coaches. I worked hard. I was lucky to have a few close friends. I idolized Papa and kept him company in the kitchen from the time I was small. He taught me all he knew about food.”

She wet her lips nervously, causing desire to flare within him. Ford remained where he was, though, not wanting to interrupt what she had to say. He knew through the story she was slowly revealing that it would help get to the bottom of why she had walked away from him.

“I have struck out repeatedly with men,” Vivi continued. “In each relationship, I’ve opened myself up and poured everything I had into it. And each one ended in varying degrees of disaster. My high school boyfriend. My lover during my time in Italy. Another one when I came home to Texas. They all left for the same reason. Each time, I thought I was in love and my partner

betrayed me. Every single one of them told me it was *my* fault that he'd cheated on me. That I wasn't enough for him, and he needed more than what I could give. He'd looked elsewhere and found someone better than I was."

A lone tear rolled down her cheek, and Vivi brushed it away.

"I couldn't understand what was wrong with me. How to fix myself. And then... I met Beck."

She rubbed her arms as if chilled. Ford fought every urge he had to take her in his arms, knowing she needed to say everything she came to tell him.

"You're under the impression that I'm still in love with Beck. I don't love a ghost, Ford. That couldn't be further from the truth. I *hate* Beck. My hate for him—even now—is stronger than any love I once felt for him. I hate him with such a passion that sometimes it scares me."

As he listened, Vivi told him of the last relationship she'd had. How Beck had milked her dry financially and emotionally. How badly he had treated her. How Dante had urged her to stand up for herself and leave her unappreciative lover.

The story that unfolded horrified him. Beck had used Vivi terribly, damaging her with emotional abuse and putting her deeply into debt. It shocked him to learn Beck had turned to drugs and that he'd died from an overdose, causing Vivi to lose everything. When Ford heard about the mound of Beck's debt she had been responsible for even after he was gone and how awful her lover's parents had treated her, rage filled him.

He knew, however, that she didn't need his anger.

Vivi needed his love.

Her eyes brimming with tears now, she took a step closer to him and said, "I love you, Ford—and the thought of that terrified me. Every man has left me because I wasn't enough for him. In my twisted perspective, I thought you would eventually do the same."

"Never," he said vehemently, reaching and taking her hands.

Just touching her caused warmth to flood him.

"I loved you so much that it hurt, Ford. But I've known hurt. Many times. And I knew what I felt for you was different from what I've felt for any other man. My heart wanted to trust you, but my head told me that one day you would wake up and figure out I wasn't good enough for you, just as the others had discovered. Because I didn't think I could ever come back from a blow like that, I pushed you away as hard as I could. I didn't want to love you. I didn't want to marry you. I didn't want to be shattered when you left—

and I was certain you would.” Vivi sighed. “It was the only way I knew how to protect myself.”

She swallowed. “But I have some extremely good friends who shared with me how much they have been hurt in their pasts. By men they also trusted. Men who left them broken.” Her gaze met his. “They also have found good men who have helped them to heal. Men they love with all their hearts. Men who love them in return for exactly who they are. Men who have healed them—and made them stronger women.”

Tears swam in Vivi’s eyes as she squeezed his fingers. “I believe with all my heart that *you* are a good man, Ford. That your love for me is real and lasting. That you won’t leave me. Ever. That together, we can face anything.” She hesitated. “If you can forgive me.”

Her words moved him, and Ford blinked back tears of his own.

“I do love you, Vivi. I want you to understand that I haven’t put you on a pedestal. Yes, I’ve said you’re perfect, but what I meant is that you’re perfect for *me*. Do I think everything will be perfect all the time between us? No. I’m a realist. There will be times when we struggle. Times when we fight. I also know that by loving you, I will do everything in my power each time a problem arises to overcome it. I believe we can communicate openly with one another. We may eventually have to agree to disagree on an issue, but I think for the most part, we’ll always be on the same page.”

He released her hands and framed her face. “I love you so much, Viviana Romano. I love everything about you. I even love the fact that you broke up with me because you were being an advocate for yourself. You’ve gone through a world of pain and didn’t want to face that again. But I promise you—you will always be enough for me. That we can face anything that comes our way. The good and the bad. Because we’re in this together.”

“I love you so much, Ford,” Vivi said. “Thank you for understanding. Thank you for giving me another chance.”

“*Us*, Vivi,” he said fervently. “I’m giving us a chance to experience a lifetime of happiness together.”

Ford kissed her then, a kiss which he hoped conveyed all the promises he made to her now and in the future. Promises rooted in his love for her.

She was the one who broke the kiss and gazed up at him. “You are everything I could ever want in a man, Ford Carpenter. Would you make love to me now?”

In reply, he swept her into his arms, carrying her up the stairs. He stepped

into the bedroom where a light burned. He took her to the bed, easing her to her feet.

“Vivi, this is the house I want to live in with you. Grow old with you. It’s the place I want us to raise our children. This is the bed I want us to make those children in.”

A slow smile spread across her face. “I’m glad we’re so in tune, Dr. Carpenter. I’m ready to start our lives together. Now.”

She ran her hands along his bare chest, sending a rush of desire through him. Playfully, she tweaked his nipples, and he caught her wrists.

He seized her mouth with his, his kiss demanding, wanting everything from her and more. After some minutes, the kiss turned tender.

Ford broke it. “I want to make slow, sweet love to you, Vivi. I want you to understand just how much I cherish you.”

They undressed one another and lay on the bed, Ford kissing every inch of her bare skin with reverence. Their bodies heated as did their kisses, and he entered her, thrusting in and out.

Vivi clung to him, her hands roaming his back as she moved beneath him, with him, their dance of love growing in intensity.

They orgasmed together, calling out each other’s name, and Ford collapsed, pressing her into the mattress with his weight, kissing her until they both were breathless.

He withdrew from her, lying next to her, his hand splayed on her belly.

“Have I told you today how much I love you, Viviana Romano?”

She smiled sweetly at him. “I believe you have, Ford Carpenter, but I would love to hear you say it again. And again. After I tell you how much I love you.”

Her fingers caressed his cheek as she said, “You’ve changed my life, Ford. You’ve given me a confidence I’ve never had before. Maybe that’s what I’ve always lacked. I look forward to every day we spend together. Days filled with our love. I guess I’ve learned that I am comfortable enough to be vulnerable around you. To show you the true me—and know that’s enough for you.”

Ford kissed Vivi deeply. “Know that I’m a better man with you in my life and in my heart. I choose you every day, Vivi. You’re my now and always.”

As he wrapped Vivi in his arms, Ford knew he had found his home.

EPILOGUE

THANKSGIVING—A DOZEN YEARS LATER...

Tanner said, “Sorry. I’ve got to take this call.”

“Use the study,” Ford told the actor, who slipped from the family room, where the Detroit Lions game was in the third quarter.

Vivi had been thrilled that Paige and Tanner had been able to make it to Sugar Springs for Thanksgiving this year. It had become a tradition for Vivi and Ford to host their friends for the holiday meal, and the Haddocks had arrived from Oklahoma two days ago to stay with them.

Ford had been a little intimidated when he first met the Hollywood couple years ago. Despite the fact they had four Oscars between them, he had found them to be down to earth. He had seen pictures and heard stories of Paige’s years growing up with Vivi as her best friend, and the Carpenter clan had trekked to Malibu and Oklahoma several times over the years for visits. Paige and Tanner would drive back to Oklahoma tomorrow, where Tanner’s sister’s family and their parents still lived, and where the Haddocks were raising their two children. At heart, the Haddocks were a couple with small-town values, never forgetting their roots, and teaching their two kids what was important.

The doorbell rang, and he hollered, “I’ll get it,” knowing Vivi bustled about the kitchen, her hands full preparing a meal for ten adults and a dozen children.

He opened the door, finding Cole and Nova there, along with Ash, Sami, and Zara.

“All the kids are in the back yard,” he told the children, who ran past him to join their friends as he ushered the Johnsons inside.

“Sorry we’re late,” Nova apologized. “Leo called.”

Leo, their oldest, had surprised everyone and entered the army after playing college football. He was now an army captain, stationed overseas.

“How is he?”

Cole grinned. “He’s engaged. And even better, he’ll be assigned stateside at the beginning of next year. Fort Hood. We couldn’t be happier that he’ll finally be back in Texas.”

Ford followed them into the kitchen, which bustled with activity. Nova and Cole set down the pies they had brought, Cole putting one inside the fridge, while the others were placed on the counter.

The two men retreated to the family room, where Walker and Gideon were watching the game. Greetings were exchanged, and Tanner returned to the room.

“I hear you’ve taken the Knights to the playoffs again,” the actor said.

Cole nodded. “We have some really good depth, especially on defense, this year.”

Although Cole had been offered numerous opportunities to leave for larger athletic programs throughout Texas, he and Nova had decided to remain in Sugar Springs and raise their family.

“Are you blind, ref?” Walker shouted at the TV.

His friend had recently replaced Tommy Milton as mayor. Milton had sold his hardware store and retired from sales and politics. Walker had always wanted to serve his community and had done so throughout the years, as head of the Chamber of Commerce and president of the local Rotary Club. Being elected mayor was the next step in giving back to the hometown he loved.

“The ref is right, Walker,” Gideon said good-naturedly. “And you know I’m not one to automatically side with the refs.”

The longtime friends began discussing the play as Vivi appeared in the doorway.

“Time to eat,” she announced.

“I’ll call the kids,” Ford said, rising and going to the back yard, hollering, “It’s time to eat. Come wash up.”

Remy and Jack, the Cox twins, helped gather everyone in the back yard, leading them inside and to different bathrooms. He couldn’t help but pat each of his own kids on the head as they passed him. They had two boys, eleven and nine, and two girls, eight and six. He coached soccer and softball teams for his kids, and besides games, the family attended everything from dance

and piano recitals to chaperoning Scouting and field trips.

As Ford returned inside, he knew how richly blessed he and Vivi were.

Hands clean and the TV muted, everyone gathered in a circle, holding hands, as he spoke a prayer from the heart.

“Dear Lord, thank you for all these friends who will share this Thanksgiving meal with us today, friends who have become family over the years. Thank you for blessing us all with good health and satisfying jobs and wonderful children. Amen.”

The older children fixed their own plates, while parents helped out with the younger ones, seeing them settled in the kitchen at the kids’ table before the adults went through the buffet line. Vivi had prepared traditional Southern dishes, from two turkeys, sweet potato casserole, green bean casserole, and macaroni and cheese to a few Italian favorites.

The adults made their way into the large dining room, with Ford and Vivi sitting at the two ends of the table. As always, the conversation proved lively.

“How long will your parents be in Italy?” Tanner asked Vivi. “Paige said they left a couple of months ago.”

“They’ll stay through spring,” she told the group. “Dante and his family are going over to spend Christmas with them.”

“Who would have thought Dante would ever settle down, much less have three kids?” Gideon asked, chuckling.

The food, wine, and conversation flowed, and their friends began sharing good news as they ate Vivi’s splendid meal.

After serving on several committees for the Texas Veterinary Medical Association, Hope announced that she had been named to their board of directors. Gideon was busy devoting time to the Texas Police Chiefs Association Foundation, which provided funds for spouses and children through its officer death benefit program for law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty.

Tanner and Paige shared details about two films their production company had just completed, and Tanner, who was stepping behind the camera more often than not, explained that financing had just come through an hour ago for him to direct a movie based on one of Paige’s screenplays, which would star Sarah Meinholdt, a former Sugar Springs speech and drama teacher who’d made her movie debut in Tanner’s movie *Shadows of the Past*, based on another screenplay by Paige.

Nova, whose jewelry line had taken off a few years ago, was thrilled to

announce that she had just signed an agreement with a Dallas company. They would absorb her small, online jewelry store, and she would be designing exclusively for them, saying the deal was so lucrative that they wouldn't have to worry how they were going to put their three kids through college. They discussed the upcoming playoff game on Saturday night, where Cole would lead his Sugar Springs Knights against an undefeated team from the Houston area.

Rory, who continued to design for individual skaters from the U.S. and several other countries, had been asked to provide commentary at the upcoming world figure skating championships in Sweden. Walker and the twins would accompany her, and he would do a little mayoral business while there, lining up a sister city partnership with a small town outside Stockholm.

"It's terrific to hear how well everyone is doing," Ford said, basking in the company of those seated at their table. He looked to his wife. "Vivi?"

She smiled mysteriously, and Paige said, "Don't play coy, Viviana Romano. What's going on? You already have your cooking blog and the restaurant."

"A few things." Vivi paused. "I have a cookbook out this coming April. A publisher in New York follows my blog and convinced me that I needed to share my recipes in print. I signed a five-book contract with them."

Rory turned to Walker. "Did you know about this?"

He grinned. "I did—and was sworn to secrecy. Vivi will be doing books on everything from apps to the vegetables which accompany her fabulous entrées. And desserts, of course."

"Walker really went to bat for me," Vivi said. "I also have an idea for a series of books which feature the cuisine from each area of Italy. I'd do a book on Tuscany. Liguria. Umbria. Sicily. If the cookbooks I'm contracted for take off, Walker wants me to pitch the new series to my publisher."

"You already go to Italy each summer for a few weeks," Hope pointed out. "Maybe you could figure out how to make those trips a tax write-off for what you publish." She paused, a slow smile spreading across her face. "I know. Maybe you should invest in a property there and make it your home base as you travel around. And we could all come visit."

"I vote for Lake Como," Gideon said, getting cheers from everyone at the table.

Ford laughed. "The kids have already picked up a lot of Italian from our trips to Italy. They would love to spend more time there. Vivi helps them

keep their language skills active by speaking in Italian to them a lot.”

His wife chuckled. “Yes, there’s nothing like trying to get a kid out of bed in the morning and barking at him in Italian. Sometimes, I think I’m turning into Mama.”

They finished their Thanksgiving meal and checked on the kids. Most were ready to watch the Dallas Cowboys game, which was about to start. Ford agreed to let them take their desserts upstairs to watch the game there, leaving the family room for the adults to view the game together.

Their friends helped clear the table and put away the few leftovers. Ford and Vivi told everyone to head in to watch the kickoff, and they would bring dessert.

In the kitchen, they had a moment alone. He slipped his arms around his wife as she cut into a pecan pie. Nuzzling her neck, he said, “You’re all the dessert I need.”

She put down her serving piece and turned, winding her arms around his neck. “You are everything I could possibly want, Ford Carpenter. I’m so glad you made me see the light. I love you and our family and the life we’ve built together.”

In reply, Ford kissed Vivi deeply, embracing the present—and looking forward to the years ahead of them.

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A native Texan and former history teacher, award-winning and internationally bestselling author Alexa Aston lives with her husband in a Dallas suburb, where she eats her fair share of dark chocolate and plots out stories while she walks every morning. She enjoys travel, sports, and binge-watching—and never misses an episode of *Survivor*.

Alexa brings her characters to life in steamy historicals, contemporary romances, and romantic suspense novels that resonate with passion, intensity, and heart.

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