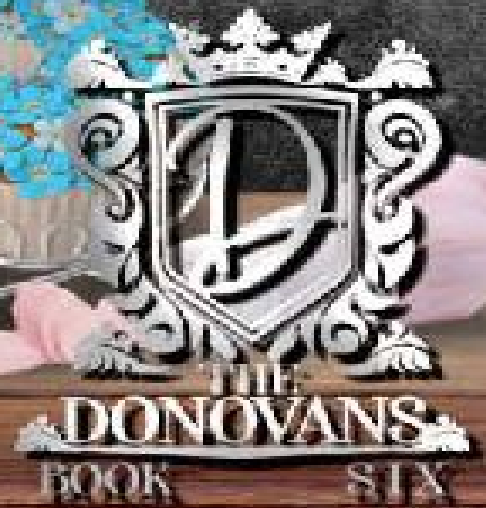


C E E B O W E R M A N

W H I P

it up



Whip It Up
The Donovans, Book 6

Cee Bowerman

CLBooks, LLC



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Cee Bowerman Master Book List

The Rojo, Texas Universe

Texas Knights MC (completed)

Home Forever
Forever Family
Lucky Forever
Love Forever

Texas Kings MC (completed)

Kale
Sonny
Bird
Grunt
Lout
Smokey
Tucker
Kale & Terra (Novella)
John & Mattie
Bear
Daughtry
Hank
Fain
Grady
Stoffer
Luke
Clem

Conner Brothers Construction (completed)

Finn
Angus
Mace
Ronan
Royal
Tavin
Chess

**Rojo, TX
(completed)**

Rason & Eliza
Atlas & Addie
Jazmyne & Luc
Kari & Levi
Noah & Tallie
Nick & Cindy
Marcus & Reagan

**The Tempests
(completed)**

Wrath
Creed
Loki
Styx
Thorn
Freya
Sin

**Lonestar Terrace
(in progress)**

1005 Alamo Way

**Rojo PD
(in progress)**

The Dark Side

Rojo Gems
(in progress)

Emerald - COMING OCT 15th, 2023!

Cee Bowerman's Stand Alone Series

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Boss
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Chef
Preacher
Captain
Bug
Santa
Kitty
Rodeo
Stamp
TS in NY
Hammer
Soda

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Rico
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Springblood (in progress)

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Fly Away with Me

The Donovans (in progress)

Drink It Up

Pull It Up
Pretty It Up
Curl It Up
Build It Up
Whip It Up

The Rojo, Texas Universe

In Chronological Reading Order

Home Forever: Texas Knights MC, Book 1

Forever Family: Texas Knights MC, Book 2

Kale: Texas Kings MC, Book 1

Sonny: Texas Kings MC, Book 2

Bird: Texas Kings MC, Book 3

Grunt: Texas Kings MC, Book 4

Lout: Texas Kings MC, Book 5

Smokey: Texas Kings MC, Book 6

Tucker: Texas Kings MC, Book 7

Finn: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 1

Kale & Terra: a Texas Kings novella

John & Mattie: Texas Kings MC, Book 8

Angus: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 2

Bear: Texas Kings MC, Book 9

Lucky Forever: Texas Knights MC, Book 3

Daughtry: Texas Kings MC, Book 10

Mace: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 3

Hank: Texas Kings MC, Book 11

Fain: Texas Kings MC, Book 12

Love Forever: Texas Knights MC, Book 4

Rason & Eliza: Rojo, TX, Book 1

Ronan: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 4

Grady: Texas Kings MC, Book 13

Atlas & Addie: Rojo, TX, Book 2

Royal: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 5

Stoffer: Texas Kings MC, Book 14

Jazmyne & Lucius: Rojo, TX, Book 3

Wrath: The Tempests, Book 1

Luke: Texas Kings MC, Book 15

Tavin: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 6

Kari & Levi: Rojo, TX, Book 4

Creed: The Tempests, Book 2

Noah & Tallie: Rojo, TX, Book 5

Loki: The Tempests, Book 3

Styx: The Tempests, Book 4

Thorn: The Tempests, Book 5

Chess: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 7

Clem: Texas Kings MC, Book 16

Freya: The Tempests, Book 6

Sin: The Tempests, Book 7

Nick & Cindy: Rojo, TX, Book 6

Marcus & Reagan: Rojo, TX, Book 7

1005 Alamo Way: Lonestar Terrace, Book 1

The Dark Side: RPD, Book 1

Emerald & Adam : Rojo Gems, Book 1

Reading Order for the Tenillo Guardians Crossover Series

Boss: Time Served MC, Book 1

Sin's Enticement: Ares Infidels MC, Book 1 by Ciara St James

Hook: Time Served MC, Book 2

Executioner's Enthrallment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 2 by Ciara St James

Chef: Time Served MC, Book 3

Pitbull's Enslavement: Ares Infidels MC, Book 3 by Ciara St James

Preacher: Time Served MC, Book 4

Omen's Entrapment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 4 by Ciara St James

Captain: Time Served MC, Book 5

Cuffs' Enchainment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 5 by Ciara St James

Bug: Time Served MC, Book 6

Rampage's Enchantment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 6 by Ciara St James

Santa: Time Served MC, Book 7

Wrecker's Ensnarement: Ares Infidels MC, Book 7 by Ciara St James

Kitty: Time Served MC, Book 8

Trident's Enjoyment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 8 by Ciara St James

Rodeo: Time Served MC, Book 9

Fang's Enlightenment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 9 by Ciara St James

Stamp: Time Served MC, Book 10

Talon's Enamorment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 10 by Ciara St James

Time Served In New York: Time Served MC, Book 11

Ares Infidels In New York: Ares Infidels MC, Book 11 by Ciara St. James

Hammer: Time Served MC, Book 12

Phantom's Emblazonment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 12 by Ciara St. James

Soda: Time Served MC, Book 13

AUTHORS NOTE

Dear Reader,

I had so much fun writing this book about my newest favorite Donovan couple. Of course, with each book I write, I think that couple may be my favorite, but there's just something about a grumpy guy who falls for a ray of sunshine that gets me every time. Maybe that's why *Shrek* is one of my favorite movies.

As you know, I like to base my characters' appearances on real people, flaws and all, and in this book, Celeste has some of the same worries that I have. In our world, appearance seems to be more important than character, and even though I hate that, I fall for the same traps most other people do. I see flaws in my appearance that might not even be visible to anyone else, but they're like a neon sign drawing my eyes to them every time I look in the mirror.

I'd like to say I try to change my weight, my appearance, and even my attitude because I know that's what's good for me, and that might be true to some extent. However, outside opinions and influences play a big part in that too. I'm lucky to have supportive people around me who are honest but tactful, but there have been times in my life that I let negative energy and opinions shape the way I saw myself. In this book, there's a woman who does her best to break down Celeste, and she *almost* accomplishes her mission.

I hope that you see beauty when you look in the mirror and don't listen to the whisper of voices telling you that you're not enough or that you need to change. Tell those voices to shut up, and go with what makes you feel beautiful, inside and out. It's a hard task to accomplish, but I hope you try every day just like I do. And I hope you remember that you're enough, you rock, you're beautiful, and if other people have a problem with you, they can just go suck it.

Happy reading,

Cee

PROLOGUE

FOURTEEN YEARS AGO

RANSOME

I sat up in bed and glared at the phone, daring it to ring again. Obviously, someone had the wrong number because there wasn't a chance that anyone who knew me would ever call this late, knowing I had to get up and work out at four o'clock so I could be at the construction site at seven.

When the phone rang again, I snatched the receiver off the base and barked, "What?"

"Ranny, I need you." I could barely hear my sister over the loud music in the background, but I could tell that she sounded off somehow.

I jumped up out of bed and grabbed the jeans I'd tossed aside just a few short hours ago as I asked, "Where are you?"

"Umm . . . I don't know. It's a house . . . and . . . It's a white house but not where the president lives."

"Have you been drinking?"

"Just one! I promise!"

"It doesn't matter. How can I find you?"

"When I walked in earlier, I could see the Taco Bell sign over the roof of the house across the street."

"That helps," I told her. "Who are you with?"

"We came with Sean, but he's acting weird, so I don't want to talk to him anymore."

"We? Who is 'we?'"

"Celeste and I."

"Is she okay?"

"Hmmm. I'll have to look for her."

I pulled on my work boots and reached for my keys that were on top of the dresser before I slipped my wallet into my back pocket.

"You stay right there, Rach. Don't leave with anyone. I'll be there in a minute."

"M'kay," Rachel said cheerfully before she abruptly hung up.

I slammed the receiver down and rushed across the room, swearing that I was going to bust her ass before I tied her to the goddamn newel post at my

parents' house.

"What the fuck's going on?" my cousin Quinn said from the doorway of his bedroom before he yawned loudly.

"Rachel and Celeste are in some kind of trouble."

"Let me get some shoes," Quinn said, fully awake now as he spun around and rushed back into his room.

"I can take care of this, man. No sense in you . . ."

Quinn reappeared wearing the same basketball shorts and T-shirt he'd been sleeping in, but now, he had on a pair of running shoes. "Do you really think your sister is in the middle of some shit and mine aren't with her?"

"Good point," I conceded. "If they are, I'll need the backup."

The triplets - Lana, Lara, and Lake - were Quinn's younger sisters and the same age as Rachel. My aunt and uncle had always joked that it was like they had quadruplets they shared with my mom and dad because the girls had been inseparable since before they were old enough to talk.

"Let's take your truck. My back seat is full of shit," Quinn said as he opened the front door. "Where are they?"

"She couldn't tell me. All she knew was that she could see the Taco Bell sign over the house across the street."

"Well, isn't that just fucking great?"

The ride across town didn't take long. Marlboro wasn't a booming metropolis, so there were only two Taco Bells for us to choose from. One was in a strip mall, while the other was on a main road that backed up to a neighborhood full of winding streets and cul-de-sacs.

When I turned into the neighborhood, it was easy to figure out where the party was since there were teenagers milling about in the yard. Rather than park at the end of the block, the only place I could find an open spot at the curb, I pulled into the next door neighbor's driveway and cut across the grass so I could park right in front of the party house.

"Well, that saves on us having to tip the valet," Mark said sarcastically before he opened his door.

"Hey!" a pimple-faced kid yelled when I got out of my truck. "You can't park there! My dad's gonna shit when he sees what you did to the lawn."

Before I could open my mouth to tell the kid to fuck off, there was the sound of glass breaking and then laughter from a group of blatantly drunk young people.

"You think the *grass* is what he's gonna be pissed about?" I snarked.

“Fuck!” the kid yelled before he sprinted toward the front door.

Quinn got into step beside me as we followed the kid. He was laughing when he asked, “Remember that time everyone else went to the lake, and we threw that party?”

I shook my head. “You’re gonna have to be more specific, man. If I remember correctly, that happened fairly regularly.”

“Okay, the party where Chris Asp set fire to your mom’s couch,” Quinn reminded me.

I winced. “Yep, I remember. That one took a while for my parents to get over.”

“They’re over it already? That was, what . . . two years ago?”

“More like four,” I corrected. “It was our junior year, I think.”

I walked through the wide open front door of the house and was assaulted by the smell of weed, but worse than that was the sight of my little sister’s best friend trying to push away some guy who was trying to kiss her.

“I said stop it!” Celeste slurred, barely loud enough for me to hear over the bass thumping from somewhere deeper in the house.

“Is that . . . What the fuck is that guy’s name?”

“Dead,” I snapped before I stomped across the room and yanked the guy off the couch by his hair. He flew over the coffee table and instantly hopped back up to his feet. By the look in his eyes, I could tell that he was on something much more powerful than weed.

“What the fuck, Donovan?” the asshole snapped. I couldn’t remember his name, but I recognized him from high school, which meant that the son of a bitch was way too fucking old to be at a house party, especially since he’d been a senior during my sophomore year.

“When a girl says to stop, you fucking stop. It’s not rocket science, fucker!”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Quinn go over to the wall and bend down. Suddenly, the music stopped as he dropped the cord to the floor.

“I don’t feel good.” Celeste moaned as she tried to stand up. “Something’s wrong with me.”

Quinn helped Celeste up and then wrapped his arms around her when she started to sway. “How much have you had to drink?”

“I swear I just had one! I borrowed my grandma’s car,” Celeste admitted.

“Borrowed? You’re not even old enough to have a license yet. Besides, you’re not driving anywhere tonight,” I informed her. “Where’s Rachel?”

“I don’t know. She was . . .” Celeste looked around, confused. “Why is

everything so . . . Why do I feel like this?”

“Shit,” I shouted before I turned to the asshole whose name I still couldn’t remember. “Did you give her something?”

“She’s my date, so she’s not your fucking problem.”

“You’re at least 25, and she’s barely 15!”

“My birthday was yesterday,” Celeste announced.

“Age is nothing but a number,” the asshole said with a grin just as his buddy chimed in from a few feet away, “Besides, it’s none of your fucking business.”

Another kid, this one I recognized as the younger brother of an old friend, didn’t seem to recognize me when he threatened, “You two need to get the fuck out.”

“Or what?”

“I’ll *take* you out,” he threatened.

“Yeah!” his two dumbass younger friends added.

I slowly turned and looked at my cousin. He grimaced and gently pushed Celeste’s shoulder. She fell back onto the couch and then shook her head.

Quinn slid behind me to watch the other side of the room, and over his shoulder, he asked, “What happened to the good old days where you drank a little beer, talked some shit, and maybe drove a car into the pool?”

“I wasn’t even drinking when that happened,” I recalled before I turned and glared at the three asshats in front of me. I zeroed in on the leader of the trio and asked, “Did you drug her?”

“It’s just party favors, man,” one of the younger kids said. “She and Rachel were way too uptight.”

I heard Quinn sigh before he said, “Go ahead and kill ‘em. I’ve got your back.”

“Thanks.”



“The police said they might have to arrest you and your cousin for assaulting those boys,” Mrs. Sweet, Celeste’s grandma, said as she ran her hand over her granddaughter’s forehead. Since my parents were sitting with Rachel, and Quinn was with his parents in Lara’s cubicle, I’d stayed with Celeste until her grandparents got here.

Mr. Sweet looked furious when he threatened, “If they do, I’ll fight them myself.”

“No sense in you getting into trouble too,” my Uncle Joseph said as he pulled the curtain open and walked into the small exam room. “I have a feeling they’ll be more concerned about finding the source of the drugs found in her system.”

“She said she only had one beer,” I insisted. “Rachel said the same thing on the phone.”

“Rachel’s blood test also came back with traces of benzodiazepine,” Joseph said with a scowl.

“What’s that?”

“It’s called Rohypnol,” Uncle Joseph explained.

“They roofied them?” I shouted.

Uncle Joseph nodded as he said, “And not just these two. The paramedics brought in more girls with the exact same symptoms.”

“That fucker,” I spat under my breath, somehow angrier now than I’d been when Quinn and I were fighting our way out of that house.

“The detective I just spoke with wants to question you but I told him I needed to examine your injuries before he can do that.”

I shook my head. “I’m fine, really. I’ve had worse.”

“Well, you’re going to have an x-ray and whatever else I have to order to make sure Marianne gets up here before they talk to you. Your parents already called her.”

“Marianne?” Mrs. Sweet asked.

“She’s a lawyer,” I explained.

“We’ll cover whatever she charges,” Mr. Sweet insisted. “That’s the least we can do to repay you for saving Celeste.”

“There won’t be any fees,” I assured them. “Marianne is my aunt.”

“I have a feeling her roster of clients is about to triple, and she’s not going to get paid for a single one,” Joseph said with a sad smile. “If word gets out that someone drugged Rachel and Lara, every Donovan on this side of the pond is going to have legal trouble.”

“I’ll line up with ‘em,” Mr. Sweet said with a murderous scowl. “I spoke to the detective about pressing charges on that boy for putting his hands on my granddaughter.”

“He is older than me, so I wouldn’t exactly call him a boy.”

“Well, there are plenty of other things I can think of to call him. He has no

idea the hellfire that's gonna rain down when my son finds out what they did to his daughter," Mr. Sweet muttered as he looked down at his sleeping granddaughter. "I can't thank you enough, Ransome."

"No thanks necessary. I'm just glad I got to them before something horrible happened."

Celeste's eyes fluttered open, and she smiled at me. "Ransome Donovan is my handsome white knight in shining armor."

"Not quite," I argued. I laughed softly and took her hand when she held it out toward me. "I guess the white part fits."

Mr. and Mrs. Sweet both laughed before Celeste asked in a more serious tone, "Will you slay the dragon for me?"

I wanted to laugh because she was obviously still under the influence, but she seemed so earnest that I felt like I should assure her, "I will. Anytime you need me, all you've gotta do is call."

1.

CELESTE

“I can’t marry him,” I whispered to my reflection in the bathroom mirror. I looked over at the door when I heard laughter on the other side of it. The many bridesmaids and attendants that had been chosen to walk with me were having the time of their lives. Of course, they all knew each other since they were related. Because I didn’t have any family to speak of, Jeffrey’s mother had filled the roster with nieces and cousins. I’d tried to convince her that my friends should be part of the wedding party, but she insisted that it would be better if my attendants were family since all of Jeffrey’s groomsmen were related to him too.

That meant I barely knew a soul in the wedding party and was completely alone on one of the most important and stressful days of a woman’s life. I

had no one to help calm my nerves or talk me out of what I was about to do. That would explain why I was locked in the bathroom talking to my own reflection.

I wondered what my grandma would think. I missed her so much that it hurt and knew that if she was here right now, she'd tell me to listen to my gut and follow my heart. I was about to do just that since both my gut and my heart said this was wrong - oh, so wrong.

Of course, if she was still alive, she wouldn't have let things get this far in the first place. All those times I'd tamped down my doubts and fears, swallowed my pride when Marjorie said something rude or insulting to me, and ignored the fact that the man I was trying so hard to love wasn't worthy of the effort wouldn't have gone unnoticed by her.

When I first got to know Jeffrey Harrigan, I thought he was the sweetest man I'd ever met. He was handsome, funny, grounded, and very driven. He was a successful business man who took his family business very seriously. Nothing seemed to phase him, and he just let any problems that came along roll off his back. When things got too intense, whether it was dealing with the family business or dealing with his mother, he escaped to the golf course and 'found his center' again.

When I'd complained that I rarely ever saw him since he was away traveling to stores during the week and then spending weekends on the golf course, he'd promised that would change once we were married. Of course, he told Marjorie about my complaint, and she sat me down to explain the stress that came with Jeffrey's position and how her son needed his alone time to recharge and unwind.

Since I was her assistant, I knew exactly how stressful running over 200 stores was because I was the one in the trenches, taking care of problems, scurrying around to make sure all the permits and licenses were in order for each property, and even helping with payroll and accounting when they hit a snag.

When my lease was up two months ago and I wanted to start looking for houses, Jeffrey insisted that I should let Marjorie help me on my day off since she knew more about the real estate market than he did.

That suggestion turned into a two-week fight that almost ended us, but as usual, I caved after he apologized and swore he'd be more attentive. Of course, he got Marjorie involved in that disagreement, too, and she insisted that we just live on the family estate with her. She was even nice enough to

let me stay in my own suite of rooms. Alone.

I had hoped Jeffrey and I could live together for a while before our wedding, sort of testing the waters to make sure we were compatible in *every* way since we were about to get married, but he kept our relationship at the holding hands stage.

I knew that in this day and age, it was rare for a couple to not sleep together until the honeymoon, but when he suggested it while we were dating, I thought it was sweet. Of course, I also thought he'd get over that. At least, that had been my hope. A woman had needs as did a man. But when I asked him about it, he said he was saving himself for our wedding night and wasn't about to budge on the issue.

Since Jeffrey was gone all the time, I was usually alone in the house with Marjorie . . . or as alone as two people could be when there were two live-in housekeepers and a chef. We ate at 6:30 sharp every evening and 'retired' by nine at the latest on weekdays because 'ladies need their beauty sleep.'

Somehow, I'd gone from dating a man who was attentive, kind, smart, and funny to dating a middle-aged woman on a power trip. I realized after I moved in and watched their interactions that the life I was living wouldn't ever change if I married Jeffrey. Or at least not until Marjorie died, and since I was with her for fifty hours a week at the office and then every night at home, I realized that she would *never* die. She couldn't. She was already one of the undead - a soulless monster that roamed the earth, her only sustenance my will to live.

I looked down at what I was wearing and remembered how shocked I'd been when I'd opened the garment bag a few hours ago and found this gown rather than the one I'd chosen. I was sure there had been a mix-up and immediately grabbed my phone to call the bridal shop. Marjorie had lightly rested her hand on mine and looked into my eyes with an expression that was so full of fake sincerity, it made my stomach turn. She then told me that she'd made an executive decision that would be more flattering for my 'ample' body type . . . specifically my bosom, backside, and thighs.

Seriously? It's 2023. Who says bosom and backside? Any normal person would just say boobs and butt.

I let out a giggle at the thought of someone as uptight as Marjorie saying boobs or butt and remembered how the urge to punch her until her face was so swollen she no longer had wrinkles had almost become overwhelming. The only thing that kept me going at that point was the thought of locking her

head between my portly fucking thighs and squeezing until her eyeballs popped out.

I took a calming breath as I leaned closer to the mirror and studied my reflection. The panic in my eyes was unmistakable, and I could feel my pulse racing as time ran out. In less than thirty minutes, the wedding coordinator would herd me out of the suite along with those other women and lead me to my death. Okay, it wasn't quite that dramatic, but that's what it felt like.

If I married Jeffrey, my life would never be my own again. I'd be restrained by the position I'd hold as his wife and silenced by the overpowering evil that was his tyrant of a mother. But if I left him at the altar, I'd be unemployed and homeless within the hour.

I picked up my phone and called my dad, trying to calculate what time it was on base in Germany. When he answered, he sounded fully awake, and I felt a second's relief. A military man to his core, he was all about schedules, and interrupting his sleep made for a very grumpy Colonel Sweet, and *nobody* wanted to deal with that.

"Have you come to your senses, Celeste?"

"Hello, Dad," I said with a sigh.

"Is that a yes or a no?" When I took too long to answer, he reminded me, "I told you not to get in touch with me unless you were calling to ask me to help you get out of that mess you've made of your life."

"I think I need help."

"Do you think or you know?"

I winced at my reflection, nearly blinded by the hideous white nightmare of a wedding dress that Marjorie had chosen, before I said, "I know. How do I get out of this?"

"Report to the mess hall immediately. I have someone there who's assigned to take you to an undisclosed location."

"In the kitchen? You want me to find the caterer or . . ."

"Specifically, the baker," my dad said firmly. "I asked that Major Harridan leave the task of choosing and purchasing the wedding cake to me. By doing that, I handpicked someone that I knew could be trusted with your safety and well-being until I could come to Marlboro and retrieve you myself."

I bit back a hysterical laugh at his reference to Marjorie Harrigan. Since the first time he'd met her, he'd referred to her as Major Harridan and told me that she was a bad seed that needed to be stripped of her rank.

I realized what he'd just said and asked, "Retrieve me?"

“It’s obvious you need a keeper, Celeste.”

“I do *not* need a keeper, Dad. I need a fucking break.”

“You’ll find one in the mess hall.”

I pulled the phone away from my ear and stared at it. I wasn’t really shocked that he’d hung up on me, but I couldn’t believe that he hadn’t berated me for insubordination. I was still reeling from that bombshell and the fact that he had arranged for a getaway driver because he knew I wouldn’t be able to go through with this when someone tapped on the door.

It was the wedding coordinator.

If Marjorie was the major, the wedding coordinator she’d hired was her lieutenant colonel. She was almost as bad. Almost.

“Miss Sweet, I need to take one more look at you in your gown before we move the procession to the staging area.”

“I’ll be out in a minute,” I said as I looked around the bathroom, wondering if the exterior was brick so I could Kool-Aid Man through the wall.

I spotted the window just as the lieutenant colonel barked, “We have seventeen minutes before the ceremony starts, and I need to see you out here within the next two.”

“Sir, yes, sir!” I snapped sarcastically as I glared at the door.

Maybe if I used these portly thighs with the addition of my portly ass and portly boobs, I could power thrust my way through that door and take out that bitch and all the other twittering cousins like bowling pins. I realized that I was very close to hysterical when I burst out laughing so loudly that the lieutenant coordinator . . . Oh God! That was perfect! Lieutenant Coordinator and Major Harridan.

My life had turned into a cheesy rom-com, and I was about to become the runaway bride. I looked over at the window again and kept laughing. It was time to see if those arm workouts I’d been focused on for the sleeveless wedding dress *I’d chosen* had paid off.

I hoped so. I was going to have to heave my *portly* ass up and then fit it through that window because there was no way I’d make it past Lieutenant Coordinator and the rest of those catty bridesmaids without having to throw hands.

The window was my only option.



RANSOME

“Are you fucking kidding me right now, Holly?”

My cousin and business partner scowled and then looked around the busy kitchen before she hissed, “Why don’t you yell a little louder, Captain Grumpy. They didn’t hear you in Alaska.” When I opened my mouth to give her a sarcastic retort, she put her hand up to stop me. “Listen, I know it’s weird, but the contract specifically said that we had to stay with the cake until after the ceremony started.”

“Why?”

“Fuck if I know! I wasn’t the one that negotiated the contract!”

“Then who did?”

“Your sister!” Holly yelled, even louder than I had a few seconds ago.

“Then why isn’t she back here?”

“She’s a wedding guest, Ransome. She’s all dressed up, and if she comes back here, you know she won’t be able to stop herself from adjusting this or that, and she’ll end up with icing all over her.”

“There’s nothing to adjust. I made that cake myself, and it’s perfect.” Holly rolled her eyes, and I glared at her as I motioned toward the seven-tiered spiral wedding cake she’d help me assemble on the rolling cart. I glanced over at the cake, a beautiful work of art that I’d finished decorating with fresh tulips just minutes ago so they wouldn’t wilt before the cart was taken to the reception hall. “It’s a work of art.”

Holly sighed and agreed, “It’s beautiful Ransome. I get it. What I also get is that we’re getting paid an exorbitant sum to stand here until they wheel that bitch out in front of . . . how many people?”

“Five hundred.”

“*That* is supposed to feed five hundred people? Do they each get one bite or . . .”

I furrowed my brow and shook my head, wondering how my business partner could be so clueless about how my part of the company worked, before I said, “There are sheet cakes that will be used for the rest of the guests once that runs out.”

“Good because I’ve had your cake, and a single bite won’t suffice.”

“Thank you. I have one question, though.”

“Yes?”

“How do you go from ‘fuck if I know’ to using a word like ‘suffice?’” I asked.

Holly raised an eyebrow and said, “I’m a woman of many talents.”

“And the biggest one is being a pain in my ass,” I muttered before I reached out and adjusted one of the tulips a fraction so that it was perfectly lined up with the rest of the cascade. “What time does the ceremony start? I’ve got to feed Barney.”

Holly dropped her head and sighed. “The fact that you named your sourdough starter says so much about why you can’t socialize with real people.”

“I’m talking to you, aren’t I?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“Barney doesn’t talk to me. That’s why we get along.”

“Where’s the cake?” a woman yelled frantically from the door that led out onto the loading dock. “I need the . . . Ransome?”

I felt my jaw drop in shock as I stared at the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen. When she said my name again, I snapped out of it and realized that she wasn’t a stranger.

“Celeste?”

“Holy shit,” she whispered as she tried to catch her breath. She put her hand on her chest and coughed before she smiled at me and said, “My white knight.”

“She’s goin’ down!” Holly yelled as we both lunged toward Celeste.

I caught her just before she crumpled to the floor and then shook my head, spitting and sputtering when the tulle from the atrocious veil she was wearing started trying to consume my face. “What the fuck?”

“Put her in the van!”

“What?” I yelled.

“Pick her up and put her in the van,” Holly ordered slowly. “What is it you always say? It’s not rocket science. Pick her up and carry her to the van, Ransome.”

“I’ll just find a chair and. . .”

“I didn’t tell you because it wasn’t a sure thing that it would happen, but we’re here to kidnap her.”

“*What?*” I yelled again.

“Put her in the back of the van. NOW. I’ll drive.”

“I am not kidnapping . . .”

“When she wakes up, she’ll be fine with it. If she wasn’t, then she wouldn’t be here.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I asked as I swept Celeste’s limp body into my arms. Without even thinking, I started to follow my cousin toward the door Celeste had just come through. “Did I fall and bump my head? I’m having a coma dream, aren’t I?”

“Since when are you so dramatic?” Holly asked as she opened the back doors of my delivery van and then stepped aside so I could get past her. “Can you get in there with her in your arms?”

“I’m not going to prison for kidnapping, and why isn’t she awake yet?” I asked as I shifted her in my arms and pulled her closer to my chest.

“You won’t go to prison, but if you follow through with what’s listed in the contract, you’ll not only be paid for that kickass cake, you’ll also get that cyclothermic five-deck oven you’ve been dreaming about.”

“Say what now?”

“You heard me.”

“The Drago 986?”

“Yep. You should really read more of the contracts than just the cake specifications, Ransome.”

“With the 7” LCD screen and the steam tube technology that optimizes . . .”

“Shut up and get in the van, Ransome. The fact that you just got a woody talking about oven specs is even sadder than the fact that you named your sourdough starter.”

2.

RANSOME

“Sweet family,” the doctor announced from the doorway. It took a second for me and my sister to realize he was here with information about Celeste, and he had to announce it again before we jumped up.

“Is she okay?” Rachel asked eagerly as we crossed the room. The doctor raised his eyebrows and studied Rachel’s face before he glanced at me, instantly knowing that we weren’t Celeste’s siblings. Rachel must have understood his confusion, so she hurriedly said, “This is her fiancé.” When I slowly turned to stare at my sister, she explained, “He’s got that look on his face because he’s agoraphobic, and I gave him a handful of melatonin gummies I keep in my purse for times like this. He gets twitchy when he has to be out in public for too long.” The doctor’s eyebrows got even higher.

Rachel just ignored both of us and powered through to ask, “Is Celeste okay?”

“She’s got some injuries that . . .” The doctor looked down at the floor for a second and then back at me with a confused expression. “She’s wearing a wedding gown and kept mumbling about escaping from her fiancé, so . . .”

“Not this fiancé,” Rachel said as she scrambled to come up with another lie.

It was as if my sister and Holly’s influence had put a worm in my brain that caused me to lose every bit of sense God had given me. Suddenly, I was vested in this lie she’d told because I was eager to find out what was wrong with Celeste.

“She was escaping from an arranged marriage because she and I are in love. It’s a whole . . . drama. I can’t even talk about it right now.”

The doctor blinked a few times and then shook his head. The man and I had more in common than he’d ever know. When my sister and cousins started rambling on about shit, it was all I could do to stay upright, and here I was spinning stories to a stranger that would make him question my sanity. I really needed to stay in my kitchen and not interact with anyone seeing as how easy I was to influence.

On any other day, I’d have just told the doctor to spit it out so we could move on, but I didn’t want to risk saying the wrong thing because I was worried he might not share the information with us.

Holy shit.

They really had influenced me.

I thought I might be experiencing what my sister referred to as diplomacy, but I wasn’t sure. She and Holly had endlessly harped at me about my lack of tact and diplomacy, two things I didn’t see any reason for. Now I realized why I’d been so resistant and wondered how they were able to tolerate having to spew a constant stream of this shit every day.

It was exhausting and a little bit painful to stand here patiently while the doctor hemmed and hawed about what was going on. I wanted to take him by the shoulders and physically shake the information out of him.

But this new ability I’d developed seemed to be working since I hadn’t actually throttled the doctor yet.

“Miss Sweet bruised her ribs and sprained her wrist when she climbed out or rather *fell* out of the window she was escaping through. She also sustained a slight concussion and . . .”

“Is that why she passed out?”

“No,” the doctor said uncomfortably. “The corset she was wearing underneath the dress restricted her breathing while at the same time put undue pressure on her heart and lungs.”

“What?” I barked. “That’s barbaric!” I looked at my sister, dumbfounded at the thought of someone putting themselves into a contraption like that in the first place. “Why would someone do that willingly?”

Rachel shrugged before she answered, “Lots of women wear those underneath their wedding dress.”

“And it made her faint? That can’t be right.”

“It’s actually a lot more common than you think, or at least, it used to be when women wore corsets regularly. They were prone to fainting spells because their heart and lungs were so restricted, they couldn’t take a deep breath, leaving them dizzy and occasionally causing them to lose consciousness.” I stared at the doctor, unblinking, as I wondered why we were discussing corsets and not what was going on with Celeste. He seemed to realize that was an issue and hurriedly said, “I’ve wrapped her wrist, and she’ll need ice for the next day or so to reduce the swelling. Her ribs should heal over time, but she’ll be sore for quite a while. As for the concussion, she should get plenty of rest and take over the counter pain relievers if she needs them. Limit her physical activity, and don’t let her make any long-term commitments or legal decisions for the next few days until you’re sure she’s got all her faculties again.”

“Should we wake her up every hour to make sure she’s not dead?” Rachel asked.

“If she’s dead, you won’t be able to wake her up,” I pointed out.

“I won’t be doing it, you will,” Rachel said with a shrug. “I’m leaving town, remember?”

“No.”

“Because you don’t listen.”

“Because you ramble about useless shit and never really say anything important.”

“Excuse me,” the doctor interrupted. “Which one of you will be taking her home?”

“He will,” Rachel said as she pointed at me.

At the same time, I pointed at her and answered, “She will.”

“Since she’s going to be staying in your apartment, it only makes sense that you’d be the one to take her home.”

“She’s not staying with me,” I argued.

“Did you *read* the contract?”

“Fuck the contract. I don’t want a roommate.”

“But you want that oven, don’t you?” I stared at my sister, wondering what her endgame was and how she’d negotiated for me to get paid with a kitchen appliance that cost more than most homes. “It specifically says that Celeste is to live with you until her father is able to come back to the US or arrange for her to fly to Germany.”

“How long will that take? Two days? Three?”

“At least six weeks, if not more.”

“So, did she get injured escaping an arranged marriage, or is *this* the arranged marriage?” the doctor asked Rachel, pointing at me as if I weren’t able to answer for myself.

“Would you marry him if you weren’t contractually obligated to do so?” Rachel asked. The doctor shook his head, and Rachel smiled. “That’s what I thought.”

“I’m not marrying anyone!”

“Are you married, Miss . . .”

“Donovan, but please, call me Rachel,” my sister said with a big smile as she stuck her hand out toward the doctor.

He took it and smiled as he said, “I’d love to call you, Rachel.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” I grumbled as I walked around the doctor to go to the exam room where we’d left Celeste.

“How do you know Miss Sweet’s fiancé?” I heard the doctor ask as I walked away.

Rachel’s answer made me want to turn around and choke the hell out of her, but instead, I just flipped her off over my shoulder when she answered, “He’s my older brother, but my parents made sure I understood from a young age that it’s my job to take care of him.”

“How noble of you . . .”

Their voices were cut off when the door shut behind me, and I sighed when I realized that Rachel was right. It wouldn’t kill me to have a houseguest for a few days. Celeste was a sweet kid, and she needed a place to stay since she couldn’t be alone while she recovered.

No. Scratch that. Celeste used to be a sweet kid. Now she was a beautiful woman who apparently had more baggage than an overbooked transatlantic flight.

That was exactly the kind of complication I didn't need in my life, however, I really wanted that convection oven, so . . .

As I approached the curtained area where we'd left Celeste, I heard a sniff and then a muted sob. I peeked around the curtain and realized she was crying. I wasn't sure what to do. Should I walk in and try to comfort her or pretend I hadn't heard anything and give her privacy?

I was frozen in panic, unsure of how to proceed. I was a big guy and had a lot of life experience under my belt, so there wasn't much in this world that scared me, but for some reason a crying woman terrified me and made me want to burn down the world at the same time.

Celeste sniffed and then, with tears in her voice, said, "I can see your feet."

I moved the curtain aside and slowly walked to the chair beside her bed, studying Celeste's face to see if she might be close to done. When tears filled her eyes, I knew there wasn't a chance of reprieve. When one escaped and slowly trailed down her smooth cheek, I was a goner. It caught the edge of those sexy lips then followed the curve to the corner, and I couldn't breathe. When she reached up and swiped it away with her delicate fingers, I wanted to reach out and take her hand. I knew right then I'd do anything in my power just to make her smile.

"Somehow we keep meeting here," I said casually as I looked around. I sighed and shook my head before I told her, "How about we move this to my house and let me get you settled in?"

"Your house?"

"Technically, it's an apartment, but it's my home, so . . ."

I stopped talking when Celeste let out a tortured sob and whispered, "I don't have a home anymore!"

"Were you living with . . . What's his name?"

"Jeffrey. Sort of," Celeste said through her tears.

"Sort of? Whose name is on the lease?"

"It's his mom's house."

"You leased it from her?"

"We lived with her," Celeste explained as she tried to stop crying. She took a deep breath and said, "We each had a suite of rooms and . . ."

"A suite? Where does she live? Southfork?"

Celeste laughed softly as she shook her head. She winced and reached up to touch her temple before she said, "She lives just outside of town on a massive estate that belonged to her parents."

“And you each had your own suite?” I asked, wondering how exactly that worked. Why would they have separate suites if they were living under the same roof and planning to spend their lives together?

“Yeah. Jeffrey didn’t want to live together because . . .”

She looked so forlorn that I had to lighten the mood at least a little bit, so I teased, “You snore that bad? Damn. Maybe I shouldn’t have you stay with me after all.”

“I don’t snore!”

“Hmmm. What good reason could a man have for not sleeping next to a beautiful woman like you?” Celeste’s eyes got wide, but I didn’t stop talking. I couldn’t, for some reason. For a person who hated chatting with people, I was suddenly a bubbling fountain of words. “If you were my fiancée, I’d keep you close so I could make sure no one tried to steal you away, no matter how loud you snore. That separate suite bullshit wouldn’t fly. Did he have to sneak past his mom’s room every night so you could be together?”

“No. He wanted to wait until we were married, so we never did anything like that.”

“Say again?”

“Jeffrey and I weren’t intimate because he wanted it to be special.”

I was stunned. Even wearing an ugly hospital gown, Celeste was stunning. The gown went all the way up to her neck and the blanket covered her down to her toes, but I could tell there was a lush bounty of curves covered by smooth skin that I would savor like dark chocolate ganache . . .

Shit! I couldn’t go there, not even in my imagination. This girl . . . this *woman* was my little sister’s friend, and she had just left her fiancé at the altar. There had to be a million emotions involved with that. The last thing she needed to contend with were the wicked thoughts racing through my head. Thoughts that shouldn’t even be crossing my mind . . .

“Is this guy ultra religious or something?”

“Unless there’s a church on the ninth hole of the golf course, I don’t think he’s ever been near one.”

“Hmm.”

“Why does that matter?”

“I was wondering if he wasn’t sleeping with you for religious reasons, but I guess that’s not the case.”

“He didn’t find me very attractive.” I tilted my head and waited for the

punchline, but instead, Celeste asked, “Why are you looking at me like that?” I tried to swallow, but my mouth was as dry as a cheap shortbread cookie. He didn’t think she was attractive? Was he blind? I still didn’t know what to say. Celeste swiped her hands over her cheeks to wipe away a fresh round of tears and then sniffed again before she put her shoulders back and took a deep breath. “I guess I should have known that it wouldn’t work out.”

“Why?”

“No matter how hard I tried to be what he wanted, I just couldn’t.”

“What did he want you to be?”

“Perfect.”

“But you are,” I blurted. Celeste started to shake her head in denial, so I had to explain. “You’ve probably got some flaws, but I can’t see any. I’m sure the snoring could be considered one, but that’s fixable with a set of earplugs and a white noise machine.” She smiled, so I continued. I wanted to see more of that instead of tears. “Let me just say that even though I don’t know shit about this Jeffrey guy, if he wasn’t all over you like icing on a cupcake, he was a complete dumbass.”

“But he was perfect.”

“He sure as hell doesn’t sound like it.”

“He’s smart and driven, he’s never been in trouble with the law, he’s got a really good job working for his mom’s company, he . . .”

“So, he lives with her *and* works for her? Does she feed him with one of those little spoons or is he still breastfeeding?” Celeste burst out laughing, and I felt my chest swell with pride. “How old is this guy? He sounds like a dud.”

“He kind of is,” she conceded. She seemed to consider it for a second and then a little more emphatically, she said, “You know what? He is a dud, and his attachment to his mother is bizarre!”

“You know who else had mommy issues? The Son of Sam, and everyone knows how that turned out.”

Celeste gasped before she said, “Ed Gein did too!”

“Three words: Henry Lee Lucas.”

Her eyes got wide as she whispered, “Maybe Jeffrey is a serial killer!”

“If he is, that sounds like the only interesting thing about him.”

The curtain flew to the side, and my sister appeared. “Celeste! I’m so glad you’re okay!”

Celeste glanced at me and then smiled at my sister. “Ransome and I have been talking, and I feel a lot better.”

Rachel squinted as she studied my face. She looked at Celeste and asked, “He was talking, and you feel better?”

“Yeah. He’s been really nice.”

“I think I need to go find a doctor. Something is clearly wrong with . . .”

“Would you fuck the hell off while you find out when she can leave?”

“Drake said . . .”

“Who is Drake?” I asked.

“The doctor.”

“Drake Ramoray?” Celeste and I asked at the same time. We both started laughing, and my sister slowly backed out of the room.

“The nurse is going to come in with some papers for you to sign, and then you’ll be free to go.”

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“I need to make a phone call,” Rachel said as she looked from me to Celeste and then back again. “I’ll be right back.”

“What was that about?” I asked Celeste once my sister was gone.

“She’s acting weird, isn’t she?”

“She’s always been weird.”

“Be nice! That’s your sister!”

“Which means I’m allowed to talk shit about her when no one else is.”

Celeste smiled. “Is that how it works?”

“You don’t have any siblings?”

“No.”

“Well, let me tell you, that’s exactly how it works. Apparently, I was perfect when I was a child, and my parents thought they could replicate that and had another kid on my fifth birthday. She’s been the bane of my existence ever since.”

“Has she really?”

I nodded before I said, “I still haven’t forgiven them.”

“Why not?”

“I asked for a bicycle.”

3.

CELESTE

I gingerly turned over and reached up to adjust my pillow and then winced at the ache in my ribs. Apparently, all those squats and arm curls I had been doing lately had paid off. Right before I launched myself up and out of the window, I heard the voice of Ramon, the trainer Marjorie insisted I work with to prepare for my wedding day, reminding me, “Focus and find the natural rhythm of your body to follow through with each rep.” I did that, hearing the guys from *Cool Runnings* chant in my head as I psyched myself up and then threw myself through the window so forcefully that I completely cleared the sill. Of course, I had been singularly focused on my escape and hadn’t thought about sticking my landing. I landed on the air conditioning unit outside, flipped over, and landed flat on my back, somehow bumping my

head and twisting my wrist for good measure.

But I wasn't married, and that's what mattered, right? The rest of me would heal. If I could get to sleep, that might happen even faster. The doctor seemed to think so, but my brain didn't give a shit about his orders. Instead, it wanted to run through every bad decision I'd made in my life so far, culminating in today's events.

Now, I wasn't just single, I was also homeless and unemployed.

Cheers to me and my fantastic life choices.

I rolled over again and slowly reached for my phone so I could check the time. I'd learned on the ride home that moving too quickly made the pain sharper and more intense, so I'd been doing everything in slow motion since then.

And now, it seemed like it wasn't just me that was moving in slow motion, time was too. My stomach growled, and I realized I hadn't eaten since the protein shake I had yesterday morning. I'd been living off those and plain salads with no dressing for six months now. All that sacrifice literally went out the window yesterday.

My stomach rumbled again, this time even more loudly, as if to tell me how excited it was at the prospect of real food. Carbs. I wanted *all* the carbs. Tortillas, cornbread, mashed potatoes, French bread, pasta . . . all of it.

I used my good hand to push myself up so I could sit on the side of the bed and thought about all the things I was going to eat now that I didn't have to listen to Marjorie berate me or worry about what I'd look like from behind as I stood in front of a church full of people.

Ice cream. Chocolate almond with caramel sauce and as much whipped cream as I could fit on top of the bowl. A mountain of it with a cute little cherry to top it all off. Cherries were fruit, so it wouldn't be a total gluttonous binge, right?

Since it was just a little after three in the morning, I thought it was probably a safe bet that I could go downstairs and raid Ransome's kitchen in the sleep clothes Rachel had found for me after she drove me here from the hospital. I had tried to convince her to let me stay at her place, but she insisted I shouldn't be alone for at least a week because of the concussion. Since she was going out of town, she'd volun-told her brother it was up to him to take care of me.

As uncomfortable as I felt imposing on Ransome, I was actually grateful to be here right now. I knew he had to have a better selection of food than

Rachel who had also been on a diet kick for the past few months. She'd been planning this vacation for a while now and had surpassed her weight loss goal so that she'd be comfortable in a bikini for the first time since high school.

I, however, didn't have any beach plans in my future and was going to raid that kitchen like I was a grizzly preparing for winter and carbohydrates were the sustenance needed for me to survive hibernation.

I took the stairs slower than I normally would, careful not to jostle too much so I didn't have to endure more pain than I was already in . . . not that a little pain would stop me at this point. My stomach was running the show, and if it had its way, I'd be bouncing down the stairs with joy at the impending gluttony I was about to . . .

"Oh!" I said in shock when I walked around the corner and found Ransome sitting at the bar. He slowly turned his head, and the look on his face reminded me of the killer in a horror movie until he sucked in a breath and started coughing so hard that he spewed coffee all over the counter. I hurried over and, not knowing what else to do, started pounding him on the back to help his choking. He was finally able to suck in a deep breath without coughing, so I stopped slapping his back and gently rubbed my hand around in circles to try and calm him while he caught his breath. "I'm sorry I scared you! Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. You just caught me off guard and . . . Whoa! That was intense."

I put my arm over his back and gave him a little hug before I walked around the island toward the coffee pot. "I didn't realize you'd be awake this early."

"I usually go into the bakery at four to get things started. My employees start showing up by five, if they show up at all."

"That's awfully early, but if that's when they're scheduled, then why wouldn't they come to work?"

"I don't have the best track record with employees."

"I wonder why."

"Holly says it's my award-winning personality that runs them away. Coffee mugs are in the cabinet over the pot."

I grabbed a mug as I said, "I can't see why that's a problem."

"Say again?"

"Well, you're a perfectly pleasant man, so unless you're making them work in harsh physical conditions, I can't see what the problem would be."

"Pleasant?"

I poured my coffee and then opened the refrigerator to see if there was any

cream just as my stomach rumbled loudly. I put my injured hand over my stomach as I pulled the gallon of milk out with my other hand and made quick work of fixing my coffee to suit my tastes. When I turned around to say something to Ransome, I saw that he looked confused, so I asked, “What’s wrong?”

“You think I’m pleasant?”

“That’s not an insult.”

“Oh.”

“Do *you* think that’s an insult?”

Ransome seemed to look everywhere but at me, and I thought that I’d upset him until he finally said, “I thought for sure you were being sarcastic.”

“Well, I wasn’t,” I said as I leaned forward to rest my hips against the counter across from him. I lifted my mug and blew on it before I took a sip. It tasted fantastic. As soon as my brain recovered from the rich flavor, I’d have to ask him what brand he used. I took another sip and was finally able to find my voice and say, “This is the best thing I’ve ever tasted.”

My stomach rumbled again, and Ransome finally looked at my face then his eyes dropped down to my stomach for a few seconds before they slowly made their way to my face again. “You’re hungry?”

“Starving,” I admitted. “I thought I’d sneak down here and finally eat some real food for the first time in six months.”

“Why six months?”

“The dreaded wedding dress diet. I haven’t had carbs or sugar in I don’t know how long. As a matter of fact, this is the first time I’ve been able to put milk in my coffee since then too.”

“What have you been eating?”

“Protein shakes and salads. Occasionally, I’ll have a chicken breast or ground turkey in a lettuce wrap.”

“Why were you on a diet?” Ransome interrupted.

“So I would look nice in my wedding dress.”

“You could rock a burlap sack with no effort. There’s just no sense in going without.”

“Well, there isn’t now,” I agreed with an uncomfortable laugh. “Do you mind if I raid your fridge?”

“Knock yourself out, but why don’t I make you breakfast instead?”

“Oh, I couldn’t ask you to do that! You’ve got to go to work soon.”

Ransome stood and motioned for me to take his seat as he walked around the

island. “Sit down and let me put you into a sugary carb coma.”

“You don’t need to do anything special, Ransome. I’d be more than happy with some Pop-Tarts and a bowl of ice cream.”

“For breakfast?”

“Or lunch. Or just because I’ve missed both of those things more than I want to admit.”

Ransome shook his head. “Absolutely unacceptable. Sit down. I’m cooking breakfast.”

“Thank you,” I said as I started to walk past him. Instead, I stopped and impulsively tiptoed up to kiss his bearded cheek. “You’re better than pleasant, Ransome. You’re downright sweet.”



RANSOME

“Mr. Donovan, there’s a customer out front who’d like to speak to you.”

“Isn’t that what you’re here for?” I asked without turning around.

“Well, yes . . . but . . . um . . .” I finally turned to look at her over my shoulder. Her eyes were wide as she quietly said, “She’s not happy with her cupcakes and wants to speak to the owner.”

I felt my eyes narrow and realized I might be intimidating the girl when she took a step back. “Did she say what was wrong with them?”

“She said that they weren’t . . . um . . . worthy of the amount you wanted to charge, so she’s refusing to pay the ticket.”

“Did you give her the cupcakes yet?”

“No, sir. I put the box on the counter, and she looked through the window on top and sort of went off.”

“Went off?” I asked as I turned around to face my newest employee. “How so?”

“She said that she thought she’d get something better for the price she was quoted. When I said they were gorgeous, she told me that I was obviously too stupid to see the flaws that she did.”

“Oh no she didn’t,” I barked as I walked around the metal table in the center of the room.

“Yes, sir. I mean, I think . . .” Heather took a deep breath and then stuck her

chin out stubbornly. “That’s exactly what she said.”

“Well, fuck her,” I grumbled as I pushed the swinging door open and ventured out into the front of the store. I spotted the woman that Heather was talking about immediately. She was obviously upset and had a pinched look around her mouth that let me know that was probably a permanent expression. I stepped up behind the counter directly in front of her and rested my hands on the cupcake box in question. “What seems to be the problem, ma’am?”

“Are you the owner or just the manager?”

“What does it matter? You have a problem, and I’m obviously here to solve it.”

“I want to speak to the *owner*,” she snapped as she rested her hand on the counter and leaned closer to me.

I leaned in so that we were almost nose to nose and said, “Then *speak*.”

“The icing on those cupcakes is subpar, and there’s no way I’m going to serve them to my daughter and her friends.”

I raised my eyebrows and then glanced down at the delicious creations in front of me. The order had been marbled strawberry and vanilla cake with unicorn swirl icing and candy sprinkles. I’d followed the specifications exactly, creating heavenly, moist cupcakes topped with a pink, lavender, and light blue Swiss meringue buttercream. I’d used gold star sprinkles and even made small white chocolate unicorn horns and painted them with edible gold dust for an added touch.

“Subpar?”

“Yes. There’s clearly more lavender than pink in the icing, and the gold on the horn doesn’t even come close to matching the sprinkles.”

“How do golds not match? I mean, gold is gold. There’s really no way to mistake gold for anything *but* gold.”

The woman scoffed and rolled her eyes, setting my teeth on edge before she asked, “And how do you explain the icing? The ratio of colors in the icing is so obviously off. It makes the cupcakes look like a jumbled mess. You are sadly mistaken if you think I’m paying for that quality of work.”

“So, you’re not gonna take these?”

“I’m not paying for them.”

“Well, if you want to take them with you, you *are* going to pay for them.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Okay then.”

“What does that mean?”

“It’s kind of like that gold is gold thing. Okay means okay. It’s not rocket science.”

“What are you going to do about the cupcakes?”

“Well, you said you don’t want them, so they’re trash.”

“Obviously.”

I heard Ronnie, one of the counter employees whisper, “Quick! Go tell Holly to hurry!”

The look on the woman’s face made me so mad, I wanted to launch the box through the picture window and hopefully hit her stupid expensive SUV that was parked on the curb complete with the stick figure family decals on the rear window. Apparently, this sea hag had three poor little children and a dog in her care. After two minutes in her presence, they had all my sympathy. Every single bit of it.

“Hello! I asked what you’re going to do about it!” she nearly screeched, as if tap dancing on my very last nerve was her mission in life.

I picked the cupcake box up with both hands and lifted it until it was eye level with the customer before I shook it with all my might. I then flipped it over and slammed it to the counter on its lid and said, “Nothing.”

I heard the door behind me swing open so hard that it smacked against the back counter and knew my cousin had arrived when I heard her whisper, “Dammit!”

“Nothing? What do you mean *nothing*?” the customer squawked.

“Why do you act as if this is brain surgery? Nothing means *nothing*!”

“Let me handle this,” Holly hissed under her breath as she got between me and the counter.

“I will burn this whole goddamn building down to the ground before I let you give Susie Spits-a-Lot one free fucking crumb. I don’t care if God himself comes down and . . .”

“What did you just call me?”

“He didn’t call you . . .” Holly said over her shoulder.

“Next time you talk to someone, say it, don’t spray it,” I barked, glaring at the customer over my cousin’s head.

“Sweet Jesus, we’re off the rails today,” I heard Holly mutter, her voice muffled by the hand she was holding over her mouth, probably to hide the fact that she was grinning like she did every time I had to deal with some uptight, entitled, ungrateful, uppity customer who just wanted to test my

resolve to stay out of prison. “Ransome, go back to your cave, and don't come out until springtime.”

“I brought you a coffee,” Ronnie said, being overly cheerful and bright as she thrust a cup in my direction. “Just let me know when you need more.”

“Thank you,” I said with a genuine smile as I took the cup from her hand. The irate customer was still sputtering when the door swung shut behind me. As I closed my eyes to savor the sweet caffeine my employee had offered up to try and tame the beast, I heard a slow clap come from somewhere to my right. I opened my eyes as I slowly turned my head and wasn't surprised to see Quinn, one of my cousins, sitting on a stool at the pass-through that allowed you to see the front of the store and hear everything that was happening. “What are you doing here?”

“I was over on Holly's side getting coffee when a frantic young woman came running in and said, ‘He's escaped his chains, and I can't find the taser!’”

“Fuck you, Quinn.”

“I see old age hasn't mellowed you at all. I thought you were bad when you worked for me at the bar, but I realize now that you were holding back. Thanks for that, by the way.”

I flipped him off with the hand holding my coffee cup as I took another sip before I said, “You're older than I am, asshole. Did you just stay to watch the show or what?”

“Of course, I did. I wanted to be able to give everyone a play-by-play,” Quinn teased. “Your customer service is legendary and obviously just keeps getting better.”

“Obviously.”

“Not too long ago, Holly mentioned installing some kind of invisible fence and fitting you with a collar that wouldn't allow you to go any farther than that door.”

“She could try it.”

“Your mom said she'd help convince you to put it on.”

“Of course she did. My mom is a saint who has never understood my inability to tolerate bullshit.”

“My guess is that Holly's going to make the call sooner rather than later.”

“Probably,” I said as I glanced out the window in the door and saw our cousin still calmly talking to the customer who was waving her arms around like a windmill, red in the face with her blood pressure probably nearing stroke level.

“You seem crankier than usual today. Might that have something to do with your new roommate?”

“Is it horrible to say I already want her gone?”

“Damn. A little bit. What did she do?”

“She almost killed me this morning.”

“Most people wouldn’t blame her if she did.”

“Fuck off.”

“What did she try? Poison? Tripwires?”

“No. Worse than that.”

“Did she make you sing “Kumbaya” and promise to say three nice things about everyone you meet today?” The look of horror on my face must have shown my feelings perfectly, and Quinn started laughing. “Fuck. That would be a sight to see.”

“I could do it.”

“The singing, maybe, but the saying nice things part is doubtful.”

“I can think of three nice things about you right now.”

“Oh, this should be good.”

“You’re not going to be here all day, your kids are way cooler than you, and your mom likes me better than you.”

“Bullshit. My mom loves me.”

“Yeah, but when was the last time you took her a pan of caramel pecan brownies, piping hot and fresh out of the oven, and told her she didn’t have to share them with anyone?”

“That’s cheating,” Quinn grumbled.

“If you’re not cheating, you’re not competing, my friend.”

“So, tell me what the new roomie did that made you think she was trying to kill you.”

“She came downstairs before I left for work and talked to me until I was ready to leave.”

“Oh! The horror!” Quinn put his hand on his chest and did his best at trying to look appalled. “How could she do such a thing?”

“Talking to her wasn’t that bad.”

“Then why are you complaining?”

“She was wearing my favorite T-shirt.”

“It’s not like she was using it to polish the silver, Ransome. It won’t kill you to . . .”

“She was *wearing my shirt* that she’d slept in all night, and I just . . . It was

hard to focus on what she was saying, and then she stood really close to my arm and . . .” Quinn started laughing, and I hung my head as I said, “I’m not sure I can handle that every morning.”

“It is a test, brother.”

“She looked all ruffled and warm, and I just . . . She smelled so good that . . . I just can’t . . . I don’t know . . .”

“It’s been a while since I saw Celeste, but I remember that she was a very . . . lush woman.”

“Lush. Yeah.”

“So, you’ve been barely functioning, walking around in a haze because you can’t stop thinking of what she looked like in your T-shirt, huh?”

Rather than admit how distracted I’d been, I asked, “Don’t you have somewhere to be?”

“Shit,” Quinn said with an exaggerated grimace. “Kyla’s waiting on her coffee so she can caffeinate and take the girls shopping.”

“Oh God. The mall is the third ring of hell. You couldn’t get me to step foot in there if you held a gun to my head,” I mumbled as I walked over to the shelf and picked up a small box. I opened the refrigerator and selected a few treats I knew Quinn’s wife would enjoy and then taped the box shut in four places. I smiled wickedly at my cousin and then picked up a marker from a nearby shelf and wrote across the top of the box in all caps, ‘If the seal on this box is broken, Quinn stole some of your food!’. When I handed it to him, I said, “I don’t like you enough to feed you, but your wife’s pretty fucking cool. If she’s taking the kids to the mall, she definitely deserves this.”

“Give me some to take home for myself.”

“No! Go wait in line and buy them like everyone else.”

“I’m calling Celeste so I can give her some ideas on how to finish the job and just kill you next time.”

“Do that and you’ll always have to wonder if the cookies I give you contain chocolate chunks or Ex-Lax.”

“Damn. You are on a roll today. I guess this morning really started you out on the wrong foot. Someone should warn Celeste not to poke the bear with the conversation stick unless it’s absolutely necessary.”

“Go away.”

“The girls asked if you’d make some cookies for them to give to their teachers on the last day of school.”

“Absolutely. How many teachers?”

“I’m not sure yet. Any chance they can come help you make them?”

“As long as you promise not to come with them.”

“I’ll bring them over after school today so y’all can talk about it.”

“Cool. I’ll make sure to give them plenty of sugary after-school snacks so they’re a joy to be around all evening.”

“You’re a dick.”

“And yet everyone insists on trying to talk to me. I just don’t get it.”

Quinn hopped off the stool, the box I’d made for his wife in hand, and grinned at me. “See ya later, asshole.”

I nodded, already planning what I’d put on the snack tray for his girls this afternoon. I loved how much they enjoyed coming to visit and that they were eager to work in the kitchen every chance they got. While Quinn had been a single father, myself and the rest of our family had done everything we could to help him when he needed it. Seeing the girls grow up so successfully was truly a joy.

It was now a tradition that a month or so before their birthday, I had a planning meeting with each child in the family to come up with an idea for a cake to beat all other cakes. This year, I’d already made one that looked like a huge cheeseburger, cupcakes that oozed kiwi-flavored green slime, a princess castle, and a bust of Spiderman that looked so good, Jolie’s son cried when she cut into the damn thing. Although I’d never admit it, watching how excited the kids got over the cakes I created for them had been some of my career highs, so far.

For a long time, I thought that I might meet that special someone someday and have a few kids of my own, but considering how my personality seemed to be a natural woman repellent, that probably wasn’t likely. I’d dated lots of women through the years, some of them seriously, but none willing to stick around and love me for who I am. I just wasn’t willing to change everything about myself to make them stay.

I’d been with all types of women, from bookworms to the life of the party, but none of them seemed to understand that when I wasn’t talking, it didn’t have anything to do with them personally, I just didn’t have anything to say. Unfortunately, when I did have something I needed to get off my chest, my words often came off as seeming gruff or irritated, and that somehow always caused an argument.

One woman I dated got irritated because I never texted her before nine in the

morning, and when I did, it was usually a short and simple ‘good morning.’ I’d mistakenly been under the impression that it would be insensitive if I sent her a text the first time I thought of her in the morning because it was usually an hour or so before dawn. So, I took her at her word when she said she wanted me to say hello before I started my day, and then she got pissed because I kept waking her up at four a.m.

Another woman from a relationship that lasted only a few months couldn’t accept that we didn’t share any of the same interests. She insisted that I at least try some of the things she liked to do, so I tried. I really did. But fifteen minutes into her favorite reality show, I found myself looking for something sharp to stick in my ear just to make the voices stop. When my sister and a few of my cousins found out how much that show irritated me, they started talking like the main characters and calling each other Kourt, Khlo, and Kimberly. By the third or fourth time they pulled that shit, I was looking for something sharp to stick into *them*. When my girlfriend found out that they were teasing me, she got offended and said they were making fun of her. I explained that it wasn’t directed at her, just the stupid shit she chose to watch that would rot her brain, and then the fight was on.

The last woman I dated didn’t understand why I wouldn’t meet her and her friends for drinks a few nights a week. I told her I’d be more than willing to go to happy hour but needed to be home by seven. She pouted for a while and then took to texting and calling me at all hours of the night while she was out with her friends. I finally put her texts and calls on silent and started returning them when I woke up the next morning. That didn’t go over well. She started giving me shit about being an old man, and I retorted with ‘better than a desperate sorority girl long out of college.’ She lost her shit. I didn’t know when to stop, apparently, because I followed that up by explaining that I was a grownup with responsibilities and had to be up at the ass crack of dawn every day. She thought I was calling her childish and threw her shoe at me. I thought that was a little extreme, and when I told Rachel and our mom about it, they laughed until I got up and left the room. They were still laughing about it an hour later when I left the fucking house.

I gave up dating for a while after that but then fell victim to family obligation and went on a double date with my cousin James. The girl he was seeing had a friend in town, and he didn’t want her to feel like a third wheel, so he begged me to go out with her a few times while she was here. I thought she and I were on the same page and understood that what we had going on was

strictly temporary, especially since she lived on the other side of the country. Just to make sure she knew the score, I explained it in no uncertain terms before I even asked her back to my apartment.

She agreed. I was going to be her fun Texas fling. She said so herself. But then her weeklong visit turned into two. Before I knew it, a month had passed, and I woke up one morning to find her reorganizing my closet to make space for her clothes. I managed to keep my mouth shut so I could get some advice from Holly on how to handle the situation, but when she asked me to take a bag of trash downstairs only for me to realize it was full of my favorite T-shirts, diplomacy went right out the door and she followed close behind it.

This morning when Celeste came downstairs in one of those T-shirts, rather than be pissed she was wearing one of my favorites, I swallowed my tongue and damn near choked to death. That old T-shirt was butter soft, and it fell just perfectly over Celeste's curvy body. It was obvious she wasn't wearing a bra, and the sight of her unbound breasts and nipples straining the material was enough to make me have an out-of-body experience.

I almost had myself under control until she came and stood beside where I was sitting and pressed herself against me so she could pound on my back. That just made it worse, but when she started rubbing circles on my back, her breasts cushioning my bicep perfectly, I saw stars. I began seeing images of her laying on her back beneath me, her breasts bouncing as I thrust . . .

"Fuck!" I muttered as I ran my hand over my face. I'd walked around with my dick hard enough to pound nails all morning. It seemed like every time I got it under control, that same reel in my head started all over again.

"What are you complaining about?" Holly asked as she walked in from the front through the swinging door with a wet paper towel wadded up in one hand and the box of those destroyed unicorn cupcakes in the other. She set the box on the island and then carefully unfolded the paper towel. As she started wiping her face, she asked, "Remember that movie where they showed people's spit flying through the air right before everyone got Ebola?"

"No."

"Well, now I have Ebola, and it's all your fault."

"How is it my fault? I didn't spit on you."

"All you had to do was tell her you'd take care of . . ."

"Of what? Perfection? You saw those fucking cupcakes!" I took a deep breath and tried to calm down, but when Holly pulled her phone out of her

pocket, I lost it again. “You took a fucking picture of those goddamn cupcakes because you said you were going to put it on the interweb.”

“Internet, caveman! It’s called the fucking internet.”

“Instaweb. Instabook. What the fuck ever. You said those were so beautiful, they’d go virus and . . .”

“Viral, Ransome. I swear to God, there’s something wrong with you. You’re a 94-year-old codger trapped in a 40-year-old body.”

“I’m only 35.”

“Yeah, okay.” Holly took one last swipe at her face before she tossed the paper towel into the trash. “Just so you know, while I’m on my deathbed bleeding from my eyes, you’re gonna have to deal with all the employees and both front counters.”

“Nope.”

“I wonder if I can find sensitivity training online,” Holly said as she started scrolling through her phone. “I’ll look into that right after I post the job listing for the manager position.”

“What happened to the last one?”

“The last one?”

“Yeah. What was her name? Umm . . . Denise? Dana? Delorian?”

“Darlene, Ransome. Her name was Darlene, and she worked with us for eight months.”

“Okay,” I said sarcastically as I put my hands up as if my cousin were pointing a gun at me. “Darlene. What happened to her?”

“You made her cry.”

“She was way too sensitive. I think I told her that.”

“Several times,” Holly barked. “Now we need a manager.”

“For what? We do just fine, me and you. There’s no need for someone else to come in and tell us how they think we should change things.”

“Are you going to start doing the hiring? The new employee paperwork? Scheduling? Payroll? Keeping the accounting stuff straight?”

“That’s why we have cousins. Harper and Tawny handle our books, so why do you need to pay someone else to do them too?”

“How do you think Harper gets our information? Osmosis? No, Ransome. Someone has to gather all that shit up, keep it organized, make the schedules, and track everyone’s hours for payroll along with about a million other things and *then* give it to Harper so he can do the books.”

“Sounds like an unnecessary step.” Holly just stood there silently with a

blank expression. “What?”

“If anything ever happens to me, this business will be bankrupt within a month.” I couldn’t really argue with that, so it was my turn to stare blankly.

“I’ll find some candidates, but I want you involved in the hiring process this time. There’s no sense in hiring someone you’re just gonna scare off. They should see what they’re getting into from the start.”

“Why don’t we just get Harper to . . .”

“You know, sometimes when you’re talking, I imagine you’re on fire.”

“That was harsh,” I snapped. “Damn.”

“Excuse me,” I heard a timid voice say. I spun around, thinking it was probably that new employee who didn’t speak above a whisper. I was pleasantly surprised to see Celeste standing in the doorway that led into the back of the bakery from the hallway that gave all the business owners in the building access to the stairs leading to the apartments above. “Hi, Holly!”

“Celeste!” Holly said cheerfully as she hurried across the room, wincing when she saw the brace on her wrist.

“Don’t touch her!” I yelled when Holly lifted her arms to embrace Celeste. Holly stopped mid-step and turned to stare at me, waiting for an explanation.

“Her ribs are injured, and you’ll be all . . . Holly . . . and squeeze her like a tube of toothpaste or something.”

Holly winced again before she asked, “How bad do they hurt?”

Celeste put her hand on her stomach, right beneath her breasts, pulling *my* T-shirt taut across her chest before she said, “It’s not pain, really; more like a constant ache.” I watched her hand gently rub back and forth and had a fleeting flash of jealousy towards the T-shirt that was touching all that smooth skin. Celeste glanced over at me. “Hi, Ransome. I’m sorry to interrupt, but you said . . .”

“You weren’t interrupting anything but Holly rambling on about how hard I am to work with and don’t know shit about running a business.”

“And you super suck at customer service!” Holly added cheerfully. “Would you like a smashcake?”

“A what?”

“It’s a cupcake that suffered the wrath of our family ogre and isn’t fit for sale anymore.”

Celeste looked over at me and raised her eyebrows in question. With a short laugh, she asked, “Your wrath? What did the poor cupcakes do to you?”

“The golds didn’t match, the ratio of colors in the icing was off, the . . . Man,

fuck that harpy. I hope she sits on a park bench and gets a splinter in her ass.”

Celeste burst out laughing right along with Holly, and I glared at both of them. “What? I can show some restraint! What I really wanted to say was that I hope that bitch . . .”

“Ransome,” Celeste chided. “You’re too sweet to wish ill on some stranger!”

“How hard did you bump your head?” Holly asked gently. “Are you okay?”

“She had a concussion, not a traumatic brain injury. I can be nice, Holly.”

“No, you really can’t.” Celeste nudged Holly’s shoulder and gave her a mock glare. Holly shrugged. “What? It’s the truth!”

“Ransome is such a nice guy. I’m not sure why all of you pick on him with such a vengeance. Rachel is always telling such outlandish stories about how he interacts with customers and . . .” Celeste’s voice trailed off when Holly burst out laughing. She walked closer to me and smiled. “I think you’re wonderful, Ransome.”

I stifled the sigh that had been building up inside, not willing to hurt Celeste’s feelings. In the last fifteen seconds, she’d totally emasculated me and shot down any glimmer of hope I *might* have had about something happening between us. Not that it would or should seeing how she’s my little sister’s best friend, but still, it might be nice to have at least a little illusion left so my imagination could run wild with the idea now and again.

Not that it had before . . . very often.

But what she’d just said cemented the fact that I was just Rachel’s grumpy and misunderstood older brother. A nice guy. A total sweetheart.

Hell. I couldn’t even *think* that with a straight face, let alone say it out loud.

“One of my favorite things about being around Ransome is that he always makes me laugh.”

“So, I’m funny, nice, sweet, and wonderful.”

I saw Holly cringe and knew she understood that it wasn’t just that I didn’t believe Celeste when she said those things about me, but that I realized I had been relegated to the friend zone.

“But he’s handsome, too, right?” Holly asked, probably trying to help me out. Or maybe she was just trying to twist the knife. It was a toss-up as to where she was going with that question.

Celeste glanced at me and smiled before she looked down at the floor and seemed to compose herself before she said, “He is a very handsome man.”

I lifted my cup of coffee and took a long sip as Holly playfully elbowed

Celeste and said, "I've heard that the best way to get over a man is to get underneath another."

"I could get behind that," Celeste agreed. She burst out laughing and said, "Or I guess he'd technically be behind me!"

I took a breath at the same time I swallowed my coffee and was racked with a dramatic coughing fit. I tried to gulp in air but choked again and bent forward to rest my hand on the counter as my vision started to darken and I saw stars.

It didn't help matters when all the blood rushed from my head to my cock when Celeste pressed herself against my side just like this morning, her lush breasts pushing at my arm as she pounded me on the back. I gasped again as she got even closer. This made things even harder - in more ways than one. My bicep was cushioned *between* her ample breasts, and all I could think about was what it would feel like if my cock was nestled there instead.

I felt the stool Quinn had been sitting on pressing against the back of my legs and slumped onto it as I tried to catch my breath. Celeste used that change in position to pull me in so that my face was pressed against her voluptuous breasts.

"Oh, honey. Are you okay?"

Holly burst out laughing, and I put my hand behind my back where Celeste couldn't see it before I flipped her off. That just made her laugh even harder until it was Holly gasping for air instead of me.

Celeste suddenly realized where she'd pushed my face and jumped back a step. I started to fall her way but was able to right myself just as I looked up and saw that her face was bright red with embarrassment. But she wasn't meeting my eyes. She was too busy looking at my lap where my cock was straining to break my zipper and get to her.

Her eyes snapped up to mine, and I tried to be nonchalant as I shrugged one shoulder and said, "You're a beautiful woman, Celeste. I'm willing to choke half to death just to get back into that position again."

Celeste's mouth dropped open, and Holly burst out laughing behind me. I'd had enough of my asshole cousin and turned so I could glower at her as I growled, "Don't you have some work to do? You were gonna hire someone or some shit. Why don't you go do that over on *your* side?"

"Oh! Right!" Holly stammered, thankfully realizing that I might like a minute alone with Celeste. "I'll go do that."

"You're hiring? I need a job."

I looked over at Celeste and wondered how in the hell I'd manage to control my libido if I not only shared my apartment with the gorgeous woman but spent the entire day with her fluttering around my kitchen too.

"You're right!" Holly agreed. "Even if you don't want to keep the job and could just help out until we find someone permanent, that would be great!"

"I'd love that." Celeste put her hand on her chest and smiled at my cousin.

"I have no idea what I'm going to do with my life, but I know I can't sit around and mope. That's just not my way at all."

"You don't even know what the job entails," I argued. I looked over at Holly and said, "I thought you said you needed someone that could do all three jobs. We can't force that kind of position on Celeste."

"I'm a quick learner, I promise!" Celeste assured me. "What position are you hiring for?"

I heard my cousin laugh, but there wasn't any mirth in it. Oh no. It was that devious laugh that made her sound like she was plotting to take over the world and make someone's life a living hell. I'd heard it many times before.

"We need someone to handle HR tasks, create the employee schedules, organize invoices, receipts, and data for our accountant, and track inventory."

"I can do all of that."

"There's one more task that I'm not sure I should add to the list, but I just don't have time to work on it myself."

"Just tell me what you need done."

"I need someone to shadow Ransome and help him work on his interpersonal skills and customer service tactics."

"Oh, you little . . ."

"I'd love to help! I'm in charge of . . . well, I *was* in charge of those tasks at my last job but on a much bigger scale. I'd love to spend all day with Ransome," Celeste assured Holly. She looked back at my face and then down at my lap before her cheeks went pink again.

"Well, there's no time like the present, right? Come with me, and I'll introduce you to the rest of the employees and show you around before I . . ." Holly trailed off and laughed again as she looked from Celeste to me and then back again. "Before I put you in what I'm sure are my cousin's very capable and, obviously, very willing hands."

I stared daggers at Holly for a second before I looked over at Celeste. She was watching me and smiled brightly, erasing my vitriol instantly. Without even thinking about it, I smiled back.

I was in so much trouble.

4.

CELESTE

I looked both ways before I rushed across the street toward the salon, hoping I could find at least one of the Donovan triplets.

As soon as I pushed the door open, the familiar scents hit me. Shampoos, conditioners, hair color, and nail polish came together to form a smell that took me straight back to my childhood. I'd spent almost every summer with my grandparents and went with my grandmother to her weekly salon appointments where I'd get pampered too.

The chatter and gossip between the women helped me learn to interact with girls my age since I rarely got to spend time with women when I was on base with my father. Of course, I always had friends from school, but since my father was usually the highest ranking officer on base, most people treated me

differently than they would any other child. My dad's perpetual bachelorhood and resistance to change meant the women he dated didn't stick around for long, so I didn't get to spend much time with them, if any at all. The countless hours I spent with my grandma every summer almost made up for that.

Jolie's salon had the same sights, smells, and friendly banter between the employees and customers that I'd loved during those childhood Saturdays with my grandma. It proved to be very calming and helped center me after the roller coaster of a morning I'd had.

"It's the runaway bride!" Jolie said as soon as she saw me.

"That's me," I said with a grin as Jolie pulled me in for a tight hug.

"How are you?" she asked sincerely, all teasing gone as she studied my face.

"Ugh. Relieved and worried."

"Worried? What happened?"

"Well, I lost my job, and I'm staying with your cousin because I don't have a home to go to since I left Jeffrey at the altar."

"You're staying at Rachel's while she's gone?"

"No. I'm staying with Ransome because . . ." Jolie's eyebrows nearly hit her hairline in question, and I could just tell she was about to say something about how grumpy Ransome always seemed to be or some other insult about his personality. "He's been so nice to me. Did you know that when I fainted, he swept me up into his arms and carried me?"

"Ransome did?"

I nodded, and Jolie looked like she was about to say something else when I heard my friend, Lara, one of the triplets, call my name from the back of the salon. I turned and smiled as she walked our way and then returned her hug when she pulled me close.

"I was going to give you a day or two to settle before I came over to get all the details," Lara explained. "How are you doing?"

"I'm better than you might think."

"She's been staying with Ransome," Jolie informed her younger sister. "She says he's been nice."

Lara's eyebrows rose, and she said, "I just got off the phone with Holly, and she told me he had an interaction with a customer this morning that almost ended in bloodshed."

"The woman said that his cupcakes were subpar," I explained.

Jolie shook her head. "That's bullshit. I've been eating Ransome's baking

since we were kids, and I've never had anything that wasn't fantastic."

Several clients within earshot immediately started singing Ransome's praises, and I was happy to hear it. It seemed like everyone teased Ransome, if not downright insulted him, because of his attitude. However, when it came to his baking, they had nothing but complimentary things to say.

"I came over to see if you had a few minutes to chat and ask if I could open a line of credit at your boutique," I told Lara as soon as the bustle over Ransome died down.

"You two go ahead. I've got a client under the dryer and another on the way, but I really want to catch up with you, Celeste."

"I'd love that," I assured Jolie before she walked off.

"Come on over," Lara said as she spun around to walk back through the wide opening that led to her boutique. It was the same setup that Holly and Ransome had across the street. There were two separate storefronts connected by a wide doorway so customers could go from one side to the other. In Lara and Jolie's case, it was a boutique and a salon, whereas, with Holly and Ransome, it was a coffee shop and a bakery. "I recognize that shirt you're wearing."

"I think Rachel scavenged some of Ransome's clothes when she brought me back to his apartment. Her clothes wouldn't have fit me, so it makes sense, but I just got a job. I need something more professional to wear until I can get access to my own clothes."

"Speaking of, do you need help getting your things from Jeffrey's mom's?"

"My dad said he was taking care of it, but I haven't been able to get in touch with him since I spoke to him right before I ran from the wedding. He's probably training or something, so I'll just wait until he calls me back rather than risk going over there and causing a scene."

"I'd be causing all sorts of scenes. That's your stuff, Celeste!"

"It can all be replaced."

"What about pictures and . . ."

"I kept all of that in storage."

Lara stopped walking and stared at me before she broke into a huge grin.

"You *knew* it wasn't going to work out."

"I did not!"

"Girl, I don't know if anyone else will find the gumption to say anything to you, but we all secretly hoped you wouldn't go through with it."

"My dad wasn't doing it secretly. He was *very* vocal about his feelings. As a

matter of fact, he told me that if I married Jeffrey and tied my life to his forever, he didn't want to talk to me again."

"That's harsh."

"That's Colonel Sweet," I said with a shrug, used to my father's gruff and distant manner. I knew he loved me - he never had a problem telling me so. He *did* have a problem showing it, but I knew that was just his way. My grandfather had been hard like that, too, but I'd never doubted that he loved me just as much as my grandmother, even though all my hugs and kisses came from her instead of him. "He tried to talk some sense into me, but when I didn't listen, he washed his hands of the whole situation. He said he couldn't sit idly by and watch Jeffrey and his mother chip away at me until I was nothing. Since I didn't seem to have a problem with the way they treated me, he was going to let me deal with my own business."

"And now, you're single and living with my cousin," Lara said with a giggle.

"Oh, how quickly life can change."

"I know," I whispered sadly.

"I remember a time when you would have done anything to get that close to him, and now look at you, living in his house, wearing his clothes . . ."

"Working in his bakery."

"Really?"

"Holly hired me for the manager position this morning."

"You're going to do Darlene's job!"

"I believe that's the name Holly mentioned."

"That is right up your alley."

"I guess the person in the position before didn't get along well with Ransome so having her as his shop manager wasn't a great fit. Maybe I can be the one to succeed in training him."

"Training him?"

"Holly said he needs some guidance in the ways of customer service."

"You're supposed to teach Ransome how to deal with people? Does Holly think you're a miracle worker? How much is she paying you?"

"He's not that bad!"

"Don't get me wrong. I love him, but I'm a realist."

"Since when?" I interrupted.

Lara gave me a mock glare and then continued, "I'm not sure Ransome is ever going to be able to successfully deal with the public, not because he *can't* but because he doesn't want to. That's why Holly is the face of their

company.”

“He’s never been anything but nice to me,” I argued.

“I think you see what you want to see because you’ve always had a crush on him.”

“I have not!” Lara just stared at me with a blank expression until I finally admitted, “Maybe a little.”

“You used to write his name next to yours when you were doodling, and every time one of us talked with you on the phone, his name *always* came up in conversation.”

“It did?” I asked innocently.

“You know it did,” Lara chided. “You asked about him all the time and not just because he’s Rachel’s older brother.”

“Maybe.”

“And now you’re living *and* working with your secret crush.”

“Something happened this morning that makes me think he might not just see me as his sister’s friend anymore.”

“What?” Lara asked as she pulled a shirt off the rack and held it in front of me. She shook her head and put it back before she pulled another and handed it to me. “This will complement your coloring perfectly. I wish I could pull off yellow like that. It makes me look like I have a rare disease or something.”

I held the shirt in front of me and turned so I could look in the mirror. “I love the color, but I think this is way too small.”

“Oh no no no!” Lara said as she wagged her finger at me. “The days of you dressing in baggy clothes are over, sister. New start, new wardrobe!”

“But . . .”

“Go try that shirt on with these jeans and come out so I can take a picture. We’ll put it to a vote.”

“Who gets to vote on what I wear? It should be my decision!”

“Your decision maker has obviously been on the fritz for a while, so we’re going to have to give it a hard reset. The perfect way to do that is with a new wardrobe.”

“I don’t know . . .” I let my voice trail off as Lara picked up a pair of strappy sandals that called to my soul. “Oh, those are gorgeous!”

“Mmhmm. There she is!”

“I haven’t had a pair of shoes like that since . . .”

“Since Jeffrey’s mom tried to turn you into Mary freakin’ Poppins?”

“Mary Poppins was white, Lara.”

“You know what I mean,” Lara chided. “Go change clothes while I put together some more outfits for you.”

“Keep them simple. I’ll be working in a bakery, not a corporate office.”

“Jeans and shirts don’t have to be frumpy,” Lara pointed out as she thrust another shirt at me. “This one is perfect. That turquoise will absolutely glow against your skin. Just so you know, I’m jealous and secretly hate you.”

I laughed as I walked toward the curtained fitting area at the back of the store. “Don’t hate me because I’m beautiful!”

“There’s our old Celeste peeking out and giving me sass! I love it.”

Lara and I kept talking through the curtain as I changed out of my loaner leggings and T-shirt, but when I walked out, there was silence. I put my braced hand over my stomach and felt self-conscious as not just Lara, but her sisters Lake and Lana stared at me.

“Holy. Shit,” Lake said softly, right before Lana wolf-whistled and fanned her face.

“Damn, girl,” Lara said as she tossed the clothes she was holding onto the couch beside her. She motioned from my head to my toes and back before she asked, “Where have you been hiding all of *that*?”

“Better yet,” Lana added. “*Why*?”

“I’ve been working out for months trying to fit into my wedding gown but . . .” My voice trailed off as I saw my reflection in the full-length mirror behind Lake. I slowly walked closer, taking in the outfit before I touched my neck where, for the last year or so, I’d been pulling my natural hair back into a sedate bun. I didn’t even think about it before I blurted, “I miss my braids.”

“I can fix that,” Lana said as walked up beside me and smiled at our reflection. “I’ve got time, and we’ve got a whole salon of supplies at our disposal.”

“If Rachel were here, she could do my nails, and then I’d . . .” I felt tears fill my eyes before I whispered, “I’d feel like *me* again.”

“Oh, honey,” Lana said as she put her arm around my shoulders. “Don’t cry.”

“I lost myself trying to be . . . I don’t know what I was trying to be, but it wasn’t me.”

“Fucking men, I swear.”

“No. It wasn’t Jeffrey. He always told me I was beautiful, but I just thought that if I toned things down, I’d fit into his life a little better.”

“That mother of his sure didn’t help. She tried to turn you into Mrs. Huxtable when, in reality, you’re more . . . ummm,” Lake stammered and then started laughing. “I’ve got nothing, but I really tried!”

“I’ve always been partial to Ms. Blige. She’s a beautiful and talented queen.”

“Just like you, baby,” Lana said as she came to stand on my other side and rested her head on my shoulder. “I’m glad you’re back.”

“I never really left.”

“You did, but it’s okay. We love you anyway,” Lara assured me. “Now, let’s find you some more clothes and then go finish your transformation in Jolie’s salon.”

“Braids and everything?”

“The works!”



“Do you need to get up and stretch again?” Lana asked as she finished another braid. “I’ve got two more sections, and then we’ll be finished.”

“Already? Damn, girl! You’re good at this.”

“I’ve got a wiggly daughter who whines until I’m finished, so I’ve learned to do quality work as fast as possible when I can get her to sit still long enough for a fresh style.”

“I can’t thank you enough, Lana.”

“No thanks necessary. I lost myself once, and while it was a struggle to find myself again, I did.”

“Was that when you were married to Clay?” I giggled before I added, “The first time.”

“Yes. I tried to be someone I wasn’t, and when that didn’t work, I just . . . shrunk. I ended up feeling so small and invisible.”

“I didn’t realize how much of myself I’d lost until I put on the wedding gown I really hated just so I didn’t rock the boat.”

“You hated your wedding gown?”

“It wasn’t the one I chose. She had the people at the bridal shop swap it for one that she explained was more flattering to a woman of my size.”

“What a bitch,” Lara said with a snort of disgust as she scraped the bowl in front of her with the little spoon she’d been using to feed Lana’s daughter,

Stevie, and Lake's son Beau. "Lake, give me some more food before they start an uprising! Quick!"

"They're about to riot because you're feeding them too slowly. They didn't get those fat thighs by taking the time to savor their food!" Lake said as she slid two more jars of baby food across the counter toward her sister. "Now, tell me about this near-miss mother-in-law. Where does she live, what does she drive, and how can we make her life a living hell?"

"She's going to realize how hard life is without me by the end of the week, and we won't even have to do anything."

"You were her assistant, right?"

"I was. I also have the passwords to every single account written on a notepad that I keep in my purse because she's terrified someone's going to steal her identity."

"So, she can't access anything?"

"Nope. She can't even access the email that she'll need to reset them."

"Oh shit," Lake said through her laughter. "Are you going to give them to her?"

"Cut all the pages into tiny pieces and mix them up in one big envelope before you send them to her. We'll see how good she is at puzzles."

"Lana's feeling a little vindictive today," Lara teased. "I like it."

"Sell them to her," Lake ordered. "Tell her you want some outrageous sum of money. If she doesn't agree, make her watch you set them on fire."

"Now you're starting to sound like Mark," Lana said through her laughter.

"Always to the extreme."

"If I ever start to sound like Jeffrey, I want one of you to set *me* on fire," I told the women.

"You're staying with Ransome and living in even closer quarters than you were with Jeffrey, so what should we do if you start sounding like *him*?" Lana asked. I thought of his physical reaction when I got close to him this morning and smiled to myself which caused her to immediately become suspicious. "Why are you smiling like that?"

"I was thinking about something that happened with Ransome this morning," I hedged.

"Oh my goodness! I just realized what this means!" Lana said as she leaned around me to look at my face. "You're right where you wanted to be!"

"What?" Lara asked.

Lana was so excited that she started pulling on my hair even harder than

before. When I winced, she mumbled an apology before she asked her sisters, “Remember when we were about 13, and Celeste came to visit over the summer and fell in love for the first time?”

“We fell in love at least five times a week when we were 13.”

“No,” Lana said as she slowly shook her head. “Celeste had it bad. So bad that it lasted year after year until . . .”

“Ransome! You were head over heels for Ransome!” Lake exclaimed. “I totally forgot about that!”

“He always thought of me as another annoying little sister, just like all of you.”

“But you’re not his sister, and you’re not annoying now. I’m sure all of us were horrible back then,” Lana conceded. “Now you’ve grown into a beautiful woman, and Ransome’s not blind, just grumpy.”

“And anti-social, a little bit rude, prone to loud outbursts, liable to explode when he has to . . .”

“He’s not that bad, Lake,” I interrupted.

“She can definitely spot the grumpy ones. After all, she is married to their king,” Lara teased.

“Even after all these years, you still defend him,” Lana pointed out.

“Wouldn’t it be cool if the two of you got together?”

“She’s got to make Ransome see that she’s not just an annoying friend of his sister’s anymore.”

I bit my lip and then smiled at Lara. “That may have already happened. I don’t know. The more I think about it, the more unsure I get.”

Lara’s eyes got wide as she asked, “What did he do?”

“Let’s see what one of the Ransome experts says,” Lake said as she picked her phone up and started typing.

“Ransome expert?” I asked.

“Rachel, Holly, and Aunt Jeannie are the experts. They spend the most time with him, so they know best,” Lara explained. “Tell us what he did!”

I explained what had happened this morning, and the triplets listened intently while they completed their tasks. Lana was working on the last section of my hair while her sisters cleaned up the babies that had just finished eating and then settled them on the floor with their toys.

“And you could *see* it?” Lara asked, her lip curled in disgust.

“Well, I could see that . . . you know . . .”

“You’re going to have to chip away at that grumpy exterior and see . . .”

Lara interrupted Lana with a bark of laughter before she said, “See what comes up!”

“But that’s the thing,” I interrupted. “He’s nothing but sweet to me. He’s not grumpy, he’s never short, he doesn’t snap, he offers to do nice things like cook me breakfast . . .”

“I just remember the *huge* crush you had on Ransome and have to wonder what it would be like to see the two of you in love.”

“As much as I always dreamed of that happening, I’m not sure it’s a good idea. I just got out of a serious relationship and . . .”

“Honey, no,” Lara said as she slowly shook her head. “Your relationship was a friendship based on mutual fear of his mother. You weren’t ever intimate, and I’m not even going to delve into what I think is the real reason for that, but the fact that you jumped out of a window to escape marrying the man says volumes.”

“But Rachel’s my best friend and . . .”

“She always thought it would be so cool if the two of you got together but never imagined it would happen,” Lana reminded me.

“I wish we could call her!” Lake exclaimed as she started furiously typing again. “I’m going to send her a message and hope she gets it when they stop at a port for an excursion.”

“I’m sure she will, but until then, it’s up to us to make sure Ransome’s eyes are open to the possibilities,” Lana said firmly. “Let me put the curlers on your ends, and while the water gets hot, we’ll make a plan.”

“A plan?”

“Yep!”

“A plan for what? To seduce Ransome?”

“To turn you into a Donovan before the end of the year.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“The two of you are going to be like sugar and spice. No! I’ve got it! Sweet and salty! That’s it!” Lara exclaimed, making a play on my name.

“Operation Sweet and Salty will commence immediately.”

“I don’t know . . .”

“You’re finding the old Celeste . . . the *real* Celeste. The one that’s comfortable in her own skin, wears her hair the way she wants and has a true smile on her face. How could he not fall in love?” Lana asked.

5.

RANSOME

I slammed the drawer closed and then kicked the file cabinet for good measure. I'd been searching for an hour, trying to find that fucking contract for Celeste's wedding but hadn't had any luck. It wasn't anywhere it should be or anywhere it shouldn't, for that matter. I had a feeling my sister had it stashed at her house just so I couldn't see the details.

I was more than curious about what exactly it entailed since our contracts generally didn't mention aiding a fugitive, even if it was a runaway bride. I wanted to know who had proposed the contract and exactly what they expected of me. The oven that had been promised cost more than I'd be able to save in five years, maybe ten. I'd have to consider getting a loan from the bank to afford it, so I'd refused to even consider owning one and had written

it off as a pipe dream.

But now, just for letting Celeste stay with me for a few weeks, I would be given a piece of equipment that was worth more than a brand new, top of the line truck with every bell and whistle imaginable? Hell, that one appliance cost almost half as much as the house where I grew up!

What was the catch? Was I supposed to physically protect her from harm? It wasn't like I'd let anyone hurt her anyway, contract or not. I'd heard my sister and cousins talking about her fiancé. Just from the little they'd said, it was hard to imagine he was all that threatening. His mother sounded like a piece of work, but what was she going to do? Hit Celeste with her purse?

I finally admitted to myself that I wasn't going to find the contract since the only other place I could think to search was my sister's apartment. I wasn't going to violate her privacy like that, so I'd just have to wait until she came home from her latest adventure. My sister seemed to go where the wind blew her, which drove me nuts but also made her charming. She had never been able to settle down and always had a dozen projects going at once. She'd mastered everything from cake decorating to acrylic nail design and had more certifications and degrees under her belt than one human would ever need. Right now, she was on a cruise and scheduled to be home in a week or ten days, but knowing Rachel, she might leave the ship for an excursion and decide to stay there. Next thing we knew, we'd get a postcard from a coastal town telling us she'd joined an archaeological dig to find the ruins of some lost temple or was learning the art of basket weaving from a native while she slept on their floor.

My parents insisted that the reason they'd only had two children was because they'd gotten the best of both worlds. I was driven and focused while my sister was fun and carefree. That was a nice way to say I was a grumpy stick in the mud and my sister had never met a stranger and loved any kind of adventure. We were polar opposites that made our parents equally crazy.

Right now, that was making *me* crazy because I wanted to know what else that damn contract said and if I was going to have to give up my soul for an oven. Having that appliance would mean I'd be able to quadruple my production in half the time and effort I expended now. I didn't really need a soul, but I *really* wanted that oven.

But I wanted to see what other stipulations there were. Did I have to keep Celeste at arm's length? If that was the case, I'd most likely lose. I couldn't imagine seeing her all ruffled from sleep every morning and not having the

same reaction I'd had this morning. I didn't think my sister would protest if I got involved with Celeste since she'd been low-key encouraging the idea for years.

Occasionally, she'd bring Celeste's name up in conversation and say something like, "She'd be perfect for you." Or, "I wish you'd find a woman like Celeste who didn't make us all crazy and could occasionally get you to smile." I'd always ignored Rachel's off-hand comments because I just saw Celeste as my sister's friend. She wasn't around nearly as much as some of Rachel's other friends since she'd only visited her grandparents in Marlboro during summer break or occasional holidays. I'd watched her grow up but only from a distance. There were some summers I never even saw her, but even then, I always heard about her from my sister or my cousins.

Even my parents had loved Celeste since she and Rachel first became friends. More than once, I'd heard my mom say that if she had another child, she'd want her to be just like Celeste - funny, sweet, and polite - all the things that I wasn't and had never been. When I happened to run into Celeste and her fiancé, now her ex-fiancé, I had wondered what she saw in the man and how in the world he thought he could ever be worthy of her.

The guy was everything I wasn't - well-dressed, eloquent, even-tempered, and all-around boring as hell. I wasn't exactly the life of the party, but at least I had *some* personality. That Jeffrey guy seemed like a sponge who absorbed the reactions of people around him according to whatever situation he was in rather than being himself.

Of course, I didn't like social situations, wasn't really all that fond of being in large groups, and couldn't keep my mouth shut or my opinions to myself. Celeste was the opposite of me in damn near everything, so there was no way in hell she'd ever consider dating me, even if she could get past seeing me as anything other than the older brother of her best friend.

"Honey, we're home!" I heard my friend Mark call from the kitchen. When I walked out, I found that it wasn't just him that had invaded my space but his brother-in-law too. Clay gave me a nod as he pulled a stool over to the stainless steel worktop and started inspecting the baked goods in front of him. "We brought beer so we could prepare for the invasion."

"What invasion?"

"Our wives are hanging out with Lara," Clay explained.

"They're triplets. They've been hanging out with her since conception."

"True, but the outcome of their togetherness always depends on the cause,"

Mark explained without giving me any information at all. I must have looked confused because he added, “Right now, their cause is Celeste, so they’re either crying with her in heartbroken solidarity or trying to figure out how to make a bomb to take out her spineless ex. There’s usually no in-between.”

I laughed, remembering some of the shit they’d gotten into with my sister over the years. “Remember when they were in junior high and that boy hurt Rachel’s feelings? They started a contest to see who could make him cry first. Separately, they’re pretty damn wild, but together, they’re uncontrollable.”

“We went in to check on the babies right before we came over and heard them talking about you.”

“Me?”

“Celeste apparently had a little crush on you when she was younger,” Clay explained.

“She did?”

“Man, I’m not sure how you’ve ever found a woman to date. You’re completely oblivious to normal human interaction.”

“I mostly just don’t care,” I admitted.

Mark laughed. “You perked right up when Clay mentioned Celeste’s crush.”

“That was years ago.”

“She’s not his type anyway,” Clay scoffed.

“What does that mean?”

“I’ve seen a few of the women you’ve dated over the years, and they’ve all had blonde hair and pale skin.”

“Like your wife?” I pointed out with a frown.

Clay laughed before he answered, “I’m just saying you seem to have a type.”

“We see how well those have worked out for him,” Mark said before he finished his bottle of beer. He tossed the empty into the trash and then pulled a bottle of milk out of the cooler he’d brought over. He grinned sheepishly and said, “I brought this in case you needed me to do a taste test.”

“That was a hint,” Clay said with a smile of his own. “There’s a bottle in there for me too.”

“Holly’s always got milk on her side,” I pointed out as I walked over to the glass front cooler to get the guys a snack. “She’ll let you have a glass if you ever need one.”

“You know I’m not falling for that again,” Clay scoffed.

Mark nodded and then aimed a glare at the wall separating my kitchen from

Holly's backroom. "That shit was just nasty."

"Some people enjoy nut milk."

"It even sounds wrong," Clay argued. I slid the box I'd chosen across the table, and Clay stopped it with one hand before he leaned over and looked through the clear panel on the lid. "What's this? It looks too fancy to eat."

"It's a fuck up." I glanced over at Mark and gave him a blinding and very obviously fake smile. "Like you two."

Clay ignored the insult, and as he carefully opened the box, he asked, "How is *this* a fuck up? It needs to be in a magazine." He glanced up at Mark and then pulled the box a little closer to his side of the table before he asked, "What's he gonna eat?"

"You don't even know what that is!" Mark argued as he leaned over the table to look into the box. "Looks good and chocolatey though."

"It fell."

"You dropped it on the floor, and now you're trying to feed it to us?" Clay asked as he pushed the box closer to Mark. "That's fucked up."

"No, dumbass. It's a souffle. I didn't incorporate enough air during the process, and it fell. It's supposed to be taller than that."

"Does it taste bad?" Mark asked as he got two plastic spoons out of the cup I kept filled for taste testing.

"I don't know. I was too pissed off to try it." I walked over to the counter where I'd left the box of unicorn cupcakes I'd destroyed and picked it up to give to the guys. "Here's some more trash for y'all to eat."

"Trash?" Clay asked as he studied the contents. "It looks like Marley and Zeb got into the finger paint again."

"Did those fall too?" Mark asked as Clay typed on his phone. As he spooned up a bite of the souffle, he said, "You talk about us like we're raccoons raiding your dumpster."

"They didn't fall. They were actually fucking perfect, but the customer and I had a little discussion, and then I decided to make them *not* perfect."

"Ahh. I heard about that. More of your legendary customer service. Quinn was still laughing about it when he told me what happened."

Clay put his phone on the table and spooned up some of the souffle for himself. He put the bite in his mouth at the same time Mark did. Their eyes widened when they tasted the dessert.

"Holy shit, that's good," Mark mumbled before he went for another bite.

"The two of you *are* like raccoons. Normal people would use a plate to serve

themselves, but you just dive in.”

“When you have kids, you learn to just roll with things. Standing over the sink while you shovel in food during whatever brief interlude of peace you can find becomes second nature,” Mark explained. “Believe me when I say that a colicky baby teaches a parent how to adapt.”

“I wouldn’t know.”

The swinging door at the front of the kitchen opened, and when I looked up, I saw the triplets filing in. I was about to say something else to Mark when my throat closed up. I lost the ability to breathe, let alone form a coherent sentence.

Celeste was the last woman through the door, and she looked so happy and carefree when she walked into the room that I couldn’t help but smile. She smiled back, and it felt like something inside me clicked into place. Suddenly, I could breathe again. I sucked in a deep breath although I was still smiling like a loon as I studied the beautiful woman walking my way.

Her hair was styled like she used to wear it when we were younger, with long braids that framed her face and cascaded over her shoulders. Her face was clean of makeup and looked perfectly natural, which I appreciated because her beautiful skin seemed to glow.

Her hair and skin were what caught my eye first but only because one of the other women was in front of her. As soon as they moved, I saw that Celeste wasn’t wearing my old shirt anymore. I’d loved it on her, even though it was way too big, but the clothes she was wearing now looked much better. I could see every delicious curve they highlighted.

Her ample chest tapered down to a smaller waist that I was dying to put my hands around. But then I saw her hips encased in fitted denim and knew that I’d do anything to run my hands over them. I’d make a trail down her sides and then explore those mouthwatering thighs.

I silently begged her to stop where she was so I could look my fill. I wanted her to turn around just so I could be jealous of every thread, but instead, she stopped just a few feet in front of me and smiled broadly.

“What do you think?”

“It’s . . . You’re . . . Damn.”

Celeste pushed her braids over her shoulder before she shook her head. “It’s been ages since I wore my hair like this.”

“You look beautiful.”

“Thank you.” Celeste ran her hands over the front of her shirt to smooth it

and then down the outside of her thighs before she asked, “Are these clothes okay for work?”

“Absolutely,” I mumbled as I let my eyes slowly roam down her slender neck, wishing the shirt was cut lower so I could see . . .

Little sister’s best friend.

New employee.

Fresh out of a long-term relationship.

Maybe if I kept reminding myself of those things, I’d be able to resist pulling her into my arms and running my hands all over her. As if my hand had a mind of its own, I reached out and took hold of a single braid she’d missed. My finger brushed against the top of her breast before I lifted the braid and settled it over her shoulder with the rest. “You look happy, Celeste.”

“I am. I’m happier than I’ve been in a very long time.”

“I’m glad. If I’d have known that all it took was a trip to the salon, I’d have brought you straight over from the hospital.”

“I think it’s more than just my new hairstyle.”

“The boutique then? I could have had Lara open it up after hours for you.”

“The clothes helped, but it’s something else.”

“What’s that?”

“The way you looked at me when you saw me walk in.”

“How did I look at you?”

“Like I wasn’t just your sister’s annoying friend.”

“You’re a beautiful woman. I’ve always thought so.”

“You have?”

“Even when we were younger, I remember thinking that someday, you’d grow up to be gorgeous, and here we are.”

“Yeah. Here we are.”

I suddenly remembered that we weren’t the only ones in the universe, or even the room, and I whipped my head around to look at my family. The girls looked almost giddy, their smiles bright enough to blind a person as they seemed to vibrate with excitement. Clay and Mark were more sedate, watching me and Celeste as they steadily plowed through the ugly soufflé.

“You need somethin’?” I barked at my cousins. They didn’t even pretend to be intimidated by my gruff demeanor. “Did you come over to take the raccoons home, or are you gonna start nibbling on my trash too?”

Celeste touched my arm and quietly asked, “You’re feeding them trash?”

“You’ve gotta taste this,” Mark said as he held his spoon out toward Lake.

The second the smooth chocolate touched her tongue, her eyes closed and she moaned in delight. Her sisters took that as an invitation and grabbed spoons to taste it themselves.

“When I have a fail, I usually give it to someone in the family or let one of the employees take it home. If it’s a really miserable failure, I just throw that shit away.”

“This is the opposite of failure,” Lara said as she went for another bite. She filled her spoon and held it aloft before she said, “I don’t care what it looks like, Ransome. This is the most delicious thing I’ve tasted since . . . What was that one pastry you were trying to perfect?”

“Profiteroles.”

“Which ones were those?” Mark asked.

“You act like I fail at something everyday!”

“No no no,” Mark said as he waved his hand in my direction. “If you did, we’d all be like those people on *WALL-E*. Which ones were the . . . whatever the hell you said?”

“They were those crunchy pastry balls with the pudding inside,” Clay explained. “Right?”

“Basically, yes.”

“I couldn’t believe you considered those a fail,” Lana said as she reached for a spoon. “Those were delicious.”

“The fact that he described them as crunchy rather than crisp says it all,” I explained.

“Whatever,” Lake said as she waved me off and went in for another spoonful.

“Do you mind if I have a taste?” Celeste asked, glancing at the souffle and then the box next to it. “Just a small one.”

“Eat as much as you like,” I encouraged.

“Oh, I couldn’t. I doubt my gym membership is still active, and even if it is, I don’t want to run into Jeffrey there.”

“Everything in moderation, right?” I asked with a shrug. I couldn’t stop my eyes from trailing down her body and had to shake myself out of my stupor when I got stuck on her hips. “If you ever feel like you need to hit the gym, you can just work out with me.”

“Yes, if you want to wake up right about the time I’m leaving work at the bar,” Mark said with a bark of laughter. “Some people are just heading home for the night, and Ransome’s going out for a run.”

“I think I’ll take you up on that, actually. I’d like to work out with you,” Celeste said, interrupting my cousins and their husbands that were busy making fun of my schedule. She glanced over at the box of destroyed cupcakes and then back to me. “I think I’ll save the sweets until after dinner since I started my day with a carb fest.”

“You haven’t eaten yet?”

“No. Lara picked up some fast food, but I try to avoid that. I thought I’d look online and see about having a salad delivered.”

“Let’s go to dinner.”

Celeste looked around the table at my family who were suddenly quiet again before she smiled at me and nodded. “Okay. I’d like that.”

I turned to my family and pointed at the box the souffle was still in and then the door. “Bye.”

Mark, not one to argue when there was food involved, shut the lid and picked up the box. “Let’s go before he changes his mind.”

“Do you want us to leave some for you guys?” Lake asked me as she watched Mark walk toward the door.

“She doesn’t want all your germs. I’ll make her a souffle tomorrow that’s not trash.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that. I don’t even know if I’d like it,” Celeste argued.

“If Ransome makes it, you’ll like it. Believe me. But if something happens and you have to scrap another one, just call me,” Clay said as he inspected his spoon to make sure he hadn’t missed a single morsel. He patted his belly, which wasn’t quite as firm as it had been when he played professional football and then grinned. “I enjoy your fuck-ups.”

“We all do,” Mark agreed before he pushed the door open. “Thanks, Ransome!”

“Bye!” I said again, even more impatient now as I nodded toward the door.

“As always, it’s been a pleasure,” Lara said through her laughter. “I’ll call you tomorrow, Celeste.”

“My phone service will probably be shut off by then, but I’ll text all of you with my new number,” Celeste reminded her.

I frowned. “Why won’t you have cell service? Do you need some money?”

“It’s my phone, but the service was on the company account,” Celeste explained. “I’m sure Jeffrey’s mother will remember that and have it shut off.”

“As soon as the stores open tomorrow, I’ll take you to get your own service.”

“Oh, there’s no sense in that. I’ll just pick up a cheap phone and buy minutes. I have a feeling that when my dad comes to town, he’ll try to get me to move back to Germany with him, so . . .”

“Do you want to move?”

“On one hand, it might be nice to get a fresh start, but on the other, I really don’t want to leave Marlboro again.”

Since Celeste had befriended my sister when they were teenagers, I’d occasionally gone for years without seeing her, but I couldn’t imagine doing that now. The thought of her moving to Germany made my chest hurt. It wasn’t an option I wanted her to consider, but she was a grown woman who made her own decisions.

But maybe, somehow, if I tried really hard, I could figure out how to convince her to stay. It was worth a try.

6.

RANSOME

“Thank you for taking me to dinner,” Celeste said as she walked past me into my apartment.

“I can’t believe that out of everything you had to choose from, you wanted pizza,” I grumbled.

“You didn’t like it?”

“I make better crust than they do, and that cheese bread was an abomination.”

“I thought it was delicious!” she argued as I sat on the couch and bent over to pull off my shoes.

As I set them aside, I said, “I’ll make some tomorrow, and you can compare, and then you’ll see how gross that shit they served us was.”

Celeste tried to stifle a yawn without success, and I couldn’t help but smile

when she asked, “How are you still so perky?”

“Perky? Me?” I laughed for a second before I said, “Mom will get a good laugh when she hears that.”

“I’m going to sleep like the dead tonight, but I know if I go to bed now, I’ll be up too early again.”

“I’m going to watch a little television if you want to join me.”

“I’d love that! Let me change into some more comfortable clothes, and I’ll come back and relax for a while before I go to bed.”

I settled into my favorite spot on the couch, and as I waited for the movie app to come up, I looked around the room from a different perspective. It was sparse. My sister had joked that my decor gave new meaning to the word ‘minimalist,’ but I’d ignored her. Now, since I had company for the first time, I was seeing things in a new light.

I had a large couch that my parents had given me. It had seen better days, but I loved it because it was overstuffed and comfortable while long enough for me to stretch out comfortably on the rare occasions I gave in and took a nap. In front of the couch was a scuffed coffee table where I propped my feet, whether I was wearing shoes or not, and it showed.

There were only two things hanging on the walls of my living room - a huge flatscreen television and a hook by the door for my keyring. In one corner, I had shelves from floor to ceiling that my mom had insisted would create a reading nook. I wasn’t sure what the hell that meant, but the shelves were packed full of cookbooks, some stacked sideways and others lined up neatly. All of them had at least one piece of paper or a notecard sticking out with scribbled notes only I’d ever be able to translate, marking a recipe for future reference.

Other than the cookbooks, there wasn’t a single thing in my living room that reflected my personality.

But when I looked over at the kitchen, I realized that every bit of that space was me. Like all the other apartments that were occupied by my sister and cousins in this building and across the street, the layout had a main floor that was an open space for the living area and kitchen separated by a large island with stools around it for seating. Since the only person that usually came over regularly was my sister or my cousin Holly, only two of the stools were ever used. The others were tucked under the counter and probably covered with a layer of dust.

I’d put up a pegboard next to the refrigerator and had my favorite cast iron

cookware hanging there along with different kitchen gadgets I'd acquired over the years. The shelf above the pegboard held more cookbooks, all with papers sticking out here and there like the others, stacked next to a row of rolling pins of all different materials and sizes.

It seemed that people didn't know what to give me for birthdays and holidays so they always chose kitchen stuff, quirky things I may never use but couldn't make myself get rid of just in case the opportunity ever arose. I had wooden rolling pins with neatly engraved patterns, some that were marble, a few that were plastic, and even one that was made out of silicone with images of a hand flipping people off.

The shelf above the refrigerator held a rack that separated all the different cookie sheets and baking pans I'd collected over the years, and above that was a shelf of mason jars that held different spices I didn't use often but wanted to keep on hand just in case I ever needed them. The spices and dried herbs were the only colorful part of the entire room. I was able to see just how boring that was now that I was looking at things from a guest's perspective rather than a comfortable bachelor's.

"Why do you look so serious?" I glanced over and realized that Celeste had come down the stairs and was standing just a few feet away. She was wearing another one of my old, faded T-shirts, but instead of tight leggings this time, she had on a pair of shorts that showed off those mouthwatering, thick thighs that I was dying to get my hands on. I tried to swallow, but my mouth was suddenly too dry. The look on my face must have alarmed Celeste because she asked, "Are you okay?"

"I'm good," I managed to croak.

"I'll get you a bottle of water. I knew that spicy food was going to hit us at some point, but it was so delicious, I couldn't resist." I watched Celeste cross the room. I couldn't have pulled my eyes away from her ass if someone had held a gun to my head. When she opened the refrigerator and bent over to reach for the water, I could have cried tears of joy. That view was the most beautiful sight I'd ever seen, and I knew that it would be burned in my brain forever, a handy snapshot that I'd reference over and over, probably while I was alone in the shower. She stood up, and I yanked my gaze away before she caught me staring and smiled my thanks when she handed me the water.

"I'm still so full, I could pop. I'm not sure how long I'll manage to stay awake once I'm still."

"If you fall asleep on the couch, do you want me to wake you up or just leave

you here for the night?”

Celeste shrugged before she sat on the other end of the couch and curled her legs up between us. “Sleeping on the couch wouldn’t bother me at all. Believe me, I can sleep anywhere.”

“I can’t. I need my own bed and pillow with the curtains shut tight or I’m not able to sleep at all.”

“I learned from a young age to make do with what was available. Growing up with a dad like mine, moving at least once a year, taught me to just roll with things.”

“My parents have lived in the same house my entire life.”

“One time, I tried to count how many different places I’d lived and gave up after twenty. The army brat lifestyle is not for the faint of heart and definitely makes you appreciate finally getting settled.”

“So, you wouldn’t mind moving to Germany where your father is stationed?”

“I don’t necessarily want to, but I feel like it might be the best option,” Celeste said sadly. “I let myself get so wrapped up in the life I thought I should be leading that I didn’t plan for a future where I’d be settled in by myself. Once we sold my grandparents’ house, I didn’t really have an anchor anymore, so I’ve just sort of existed in blank spaces since then.”

“Blank spaces?”

“Yeah. You know what I mean. When you rent an apartment, the walls are white and the carpet is beige. Boring but serviceable.”

“Like my place.”

Celeste looked around and grimaced before she lied, “Your apartment is great!”

“You don’t have to lie,” I grumbled.

“You don’t like it?”

I shrugged. “I never really thought about it until you went upstairs, and I looked around. I realize it’s not exactly the most inviting space.”

“I’ve lived in much plainer homes before. And you’ve got all this incredible space to work with. You could make it wonderful!”

“I guess, but I wouldn’t know where to start.”

“Get Lana to help you. It is what she does for a living, after all.”

“Yeah, but then it wouldn’t be me.”

“So, take the helm.”

Celeste looked like she was about to say something as she eagerly looked around the sparsely-furnished apartment, so I asked, “Do you think you could

help me make it more homey?”

Her eyes lit up instantly. “I’ve always wanted to have a place that I could decorate. Living on base, you had to make sure to never put holes in the walls or change anything with the structure. And since we moved all the time, we kept our belongings and furniture to a minimum, but you don’t have to worry about that.”

“I don’t ever plan on moving. I’ve got three bedrooms and plenty of space here, and since it’s right above the bakery, getting to work takes me about two minutes.”

“That’s very handy. I’m going to appreciate that while I work for you.” Celeste picked up her phone and started scrolling before she said, “I was hoping my dad would call me back so I can see what happened with all of my things from the house.”

“You don’t want to go get it yourself?”

“Honestly? I think that Jeffrey’s mom is probably so mad that she’d find a reason to call the police.”

“So? It’s your shit!”

“Look, I learned to pack light long ago. What little I have of sentimental value is in a climate-controlled storage unit in town. The only thing left there were clothes I really don’t want anymore anyway.”

“Why not? I thought women loved their clothes. I know my sister does.” I admitted, “I’m pretty fond of my T-shirts and wouldn’t leave them for just anyone to wear.”

Celeste’s eyes got wide, and she put her hand on her chest. “Rachel gave me a stack of shirts! She said they were yours, but you wouldn’t mind if I wore them.”

Celeste started to get up, presumably to change, but I put my hand on her arm to stop her. “I don’t mind you wearing them. If anything, I appreciate them even more when you do.”

“How so? I don’t mind changing. I got some stuff from Lara’s boutique and . . .”

“I like seeing you in my shirts. You make them look good.”

“Thank you. That’s so sweet.”

“Yeah,” I mumbled, mostly to myself. “That’s me. Sweet as pie.”



CELESTE

I came awake slowly, so warm and comfortable that it was almost a shame that I was even considering consciousness. I let myself float in that in-between for quite some time, waiting for that delightful dream I'd been having to come back to me. It was the same dream I'd been having for years, but for some reason it seemed more real this time.

I'd been wrapped in Ransome's arms as his hands roamed up and down my sides, his thumbs brushing the undersides of my breasts, tantalizing me with what was to come. I had squirmed against him, begging to take things further, until I finally had enough and nudged him aside so I could climb on top and take control.

His low growl had been sexy as hell, and it turned me on even more when it was accompanied by a nip on my collarbone and then a trail of kisses up to my ear. When he'd finally slid both of his hands under the waistband of my panties and cupped my ass, it was my turn to make a sound. It was one he seemed to approve of, if the tight grip on the globes of my ass was any indication.

I let my legs relax until my knees were on either side of his hips and tilted my pelvis so I could rub against his erection. I groaned at the barrier and cursed as I slipped my hand between us to free his cock, surprised at the length and girth I felt in my hand. It was so thick, I couldn't wrap my hand around it, and when I stroked up and down from the base to the tip and then down again, I heard Ransom hiss in my ear.

He was obviously as impatient as I was, and I felt a tug on my panties a split second before they ripped, leaving me exposed to the cool air. I gasped as Ransome cupped my ass again, this time bringing me up to rub the length of his cock. I lifted my hips a fraction to settle him at my entrance and then slowly let myself slide until he was deep inside me.

"Fuck," Ransome moaned, drawing the word out and then gasping when I used my thighs to lift my hips only to drop them down again. I did that a few more times before I rested my hands on his chest and pushed myself up, squeezing my eyes shut tightly as I felt my body trying to adjust to his size as I settled all the way down on his cock. When my clit hit his pubic bone, I couldn't help but moan. I moved my hips until I found the perfect spot and then lifted up and settled back down slowly, over and over, making sure to bump my clit on every downstroke.

I kept up that even pace for quite a while as I enjoyed Ransome's hands

roaming over my body. It just wasn't enough, though, so I ripped my shirt over my head and tossed it aside, giving him unfettered access to my breasts. "Fucking perfect," Ransome whispered, awe and wonder in his voice. He lifted himself up, aiming his mouth at one nipple as his hand covered the other breast. His position changed the angle of our bodies to an even better friction, and I started to move in earnest, bouncing up and down on his lap, searching for the orgasm that was just out of reach. He seemed to sense my distress and moved his hand down until the pad of his thumb covered my clit. When he started strumming it in rhythm with my movements, the rush of excitement was almost overwhelming. I threw my head back to let out a loud scream as I came so hard, I saw stars.

I was so taken by my orgasm that I stopped moving but couldn't respond when Ransome wrapped his arms around me and flipped us over so that he was on top of me. He pulled his hips back and then thrust into me over and over. When he sat back on his heels and lifted my hips, changing the angle again, I gasped and opened my eyes.

The look on his face was so intense that I could feel his gaze burning my skin as he watched my breasts bounce with every thrust. Rather than being self-conscious as I was wont to do, I took a cue from his heated expression and basked in his gaze. Without even thinking about it, I lifted my arms above my head, grabbing the arm of the couch for leverage as he pumped into me. The position of my arms left my breasts even freer, and I felt them bouncing as Ransome started chanting my name in a tortured whisper.

I wasn't sure when I'd come fully awake enough to realize that this was real and not another erotic dream about my first crush, but I wasn't going to psychoanalyze anything right now. Instead, I was going to chase another orgasm until it wrapped itself up in my body and made me burst into flames one more time.

Ransome slipped his arms under my knees, lifting my hips even higher, and I slowly moved my hands over my breasts, tweaking my nipples a few times just to add to the sensations running through my body, before I put one hand on my pussy to play with my clit and the other hand on Ransome's stomach so I could feel those muscles I'd always admired.

I strummed my clit just the way I liked it, knowing it wouldn't take much for the sensitive bud to react again. Ransome's eyes flicked from my bouncing breasts to my busy hand, and I felt him tense as his face changed from one of concentration to something akin to relief as he felt my pussy start to ripple

around him with the first flutters of my second orgasm.

“Celeste,” Ransome hissed before he winced and thrust into me again. “No condom.”

“Don’t you dare stop!”

“I can pull out . . .”

I wrapped my legs around him in answer, holding him deep inside me as I let go and screamed with an orgasm that was even more intense than the first had been. Ransome’s loud roar compounded my scream as he came deep inside me. When he collapsed on top of me, my lips met his in a slow, languid kiss as he bumped my clit over and over, little thrusts that just drew out our orgasms until they were almost unbearable.

When he finally stopped, I sighed and let my legs drop, but Ransome stayed deep inside my body, his softening cock still filling me as it held in his release. I had a fleeting thought that I hoped it was the right time for conception.

I stopped to check myself. I’d always wanted Ransome Donovan, but I didn’t want him that way. Trapping him into a relationship was not something I’d ever do. I knew that he was a family-oriented man just like the rest of his family, and he’d sacrifice anything for his own child, even his own future and happiness.

“I can hear your thoughts pinging around inside your head, Celeste,” Ransome mumbled against my neck. “I’m not sure I can move yet, but I’m not going to anyway until you talk to me.”

“We might have made a baby,” I whispered.

“And how does that make you feel?”

I didn’t even have to think about it when I blurted, “Hopeful.”

“You’d be stuck with this *sweetheart* who’s just *so nice* for the rest of your life because I would never abandon my child, Celeste.”

“I know.”

“We can go get one of those pills if you’re not ready to face that.”

“I am.”

“What does this mean?” Ransome asked. He lifted his head so he could look into my eyes.

“What does what mean?”

Ransom bumped my clit again, and I could feel his cock starting to swell.

“You’re underneath me, full of my cock and my come, and I want to know what that means to you.”

“It’s a dream come true.”

7.

RANSOME

“What’s wrong with you?”

I glanced at my cousin and then back down to the recipe on the iPad propped up in front of me before I said, “Who’d I piss off this time?”

“Nobody!”

“So, who did I make cry? Was it . . . Shit! What’s her name? The new counter girl.”

“Keeley.”

“She didn’t seem upset when I came back into the kitchen. I’ll apologize to her as soon as I get this in the oven. I’m trying a new recipe for . . .”

“You’ll *apologize* to her?”

“Yeah. You want me to buy her flowers or some shit? An apology should

suffice.”

“You didn’t make her cry.”

“Then why are we talking about this?”

“You smiled at her.”

“Call the authorities! I’m a monster and must be stopped!”

“You’ve been acting weird all day, and the employees are starting to get worried. Frankly, so am I.”

“I’ve stayed in the kitchen like you asked!” I looked up at her and glared.

“Remember our deal? I stay in here and everyone else stays out.” I motioned toward the door. “What happened to that?”

“You said good morning to Ronnie and then told me you liked my hair.”

“It looks pretty. Did you cut it?”

“Two months ago.”

“Huh,” I said with a shrug. “Well, it looks nice.”

“See! That right there! What’s wrong with you?”

“Ransome?” Celeste called out from the office. “Do you have a second?”

“Go away,” I ordered my cousin. I turned around and walked toward the office as I said, “Sure! What’s up?”

Celeste was sitting at the desk with receipts and invoices spread out in front of her. She picked up a pile and said, “This might take a minute. I need to know how to code these receipts.”

I put my hand out, and Celeste handed me the slips of paper, her fingers brushing mine in the process. I smiled at her and then studied the receipts while her scent enveloped me. She smelled like sunshine and heaven. I’d assumed it was the lotion she used, but when I popped open the bottle she’d left in my bathroom this morning, it didn’t smell nearly as wonderful.

I cleared my throat and tried to focus, and within just a few minutes, I’d given Celeste the information she needed as I handed her each receipt back with an explanation. She smiled at me before she grimaced and rubbed the back of her neck.

“What’s wrong?”

“There’s a lot to get through here, and I’m not sure I’ll finish today.”

“You’re not on a deadline, you know.”

“I know, but I’d like to earn my pay and show you and Holly that I’m a good choice for . . .”

“You’re the perfect choice.”

“Thank you,” Celeste said softly as I leaned forward and put my hands on the

desk.

She leaned forward in her chair, and I gave her a soft kiss before I said, “Let me take you to dinner this evening.”

“Again?”

“I want to take you to a real restaurant.”

“We were in a real restaurant last night when we had pizza.”

I couldn’t help but laugh as I argued, “That was *not* real food.”

“It was!”

“Not at all,” I said with a dismissive wave. “I’ve got to finish this recipe and then let it rise for a few hours. How about we leave in thirty minutes? It should be good by the time we’re finished with dinner.”

“I won’t be done by then!”

“That desk will still be there tomorrow, and all that shit will be waiting when you get here in the morning. You’re going to work yourself into a headache if you don’t watch out. You didn’t even have a real lunch. I want to make sure you get a decent meal at least once today.”

“You’re so sweet.”

I rolled my eyes before I retorted, “Yeah, you keep saying that.”

“Because you are.” Celeste’s smile changed to a more seductive grin before she whispered, “Sexy too.”

“I like that better.” I turned around to leave the office and called out over my shoulder, “Thirty minutes!”

Celeste laughed. “I’ll be ready, sir.” I stopped in my tracks and had to suppress a shiver as all the blood in my body rushed to my cock. Celeste giggled before she asked, “Liked that, did ya?”

I reached up to scratch the back of my neck and flipped her off, causing her laughter to ring out behind me. I walked into the kitchen only for my mood to plummet when I realized my cousin was still there.

“What?”

“Holy shit!”

“*What?*” I barked.

“She’s the Ransome whisperer.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I asked as I picked up the iPad so I could finish my recipe. “Why are you still here?”

“I’ve got to call the girls.”

“About what?”

“Celeste is a miracle worker. I swear I heard you laugh just a minute ago

while you were in there talking to her.”

“Well, I’m not laughing now because you’re still here talking to me.”

“I’ll go away because I want to, not because you told me to.”

“Whatever works,” I retorted. I set my iPad down before I smiled at my cousin and asked, “Want to try a new cookie I’m working on?”

“Holy shit,” Holly whispered as she nodded excitedly.

“It’s just a cookie. Damn.”

“No, it’s a miracle.”



I smiled when Celeste put her hand over her mouth to cover a yawn and then rubbed her eyes.

“It’s not funny! I don’t know how you do this every day. You must sleep around the clock on your days off.”

“I don’t take days off.”

“Ever?”

I shook my head. “I don’t remember the last time I took a day off for anything other than a mandatory family event or . . .”

“Mandatory?” Celeste interrupted with a snort.

“You know - weddings and stuff.” I shrugged and added, “Not that those really constitute a day off for me anyway since I always make the cake and anything else the bride dreams up.”

“You do?”

“I never know what to buy people, so I take care of all of that as my wedding gift to them.”

“That’s sweet.”

“You keep saying that, but I don’t think anyone else would ever describe me that way.”

Celeste tilted her head as she studied my face. “Does that bother you?”

“That no one else thinks I’m sweet?”

“No, that I do.”

I sighed, uncomfortable with this line of questioning, before I admitted, “Maybe a little.”

“Why?”

“Up until yesterday, it wouldn’t have, but . . .” My voice trailed off as I tried

to figure out how to say what I was thinking.

“But what?”

“I saw you in a different light, and now it kind of irritates me that I’m just that sweet guy.”

Celeste pulled her lips between her teeth and looked uncomfortable for a second before she asked, “How did you used to see me?”

“As my younger sister’s annoying best friend.”

“And now?”

“You’re not annoying.”

“Is that a problem?”

“You looking the way you do makes me . . .” I found myself at a loss for words again.

Before I could get my shit together to speak coherently, I heard a jovial, “Ransome, my friend!”

“Mr. Kumar! I didn’t realize you were still here,” I said to the owner of the restaurant I’d chosen to bring Celeste to tonight. I stood up and put my hands together as if in prayer before I leaned forward and said, “Namaste.”

Mr. Kumar returned the greeting and then put his hand out to shake mine.

“You know I never leave. It’s just like you and your bakery.”

“That’s true, but I’m here now.”

“It is good that you came to visit rather than call for a delivery. My wife is making a special feast and will be bringing it out so she can see you herself.”

“She doesn’t have to go to any trouble. We ordered . . .”

“I know what you ordered, but she wants to make sure you have plenty. She saw you through the window and said you are wasting away.”

I laughed because I was far from that, but Mrs. Kumar insisted that she feed me until I was about to burst. She’d been doing that since I was a teenager with a bottomless pit for a stomach.

“How is Aarav? I haven’t talked to him in quite a while.”

“He is busy with his residency but aching to come home soon.”

“I’ll be happy to see him more often,” I said honestly. I remembered that for once, I wasn’t alone in my favorite restaurant and glanced over at Celeste before I motioned toward her and said, “Mr. Kumar, allow me to introduce you to Celeste.”

Mr. Kumar winked at me before he smiled at Celeste and said, “My wife saw that our friend brought a guest, and she’s eager to feed you both.”

“Thank you so much,” Celeste said. “I’ve never been here, but Ransome

swears it's the best restaurant in town."

"He is biased because he grew up coming through the back door and sneaking food with my Aarav."

"Their son and I have been friends since the seventh grade," I explained.

"Ransome saved his life, and we've been in debt to him ever since."

"I didn't save his life, Mr. Kumar. You make it sound so dramatic," I said with a chuckle and shook my head.

"There were boys at the school who picked on Aarav, but Ransome made sure that he was protected. He and his cousins have always been much bigger than my son, so it was good to have them on his side."

"Bullies?" Celeste asked.

"Assholes," I grumbled, remembering the boys who had mercilessly picked on the new guy. It had pissed me off immediately, but Aarav had seemed to take their teasing and taunts in stride. Somehow, that made me even angrier, so I stepped in and stopped it and then continued to do it throughout the years after he became my friend.

"My son is studious, but Ransome is outgoing."

"Outgoing?" Celeste asked with a grin. "That's new."

"He means I'm loud and pushy, but he's too nice to say that."

"We had just come to America, and Aarav didn't have any friends until he met Ransome and his cousins. Ransome helped him learn to fit in, and Aarav helped Ransome with his homework. They made a good team."

"The bonus was that while Aarav was helping me pass math, his mom was feeding me *and* teaching me how to make delicious treats," I explained. "I got the better end of the deal."

"Aarav will soon be returning to be a doctor here in Marlboro, and our Ransome is a famous baker!" Mr. Kumar said proudly.

"I'm not quite famous, but luckily, Mrs. Kumar still likes to feed me," I said as I saw the sweet woman come through the swinging door at the back of the restaurant. She had a tray in her hand filled with plates and bowls full of food that could've easily fed a small crowd. This was nothing new. Mrs. Kumar always gave me enough food so that I ended up with enough leftovers to last me a week. I was pretty sure that was always her intention. As she walked up, I gave a slight bow and greeted her with a smile. "Mrs. Kumar, you're as lovely as ever, and the food smells amazing."

"Sweet boy," Mrs. Kumar said with a dismissive wave. "You don't eat enough. You're skinny." She looked at Celeste and shook her head. "You

need to eat more too. I brought plenty.”

“You think I’m skinny?” Celeste asked through her laughter. “I love you already.”

“Sit! Enjoy!” Mrs. Kumar ordered as she set out the food she’d brought from the kitchen. “I made your favorites. When you’re finished, I will bring dessert.”

I looked over the food she’d prepared for us and grinned before I said, “I know I say this every time, but it’s not too late for us to run away together.”

Mrs. Kumar rolled her eyes and started speaking rapidly in Hindi, knowing full well that I couldn’t understand her.

I loved to tease her, and it always made Mr. Kumar laugh. “She’s saying yes, isn’t she?”

“No. She’s saying that if I don’t get back to work, she’s going to make *me* want to run away with you,” Mr. Kumar answered with a smile. He nodded toward Celeste and then at me before he said, “Enjoy your food, my friends.”

“Always,” I said before I smiled at his wife. I thanked her in Hindi, using one of the few phrases I’d been able to master in all the years I’d been friends with her son, and she beamed at me proudly before she turned to go back to the kitchen with Mr. Kumar on her heels. I sat back down across from Celeste who was studying the feast on our table with wide eyes. “She swears I’m wasting away and always brings me way too much food.”

“So much for watching my diet,” Celeste muttered. “Who can resist all of this? I don’t even know what half of these dishes are, so I don’t know where to start!”

“I’ll be your tour guide,” I assured her before I settled my napkin over my lap and then reached for the basket of naan that accompanied the meal. I handed her a piece and smiled before I said, “Fuck the diet, Celeste. You’re a beautiful, healthy woman.”

“Thank you, Ransome, but I’m going to take you up on your offer to be my workout partner.”

“In that case, eat as much as you want. We’ll work it all off later tonight and again in the morning.”

“I like that idea!”

Once I’d explained each dish and served Celeste a portion of those she thought sounded enticing, we settled into comfortable silence. More often than I cared to admit, I was quiet because I wasn’t sure what to say, which made me and the person I was with uncomfortable, but this wasn’t like that at

all.

There was something about Celeste that calmed me, and it was nice to feel like I didn't have to hold a conversation when all I wanted to do was concentrate on the delicious food in front of me. Occasionally, she'd ask a question about a dish, and after I answered, we were quiet again as we enjoyed our dinner.

"If I eat any more, I'm going to burst," Celeste said before she dabbed at the corners of her mouth with a napkin and then relaxed against the back of the booth. "Until today, the only Indian food I'd ever eaten was butter chicken. I always ordered that instead of trying anything new. Now that I've sampled all these different dishes, I'll never be able to choose what to eat next time."

"If you come with me, you'll always have a spread like this. Mrs. Kumar is intent on turning me into a roly-poly."

Celeste laughed and patted her stomach. "I'm right there with you."

"Thank you for coming to dinner with me."

"Thank you for inviting me," Celeste said with a bright smile. "I don't think I've ever enjoyed a meal more, but I know that has a lot to do with the company. It was very comfortable."

I grimaced. "Comfortable? Okay."

"That's not an insult, Ransome."

"That's more of the 'sweet guy' thing we talked about earlier," I said, using my fingers to make air quotes to emphasize those two words I was beginning to hate.

"You act like being called sweet is going to ruin your reputation or something."

"Fuck my reputation. I don't care what anyone else thinks of me, but for some reason, having you think I'm sweet irritates the shit out of me."

"The fact that you don't see me as anything other than your sister's best friend irritates the shit out of me!" Celeste snapped before she clamped her hand over her mouth. "I didn't say that out loud! You didn't hear that!"

"So, we're both irritated, and it's basically about the same thing."

"I'm not irritated. Remember? I didn't say that."

"Oh, I heard it loud and clear, and it makes me happy."

"It does?"

"I've been fighting my attraction to you for a few years now, Celeste, and it's getting tiresome."

"Then stop fighting it!" Celeste's eyes got wide, and she shook her head.

“What is wrong with me? It’s like I open my mouth and just . . . I blame you!”

“Well, it’s only going to get worse seeing as how you’ve only had a little bit of my *influence*, and I fully intend to give you more. Much more.”

Celeste smiled and then licked her lips seductively before she said, “Promises, promises.”

“I’ve got to ask you a question.”

“What’s that?”

“Where’s this going? Me and you?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, you just got out of a long-term relationship and should be on your honeymoon as we speak but instead . . .”

“You think I’m horrible, don’t you?”

I stared at her blankly for a second before I shook my head. “I could never. I’m just trying to set my mind right, and I need some straight answers to do that.”

“You want to know what this is.”

“Yes. Am I a fling? Am I a big ‘fuck you’ to that schmuck you left at the altar?”

“I would never use you like that!” Celeste argued, leaning toward me with an earnest look on her face. “You’re Ransome Donovan. You’re not a ‘fuck you’ to anyone. You’re you!”

I tried hard not to laugh, but it slipped out. I leaned forward to take Celeste’s hand. “Celeste, you’re the only one who has ever thought me being me was enough for anything.” She started to argue, and I squeezed her hand gently so she’d let me finish. “I want to know where this is going between us. You’re talking about leaving for Germany, and I’m thinking about asking you to help me decorate my apartment so you’ll be comfortable enough to stay forever.”

“Forever?”

“And a day.” Celeste tilted her head in confusion, so I explained, “That’s what my parents say to each other.”

“But we barely . . . No, that’s wrong. We do know each other. We have for years. But you don’t really *know* me.”

“You’re smart, you’re funny, you light up every room you walk into, and you’re *sweet*,” I added finger quotes to that one, and she giggled. “You’re beautiful, sexy, striking, and stunning wrapped up into a compact package

that makes my toes curl and my mouth water.”

“Compact? I’m almost six feet tall!”

“By compact, I mean you’ve got on way too many clothes, and I’d appreciate it if you stopped wearing a bra.”

Celeste sputtered out a laugh. “What?”

I cleared my throat and looked around to make sure no one was near enough to hear me when I said, “I’ve *dreamed* of your breasts and ass for longer than I care to admit.”

“You have?” When I nodded, she leaned forward and asked, “What exactly have you dreamed about?”

“The whole package. In fact, I got to see one of my dreams come true last night when your tits bounced every time I slammed my cock into the sweetest pussy I’ve ever seen.”

“You don’t know if it’s sweet or not.”

“I’d like to find out as soon as possible.”

“And the rest? You’ve dreamed about my ass?”

“I want to smack it, kiss it, nibble on it, and then watch it ripple as I fuck you from behind.” Celeste’s mouth dropped open in shock, but the sparkle in her eyes told me she was more than interested. “How does that sound?”

“Fantastic.”

8.

CELESTE

“I can’t believe we did that again!”

“I know, right?” Ransome pulled me even closer, my back to his front, and cupped my breast in his hand as he gently rubbed his thumb back and forth over my nipple. “Give me a second to catch my breath, and we’ll do it again. Maybe even again in the morning before I go down to the bakery.”

“We stopped at the store and bought condoms, for God’s sake!”

“Oh. That. Oops.”

“*Oops?*” I felt Ransome tense behind me as his thumb stopped moving.

“That’s it? Oops?”

“Well, yeah.”

“We’ve gotta get better at this! Maybe we should stop and put a condom on

as soon as you get hard.”

“If that’s the case, then I’d be dropping my pants every time I caught sight of you or heard your voice. That could get expensive . . . and I’m positive it would be frowned upon by law enforcement.”

“I’ll call the doctor and make an appointment first thing in the morning, but we’ve got to be careful until whatever method I choose takes effect.”

I felt Ransome getting hard behind me, and it didn’t make me angry that he wasn’t taking me seriously. It turned me on way more than I was willing to admit. It seemed like he just couldn’t help himself. We’d had sex three times since we got home from dinner, not including the heavy petting that happened in the bakery kitchen when we went to check on the bread that was rising. Turns out, it wasn’t the only thing rising, and I appreciated that.

“We do need to discuss a few things before we get any further into this,” I said softly once Ransome’s thumb had started moving again.

It stopped instantly, and he asked, “Like what?”

“What are we doing, Ransome?”

“Well, I *was* about to make you scream again but . . .” I felt him take a deep breath when I didn’t respond to his teasing tone. “We were about to sort this all out before Mr. Kumar came to the table, but then we started eating, and you got me all worked up . . .”

“I got you worked up? Really?” I twisted around so I was facing Ransome and asked, “If I recall, you were the one who described, *in detail*, what you wanted to do to my ass and . . .”

“Yeah,” Ransome’s expression got dreamy as he smiled. “It was even better than I imagined.”

“It was,” I said as I pressed myself closer. Suddenly, I remembered what I had been talking about and stiffened. “What is this, Ransome?”

“A happy accident?” When I frowned, he kissed the tip of my nose and then smiled. “Everything I didn’t realize I wanted or could ever have?”

“How does this work? I just move in with you and . . .”

“Technically, you already have,” Ransome interrupted helpfully.

“Do I need to start looking for a place of my own?”

“You’re not going to Germany with your father?”

“I considered it, but now . . . I don’t want to go anywhere.”

“Good.” Ransome gave me a lingering kiss as he rubbed his hand up and down my side, then he let it roam over my back so he could cup my ass and pull me closer.

“But that still doesn’t answer my question. I think I should look for my own place.”

“Or pretend you did and couldn’t find anything, keep your things in my spare room, and sleep next to me . . . or on top of me . . . or underneath me . . . every night after we make love.” Ransome punctuated his suggestions with kisses, and it was all I could do to resist falling into him and making love again.

But that was the crux of the matter, so before I could talk myself out of being so direct, I asked, “Is that what we’re doing?”

“Did no one ever have that talk with you, babe?” Ransome teased. I turned and bit his shoulder playfully. Ransome laughed and asked, “What else do you think this might be? Canasta? Skip-Bo?”

“Is this making love or . . .” I let my voice trail off, and it was Ransome’s turn to frown.

“Or just a fuck?” he asked with an angry expression. “I’m clearly not doing something right if you have to ask that.”

“You’re definitely doing everything right, sir,” I whispered, knowing how that title got to him. I didn’t know exactly why, but I’d read enough erotic romance novels to get the gist of the situation, especially after he’d enjoyed spanking me earlier when I didn’t get my clothes off quickly enough to suit him.

Ransome pushed me to my back and was over me in the next heartbeat. Of their own accord, my legs opened for him and wrapped around his waist as he sunk into my body. He held himself still as he pushed up on his arms so he could stare into my eyes.

After a few seconds he ordered, “Stay with me, Celeste.”

“For how long?”

“For as long as you’re as happy as you are right this minute.”



“Celeste,” I heard my father’s surly voice a split second before his face filled the phone screen, and I smiled in greeting. He might seem gruff and grumpy to the rest of the world, but he was a good father. I knew how much he cared about me, even if he showed it in his own peculiar way. “How is my

daughter?”

“I’m good, Daddy. How is my father?”

“Rolling right along.”

This was our usual greeting. Other people might see it as odd, but I found its familiarity comforting.

“Is everything okay on base?” I didn’t remind him that I’d left several messages because I knew that his reply would remind me that the US Army was top priority unless I was in a mess that he considered an emergency. Not one *I* considered an emergency, just one that *he* might.

“We had some inclement weather that was perfect for a training exercise, so I was away for a few days.”

“I bet the guys *loved* that.”

“There were a few that whined until they realized that makes me abandon my normally sunny disposition.” I burst out laughing and could hear the smile in his voice when he asked, “Are you settled in with your friend?”

“I am. Well, sort of. Rachel had a vacation planned, and since I was injured . . .”

“What?” my dad barked. “How were you injured? Did Jeffrey . . .”

“No! Nothing like that! I launched myself out of a bathroom window without considering my landing space and . . .”

My father laughed before he said, “Look before you leap, daughter. I’ve tried to teach you that all your life but you still do it.”

I grimaced when I wondered what he’d think about this new and sudden relationship with Ransome but didn’t consider glossing over it. I’d always been able to talk to my dad, and whether I wanted to admit it or not, I appreciated his advice. It was usually curt and to the point, but he’d never steer me wrong.

“What were your injuries?”

“Sprained wrist, slight concussion, and a few bruised ribs. But Daddy, I’ve taken another leap.”

“You’ll be fine in no time,” Dad replied, brushing off such injuries as insignificant since there weren’t any medical procedures like stitches or surgeries required. “What is this other leap you mentioned?”

“I’m living with Ransome Donovan, Rachel’s brother.”

“While she’s out of town.”

“Well, it’s a little more than just convenience.”

“Oh?”

“I think . . .” I stopped short, knowing what my dad’s reply would be if I wasn’t firm in my decision. “Ransome and I have decided to pursue a relationship.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes.”

“Of convenience?”

“No. More permanent than that. He’s been fighting his attraction to me because of my friendship with his sister.”

“What has changed?”

“He realized that I’ve always felt the same attraction.”

“I’ve met this boy and assumed he was smarter than that,” my dad mumbled.

“What does that mean?” I snapped. “Ransome is a very intelligent man!”

“But not quite smart enough to realize that you’ve been in love with him since you were barely more than a child?” I burst out laughing, my ire completely gone now that I understood that my father wasn’t trying to insult Ransome. “When you’d come back to me after visiting your grandparents, I had to listen to ‘Ransome this’ and ‘Ransome that’ for weeks. It got tiresome, Celeste.”

“I’d imagine that it did.”

“Well, I respect the Donovans and their children. They’re very good people, and I’ve always appreciated Ransome and his cousin since they were there to protect you when I couldn’t be.” My father had flown into a rage after the incident at the party when we were teenagers. When he found out that I’d been drugged, I’d barely been able to convince him to stay on base rather than fly back to Texas where he’d end up in prison for murder. I didn’t doubt that my father would have ripped those boys apart with his bare hands and had to reassure him that they’d not only have to endure the original ass whooping Ransome and Quinn doled out, but they had to live in this town with the rest of the Donovans and their friends knowing what they’d done and holding it against them forever. The thought of that had soothed him enough to keep him at his post, but even after all these years, the mention of that time raised his blood pressure. I could hear it in his voice now. “I enjoyed hearing about the ass kicking those motherfuckers got for what they did to you. Your grandpa called me often to tell me about the different times one of them got a hold of those boys before they went to jail.”

“I’m just glad they got convicted so they hopefully won’t be able to do that to other women.”

“The law doesn’t always mete out a suitable punishment, but your new boyfriend definitely got that started in the right direction.”

I smiled when I heard my dad refer to Ransome as my boyfriend. We hadn’t discussed that as his official title, but since we’d decided I was going to live with him, I assumed that ‘girlfriend’ would be my title. I had a moment of panic when I realized how quickly this was moving, and my father must have sensed my distress. “You’re going to live with this man, Celeste?”

“Yes,” I said firmly.

“And you love him.” It wasn’t a question because my father knew me better than almost anyone and understood that I wouldn’t go into something like this lightly. “I think you have for years.”

“I have,” I admitted in a whisper. “He’s wonderful, Daddy.”

“You never said that about Jeffrey.”

“I know.”

“I’m glad you didn’t go through with that farce, Celeste.”

“So am I.”

“I always knew you could do better. I’m glad you realized that too.”

“I thought Jeffrey was what I needed.” I shook my head, and my dad’s smile filled the phone screen. “Jeffrey was what I should have wanted.”

“He was weak, Celeste. Obviously, considering his relationship with his mother. He wasn’t a strong man, and that’s what you need in your life.”

“I liked the fact that he wasn’t as pushy as . . . well, as you.”

My dad laughed loudly, and it was good to see since it took a lot to get him to relax like that. “And you were content with that for a time until you opened your eyes and saw that he’d never stand up to his mother and you’d be at war with that old bat until she died. And then when that happened, you’d end up having to coddle him like she always has.”

“Ransome definitely isn’t a pushover,” I assured him. “He is very sweet, though.”

“I’m sure he is,” my dad said drolly. It made me wonder why he felt the urge to be sarcastic when he didn’t know Ransome at all.

“Sweet isn’t a bad thing, Daddy. You’re sweet.”

My father burst out laughing before he argued, “Like hell I am, girl.”

“You are to me.”

“And only you.”

“It wouldn’t hurt you to be nicer to other people, you know.”

“It probably would. It gives me indigestion.”

“It does not! Your cooking is what gives you indigestion, not being nice.”
“Prove it.”



RANSOME

“There’s my sweet boy,” my mom said as she held her arms open for a hug.

“I saw you two days ago, Ma,” I said as I pulled her into my arms and hugged her tight, my words belying how much I enjoyed the way she always greeted me. Whether it had been two days or two weeks, my mom was always happy to see me and insisted on greeting me with a hug. “What are you doing here? I thought you and Dad were getting ready to go out of town.”

“We are, but I needed to get a hug before we take off.”

“Holly called and tattled, didn’t she?”

“Maybe,” Mom said as she pulled back so she could smile at me. “She’s right. You do look different.” Mom rested her hand on the side of my head before she rubbed her thumb over my temple. “She was wrong about your face, though. It’s just fine.”

“What did she say was wrong with my face?”

“She insisted that it was cracking because you actually smiled, but I don’t see any signs of that. I do see a twinkle in your eyes there that I don’t think I’ve ever seen before.”

“My eyes don’t twinkle,” I argued as I let my mom go.

She stepped back and grinned. “They usually don’t, but they are right now.”

“That’s weird.”

“No, it’s not, especially when things are going so well for you.”

“What did Holly say?”

“Celeste is living with you, and she’s also working here.”

“She is.”

“And she’s not just a roommate.”

“Why does Holly think that? Did Celeste already talk to her this morning? I thought she was . . .”

“I didn’t hear that from Holly,” Mom said before she swallowed audibly and her face changed as if she’d smelled something horrible. “I’m sure you remember us talking about Uncle Shawn and Aunt Marianne staying with Jax while James and the guys refurbish the floors and put the addition on their

house.”

“Yeah. And?”

“They’re staying with Jax *now*.”

“Okay.”

“Across the hall from you.”

“Did I see one of them in the hall and forget to greet them? What are you saying?”

“They . . .” Mom cleared her throat and actually blushed before she said, “They were just getting in when they heard you and Celeste . . . being more than roommates.” I burst out laughing, and my mom glared at me. “You have neighbors, Ransome.”

“Ma, I love you, but it would set your face on fire if you knew half the shit that happens in our building. There’s a reason kids move out when they come of age and start dating.”

“I don’t even want to know.”

“Most of the time, things are pretty quiet since they soundproofed the walls, but the doors are just plain old doors and occasionally windows are open when things . . . happen.”

“Oh no.”

“A good reason for you and Dad to live across town.”

“Your sister?”

“I’ve been traumatized so many times that I should probably find a therapist.”

“No!”

“I did buy some industrial ear plugs like machinists wear. They helped, but they can’t erase what’s already been heard.”

“Oh!”

I burst out laughing, not able to hold onto the lie any longer. My mom’s eyes got wide as her face softened and filled with tears. I put my hand on her arm as I quickly sobered. “I was just joking. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings!”

“You didn’t,” Mom said with a sniff as she blinked rapidly to fight back the tears and gave me a watery smile. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you laugh like that.”

“I laugh!”

“Not very often and certainly not like that!”

“Really?”

“Have you ever looked at your baby pictures?”

I shrugged. “I guess not. Why?”

“You are frowning in every single one, Ransome.”

“No, I’m not.” Mom raised her eyebrows, and I asked, “Am I really?”

“You’ve been a grumpy old man since the day you were born, but now you seem lighter and . . . well, happy, for lack of a better word.”

“I’ve been plenty happy, but the last few days have . . .” I paused as I tried to find the words to describe how I’d felt since Celeste and I started our . . . relationship? Dating? I still wasn’t sure exactly what to call it. I tried to describe what I was feeling instead of taking the time to analyze it. “I feel lighter somehow. That’s the only way I can explain it.”

“That makes me so happy!” Mom’s eyes filled with tears again, and I pulled her close for a tight hug. “Now, if we could just get your sister to settle down, I’d feel so much better.”

I leaned back and looked down at her with a raised brow. “You’re expecting miracles now?”

“You’re laughing and smiling so apparently they really do happen.”

“I suppose Rachel might find a special someone and settle down, maybe pop out a few kiddos so you have some grandchildren. You never know.”

“Or you can marry this woman who has found your smile and maybe think about hearing the pitter-patter of little feet yourself.”

I thought about all the times Celeste and I had skipped the condoms and smiled to myself, thinking that might be a distinct possibility at this point. The thought of having children with Celeste, little boys with her skin tone and my eyes or little girls who looked just like her, didn’t scare me at all.

A week ago, the thought of having children didn’t really interest me. I thought it would probably never happen, and that was probably for the best, but now I *wanted* to explore that option. No, fuck that. I wanted to live that life. I wanted to watch Celeste grow big with my child. I wanted to help her through the trials of pregnancy, rub her feet when they were sore, massage her back when she needed me to, and pamper her in any way I could while she was pregnant before I stood beside her and gave her all the encouragement she needed while she gave birth to our baby. And then, I’d make sure she didn’t have to lift a finger until she was well recovered and beyond.

“You’re considering it, aren’t you?”

I smiled at my mom and nodded. “For the first time in my life, I think that sounds like something I really want.”

“Oh, Ransome!” Mom started crying in earnest now. I smiled at her as I

shook my head, used to her emotional outbursts but still amazed every time they happened “I’m so happy for you.”

“I’m happy, too, Ma. More than I can even explain.”

9.

CELESTE

“Can you come out front?” I heard a shy voice ask from the doorway. I looked up from the laptop in front of me, where I’d been staring so long the numbers were starting to swim, and saw the young woman who’d started working at Whip It Up just a few days before me. The look in her eyes was desperate when she whispered, “Please.”

I thought for sure someone must be injured, so I jumped up and rushed over to her. “What’s going on?”

“Ronnie said to find Holly because the beast had escaped his enclosure, and I didn’t know what that meant until he started yelling.”

“Until who started yelling?”

“Mr. Donovan.”

“Ransome?” I asked, knowing that had to be who she was talking about. There were Donovans in and out of the coffee shop all day, but none of them would be yelling. “Is he hurt? What’s going on?”

“There’s a woman at the counter that made him *really* mad.”

“What the hell?” I muttered as I followed her through the kitchen. When we got within a few feet of the swinging door that led out into the front of the bakery, I heard it. Ransome was roaring like a lion with a thorn in his paw, and what sounded suspiciously like my almost but not quite mother-in-law and ex-employer was yelling right back. “Oh shit!”

“The man that was with her was the one that originally made him angry, but then the woman jumped in and everything just sort of exploded.”

“She has a way of making that happen,” I said more to myself than the employee right before I pushed through the door and then stopped abruptly on the other side.

Jeffrey was standing there with a shell-shocked look on his face and his mother was next to him, across the counter from Ransome, with her finger pointed just inches from his face as she yelled at the top of her lungs.

“I’ll sue you and your sister both for breach of contract! You ruined our wedding!”

“*Our* wedding?” Ransome replied, his voice just as loud as hers but not nearly as shrill. “I didn’t see anyone waiting at the front of the church for you!”

Jeffrey’s head dropped, and I was almost positive I saw a smile flit across his face before he was able to compose himself. Honestly, it was hard for me not to burst out laughing when I saw the look on Ms. Nixon’s face. She was so red that I worried for her health, and the wheezing noise coming from her was even more alarming than her skin tone.

Jeffrey must have seen me out of the corner of his eye because he whipped his head around to stare at me in shock. “Celeste?”

“There she is!” Ms. Nixon snapped. She spun around so she could point at me now and yelled, “You owe me fifty-six thousand dollars!” Then, Ms. Nixon pointed her finger at Ransome and screamed, “I’m going to put you out of business for this!”

“Better people have tried, sweetheart,” Ransome drawled in a menacing tone. It took a second for the rest of her words to sink in, and he burst out laughing. “You spent 50k on a fucking wedding? Apparently, the stupid is genetic!” He turned to glower at Jeffrey and asked, “Do you drive her around

so she can terrorize people, or does she just hook that leash to your collar and drag you with her everywhere she goes?”

Jeffrey didn't take the bait and grimaced before he asked in an even tone, “Can I talk to you alone, Celeste?”

“Nope,” Ransome said firmly. “You're not taking her back.”

“He's not taking me anywhere, Ransome,” I said as I laid a hand on his arm to calm him. “Do you mind if he comes back to the office so we can speak in private?” Jeffrey's mother started around the end of the counter, and I put my hand up. “Not you. I've got nothing left to say to you.”

The look of shock on her face was so rewarding, I felt like I'd just won an award. “We'll get this settled and then . . .”

For the first time in *years*, I felt like I could speak my mind. When I took a deep breath to unleash on her, I felt a sense of relief like I hadn't known since before Jeffrey and I started dating exclusively. “There is nothing for us to settle, Ms. Nixon. The days of being bullied by you are over.”

“You will not speak to me like . . .”

“I'll speak to you however the mood suits me because you're a cancer that I've finally cut out of my life. I will no longer put up with your insults, harassment, and constant bullying. You can sit your ass down like an errant child and wait for Jeffrey and I to finish our conversation, or you can take your ass out to the car and pout there.” Ms. Nixon's mouth dropped open in shock. I'd *never* spoken to her like that before. As a matter of fact, I wasn't sure that anyone ever had. It seemed like I was on a roll, and I couldn't stop myself from saying, “You made my life a living hell for years as my employer and then as my *roommate*, and I don't have to take it anymore! If I'd gone through with that bullshit marriage, you and I would've been stars in our own crime documentary someday!”

“You're going to regret speaking to me like that, Celeste,” Ms. Nixon growled, an even brighter fire in her eyes now that she'd realized I couldn't be pushed around anymore. “I'll see you in court.”

“Mother!” Jeffrey yelled as he slapped his hand on the counter. “I will meet you at the car in a few minutes.”

“But I . . .”

“The car! Now!”

That was the first time I'd seen Jeffrey stand up to his mother. If the look on her face was any indication, she was just as shocked as me, if not more. Jeffrey motioned toward the kitchen door I'd come through just a few

minutes ago and said, "I'll only take a few moments of your time, Celeste."

Ransome started to follow me, but I stopped him with just a touch and then stood on tiptoe so I could kiss his cheek before I whispered, "I've got this, sweetheart." Ransome frowned and huffed out a breath before he gave me a firm nod and then scowled toward Ms. Nixon. "You might have to call the authorities . . . or a crane service . . . to haul her ass out of here. Feel free to do either. I'll be back out in just a second."

I swept past Jeffrey and led him back through the kitchen toward my office. I realized that the drama unfolding up front had interrupted Ransome in the middle of a recipe since there were measuring utensils and bowls spread out on the large metal table he liked to use as his workspace.

Once we were inside the office, I shut the door and motioned toward one of the chairs in front of the desk as I sat in mine before I said, "I hope you're doing okay, Jeffrey."

Jeffrey laughed for a second before he answered, "You have to be the nicest person on the planet, Celeste. I hope your new boyfriend appreciates that."

I felt myself blush before I asked, "You asked to talk to me, but I'm not sure what else to say other than to apologize for leaving the way I did. I should have found a way to talk to you, but I wasn't sure I'd be able to get past your mother's minions and that wedding planner she hired."

"If you'd found me that day, you'd have seen me feeling much the same way you must have felt but without the guts to follow through and run away like you did."

"You didn't want to get married either?" Jeffrey shook his head, a sad expression on his face. It suddenly struck me, and I asked, "You didn't want to marry me at all, did you?"

"It's not that I don't love you, Celeste. I do. You're one of the best people I've ever met, and I have a feeling that if we stay in touch, we'll have a lasting friendship, but . . . you're not my type at all."

I went with my gut and asked, "What's his name, Jeffrey?"

His eyes locked with mine, and although his face drained of color after my seeing straight through him, he didn't deny that there was a man in his life, or at least one he wanted to be. "How did you know?"

"I think I might have always known, but I was too blinded by what could have been to see what should have been."

"What do you mean?"

"I love you, Jeffrey, but not the way a woman should love her husband."

“You’re . . . were my best friend.”

“Why did you ask me to marry you?”

“Why did you say yes?” Jeffrey retorted with a bark of laughter.

I cringed. “That’s a good question, but I guess I’d have to say it was because you weren’t like any other man I’d ever known.”

“You mean I stayed out of your business and was easy to push around?”

“I never . . .”

“You never did, but you know what I mean.” When I winced again, he smiled wryly. “You felt like I was the perfect man because I was the exact opposite of your father, and you convinced yourself you didn’t want such a strong personality.”

I couldn’t stop myself from bubbling with laughter. “That’s the most understated description of my father I’ve ever heard! That’s hilarious.”

“That’s like describing my mom as a gentle soul,” Jeffrey cackled. “Can you imagine if they got together?”

“One of us would be planning a funeral, and the other would be visiting the prison!” I said through my laughter. “Oh, the fireworks!”

Jeffrey suddenly sobered. “I’ve lost everything, Celeste.”

“We can still be friends. A week ago, I wouldn’t have imagined that was possible, but now I’m glad that things worked out the way they did or I might not be where I am today.”

“You’re with Ransome,” he stated. It wasn’t a question since he’d clearly seen the way we’d interacted a few minutes ago. “I always thought you might have a crush on him, but apparently, it was much more than that.”

“It wasn’t then, but it is now. He was my knight in shining armor that rescued me from the evil queen.”

“I hope he can do better at showing you that you don’t need a rescue, Celeste. You’re strong enough to withstand anything on your own.”

“Thank you,” I said as tears filled my eyes. Finally, I asked, “Are you strong enough to branch out on your own?”

“I think it’s too late for that.”

“It’s never too late. It won’t be comfortable, but you’ll be happier in the end. I can guarantee that.”

In a tortured whisper, Jeffrey admitted, “I already lost him.”

“You were seeing a man while you were . . . Oh my God! It’s Smith! You were in a relationship with Smith!”

“I didn’t cheat on you, Celeste. I meant what I said about waiting until we

were married but . . .”

“You thought you could fight what you felt for him by marrying me and forcing yourself to be intimate? I think you’d have found another excuse not to sleep with me because you’re not attracted to me.”

“You’re a beautiful woman, Celeste. I should have made sure you understood that and kept my mom from . . . what am I talking about? I can’t make my mom do a damn thing.”

“You can grow a backbone and make her show you some respect,” I suggested, being more blunt than I’d ever been with him. “If you don’t do something, she’s going to run your life into the ground.”

“Smith moved away because I refused to call off the wedding.”

“Your feet aren’t nailed down! Go find him!”

“But . . .”

“Grow some balls, and go after what you want!”

“That’s easy for you to say since you finally got the man you’ve always wanted.”

“True. I literally fell into this situation, but I’m going to hold on for dear life so I don’t lose it. You need to do whatever you can to find your happiness, Jeffrey. As horrible as it is to say this, you’ll never find that while you have anything to do with your mom.”

“I think you might be right, but I have no idea where to start.”

“Running away and hiding while ignoring her millions of calls and texts seemed to work for me.”

“I think you may be right.”

“I think that’s the only way you’ll be able to get out from under her thumb.”

“You should hate me, Celeste.”

“I’ll admit that I’m upset you have been lying to me all this time, but you didn’t actually force me into this situation. I let it happen all on my own. Obviously, my taste in men up until now has been abhorrent.”

“You’re handling this better than I thought you would.”

“Did you think I’d be binging on ice cream while singing Taylor Swift songs?”

“How did you know that’s what I’d been doing?” Jeffrey asked with mock outrage.

“Put the spoon down and go find your man, Jeffrey.”

“I’m glad you’ve found yours.”

I smiled to myself. I had found mine, and if the crashes and cursing coming

from the kitchen on the other side of the office door were any indication, he was feeling even grumpier than usual. I'd have to see what I could do to fix that as soon as Jeffrey got himself together. Right now, it looked like he might be close to tears, and even though I still had some resentment about the fact that he never really loved me the way he should have, I recognized that I hadn't loved him the right way either.

I didn't want to analyze why I'd been willing to settle for something that wasn't right just to avoid conflict, but I knew it had to do with my relationship with my father. Between him, my grandfather, and the men on the bases where I'd been raised, I'd been surrounded by strong alpha men all my life. They weren't the best at communicating their feelings or showing love. Jeffrey had paid attention and seemed so considerate when we were together if you didn't count how he'd let his mother steamroll her way through almost every decision we made about our future.

"I made sure that all of your things were packed up properly and spoke to a representative at the phone company this morning. Your number is yours to do with as you choose, but I'm going to keep you on the company plan for the next year. You'll also be covered on the company health insurance plan for the next year as part of your severance package."

"Severance package?" I asked in confusion.

Jeffrey laughed bitterly. "If anyone deserves it, it's you."

"I don't remember reading anything about that in the handbook."

"Because it wasn't there until a week ago."

"That's . . . Wow, Jeffrey. I wasn't expecting that at all."

"It's the least I can do, Celeste," Jeffrey said sadly. "I'm sorry that I let it get this far. I hope that you can forgive me."

"I think I'm beyond forgiving you already. I wouldn't change my life right now for the world." I thought about it for a second and said, "Although, if I had it to do over again, I probably wouldn't move in with your mother."

Jeffrey burst out laughing as he stood up. I smiled and walked around to stand in front of him, knowing that this was goodbye for now and maybe even forever.

"I would tell you to take care of yourself, but I have a feeling that Ransome would willingly volunteer to step in whenever you need it."

"I think so too."

"Be happy, Celeste."

"Go to Smith, and do whatever you have to do to find your happiness,

Jeffrey.”

Jeffrey pulled me into his arms for a hug, and I felt his breath hitch before he said, “Thank you, Celeste.”

“Goodbye, Jeffrey.”



RANSOME

I lifted the rolling pin off the counter and took a deep breath to calm myself. If I didn't concentrate on the task at hand, I'd fuck up this step of the process, and my bakery was known for flaky layers, not gummy biscuits. I got to work, trying to pretend I wasn't wishing that I hadn't chosen such a solid door for the office so I could hear Celeste talking to the douchebag she almost married.

I couldn't believe that guy and his bitch of a mom had the balls to show up at my building and . . . I lifted the rolling pin and sighed. I was fucking it up again and needed to just stop before I made even more of a mess than I already had. I glanced up at the menu board where I kept meticulous notes and went through all the options this dough could be turned into since delicate biscuits were obviously out of the question. Once I'd decided what to do, I set the rolling pin aside and selected a rectangle from the pegboard on the wall before I went into the walk-in to see if I had what I'd need to make a new creation.

When I'd found what I thought might work, I selected a few spices and got to work coring and chopping jalapenos to add to the dough that I would wrap around the breakfast sausages I had available. Once I had enough to make at least two spicy batches and two medium batches, I pulled some cheese out of the refrigerator and started grating, hoping that repetitive movement would burn off some of my nervous energy.

They'd already been in the office for at least fifteen minutes, and every second they stayed behind that closed door was agony. I wanted to knock the shit out of the guy for his stupidity and the way he had allowed Celeste to be treated, but then again, he'd done everything but wrap her up in a bow and deliver her to my doorstep. If he'd treated her better and kept that mother of his on a leash, she might have gone through with the wedding, and I wouldn't have been given the opportunity to be close to her like I had for the last ten

days or fall head over heels for her like I had already.

I wasn't sure exactly how that had happened, but there was no denying it. Obviously, I had feelings for her, considering that she'd been in my bed for two whole days before I all but begged her to never leave it. I'd been happier in the last week than I'd ever been in my whole life. I was terrified that I was going to lose this feeling when she ran off with that douchebag she'd almost married.

The office door opened just as I finished mixing the grated cheese and jalapenos with cream cheese. Before I picked up the square cutter I needed for this mishmash recipe, I glanced over my shoulder. I saw Jeffrey and Celeste embrace and then spun back around to look at my creation. There were murmured goodbyes, and then Jeffrey appeared in my peripheral. I looked up from my work to see if I was about to get the opportunity to beat him to death with my rolling pin or not.

From the sad expression he was sporting, I guessed that was a no-go. I took a second to rethink my restraint when he looked at me and narrowed his eyes before he said, "Take good care of her, Ransome." Before I could respond with a sarcastic retort or a smack upside the head, he walked out the door and hopefully out of our lives. If we were lucky, he'd take Ursula the sea witch with him and throw her back into the depths of hell.

I felt Celeste's warmth a split second before she pressed herself to my side. I closed my eyes when I felt her begin to rub circles on my lower back and held back a sigh when she moved her hand to rub between my shoulders. She was either trying to tame the beast within or preparing me for bad news. Over the last week, I'd noticed that Celeste didn't just speak with words, she was a woman of action. Whether that action was spreadsheets and clipboards or a gentle touch on my arm, she put all of her energy into it. I could feel that flowing from her fingertips into my skin right now.

"Jeffrey is going to track down the man he loves so he can be as happy with him as I am with you." I opened my eyes and turned to look into Celeste's beautiful face. "I'm not mad at him because if things hadn't happened the way they had, I might not be where I am right now or appreciate my new life as much as I do."

"Even though he was in love with a man, he was going to marry you?" When Celeste nodded, I asked, "Want me to chase him down and beat his ass for lying to you?" Celeste smiled and shook her head before she leaned forward and rested her forehead on my bicep. "Are you sad that he's gone?" She

shook her head, and I asked, “Then why are you upset?”

Celeste lifted her head and smiled at me so sweetly that I couldn’t resist leaning down to give her a lingering kiss. I would have pulled her into my arms, but I still had my gloves on that were covered in the mixture I’d been making.

When the kiss was over and I stood up straight, she started rubbing my back again before she said, “If there’s any reason to chase Jeffrey down, it’s to thank him for bringing me to this part of my life. Otherwise, I might never have had the chance to fall in love with you.”

“You love me?”

“I do.”

“Good.” I took a deep breath and said, “I guess if you insist, I’ll give the man some credit for fucking up so badly that it led you to me. Otherwise, you’d still be my sister’s friend that I didn’t have the guts to ask out. And I love you too.”

“Good.”

Celeste was smiling at me again, and I smiled back. Just a few minutes ago, I’d been so upset that I was ready to explode, but now I felt peaceful and happy. I had never felt so content and knew I’d do anything in my power to make this woman happy as long as I was breathing.

“This looks delicious.”

“It’s a mistake.”

“No way!”

“I was trying to make biscuits, but my heart wasn’t in it, so I fucked everything up and now I’m trying to salvage it.”

“I have a feeling that all you have to do is touch ingredients, and they magically mix themselves into a wonderful concoction that makes everyone drool. That’s not a mistake, that’s a work of art.”

“You’re good for my ego.”

“Can I be your taste tester when these come out of the oven?”

“Of course.”

“I’ll be in the office. I’ve got some things I’d like to finish before I quit for the day.”

“I’ll bring you a snack in just a bit.”

“I’d like for *you* to be the snack.” I saw she was wearing a wicked grin.

“How soundproof is that office?”

I thought back to how hard I’d tried to listen in on the conversation between

Celeste and the dumbass and replied, “Very soundproof.”
“We’ll see.”

10.

CELESTE

I picked up my phone to see who was calling before I put it on speaker and asked, “Did I do something wrong?”

“Absolutely not,” Harper, Ransome’s cousin, replied in a firm voice. “As a matter of fact, I’ve never had such an easy time sorting through a month’s worth of receipts and transactions for any business. I am calling to offer you a job.”

“I already have a job.”

“I pay more.”

I laughed as I shook my head, leaning back in my chair to relax for a second while I talked to the accountant. I had a list of questions to ask him, but the fact that he was calling to tell me how well I’d done answered several of

them. “But you don’t have delicious smells coming from right outside your office door and people don’t randomly deliver fresh cookies and coffee to you.”

“I can arrange for deliveries since we’re just next door.”

“Hmmm,” I hummed, pretending to consider the offer. I saw movement out of the corner of my eye and glanced up to find Ransome in the doorway with a frown on his face. “What does the benefits package look like?”

“It’s negotiable,” Harper insisted. “Whatever you want.”

“She’s not interested, Harper,” Ransome barked as he walked farther into the office. “Stop trying to poach my employees.”

“Ransome, my friend, you’ve got a gold mine in Celeste, and I’m going to do my best to steal her away.”

“Not happening,” Ransome snapped before he picked the phone up from the desk and glared at the screen. Right before he ended the call, he growled, “Fuck off.”

I laughed as Ransome handed the phone back to me. Still relaxing in my chair, I asked, “Do I have a benefits package?” Ransome walked over and slammed the door shut before he turned the deadbolt. When he turned to look at me, there was a fire in his eyes that I knew meant good things, but I couldn’t resist poking the bear just a little more. “Maybe Harper’s company has perks I won’t have working here.”

“I’ll show you a perk,” Ransome snarled before he walked around the desk and reached for me. I stood up, and he spun me around until he was the one sitting in the chair and I was facing the desk. He rested his hand on my lower back and gently pushed me forward until my ass was right in front of his face. “I want you to change the employee handbook to read that the dress code for office employees requires wearing clothes like this every day.” Ransome ran his hand up the back of my thigh, lifting the skirt as he went, until his hand cupped my ass right at the bend of my thigh. “And I see you didn’t learn your lesson last time, Celeste.” I gasped when Ransome tugged on the edge of my panties as the other hand flipped the skirt over my back. He slapped one cheek and then the other before he used his hand to rub out the sting. “I told you panties aren’t allowed while you’re working.” Ransome smacked my ass again, this time, just inches from my pussy. “I’m going to have to punish you for your infraction.” He rubbed the stinging spots with his hand before I felt his lips on my skin. “Do you want me to punish you?”

“Please,” I whispered, not caring that there were customers and employees on the other side of the wall.

“What sort of punishment do you think will make you remember my rule?” Ransome asked, his lips so close to my pussy that I could feel his breath. I leaned even further over the desk so that I was laying flat, giving him even better access to my pussy. He blew out a slow breath, and I shivered as it hit me, then yelped when he pinched my clit between his finger and thumb and held it. I squirmed, and he slapped my ass again before he said, “I want to worship you in ways that will make you blush fifteen years from now, and then I want to fill you with my cock, but I can’t do that right now.”

“Yes! Do that!”

“Can’t,” Ransome said as he slowly pushed one finger into me. He pulled it out and swirled it around my clit before he ran his hands over the globes of my ass and then leaned back in the chair. “No condom.”

“Fuck the condom!”

Ransome chuckled and then growled when I wiggled my ass at him. “We said we were going to be more careful.”

“Tomorrow.” I gasped when he pushed two fingers inside me and then pressed on my clit with the pad of his thumb. “We’ll be careful tomorrow. I’ll do a hundred jumping jacks the second we’re finished today.”

Ransome laughed again before he said, “But if you do that, then you might not get pregnant.”

I swiveled my head around and looked at him over my shoulder. “We’ve been together for ten minutes, and you want to get me pregnant?”

“We’ve been together for three weeks and three days, Celeste,” Ransome said before he lightly pinched my clit again. I hissed, and he smiled before he said, “And yes, I want you pregnant again and again. We’ve got room for six kids in the apartment, and if you . . .”

“Six? You want six . . .”

“If you want more, we can just move out into the country and build a bigger house.”

“I’ll settle for four,” I said firmly. I heard the chair behind me move, and I tensed, anticipating a tap on the ass or even another pinch. He liked to do that when I argued with him, so I made sure to argue as often as possible just for that reason. “Six is a little much don’t you . . .”

I sucked in a breath when he pushed his dick deep inside me on the first stroke and felt the lovely burn and stretch for a split second before he pulled

almost all of the way out and then slammed into me again. He did it over and over, grunting and groaning with his efforts. For whatever reason, that turned me on even more than usual.

He paused when he was seated deep inside me and reached down to lift my leg. Once he had my knee propped on the desk, changing the angle of our connection, he reared back and pushed deep inside with another grunt. He gripped my shoulder with one hand and pulled me up onto my elbows before he slipped his arm around my waist and pinched my clit. I let out a loud shriek at the pleasure pain, and he held onto it as he fucked me in earnest now, his hips bumping my ass and his balls hitting my clit where it was pinched between his fingers.

It hurt so good that I was coming within seconds, and I heard him groan before his hips stuttered, and he emptied himself deep inside me. I collapsed onto the desk, my keyboard digging into my ribs uncomfortably, as I tried to catch my breath. I tried to move my leg down, but he grunted and flexed his hips again, and I felt his cock twitch one last time.

“Stay like this,” Ransome whispered in my ear. “No jumping jacks, Celeste.”

“I couldn’t do a single one no matter how hard I tried,” I admitted breathlessly. I felt him move my braids to the side before he nibbled on the nape of my neck, and he bit me when I said, “Four kids, Ransome.”

He flexed his hips, and I felt his cock start to harden again before he pulled back and then slammed it deep inside me, fully hard now. “Seven.”

“Four.”

He pulled out and yanked me up before he reached behind me and strong-armed everything off the desk. Ransome put his arms around me and lifted me up to perch on the edge of the desk and then pressed me down with his body as he pushed into me again. “Nine.”

I shook my head. “Four.”

Ransome pushed up and rested his hands on my inner thighs to press them further apart, stretching me out as he watched his cock go deeper. “Ten.”

I laughed and felt my body squeeze his right before he groaned loudly.

“Four, Ransome.”

“Compromise,” Ransome said in a raspy voice before he pressed my thighs against the desk, opening my body completely to him before he started fucking me in earnest. “Let me see ‘em.”

“What?”

“I’ll rip that shirt off and . . .”

I grunted when he slammed into me again and then yanked my shirt up as I said, “Don’t you dare!”

“Fuckin’ bra,” Ransome grumbled as he watched my tits bounce with each stroke.

I had gone shopping with Rachel a few days ago and planned for just such an event, so I flicked the middle latch on my bra and freed my breasts to his gaze. He let out a loud sigh and then smiled so wickedly, I felt my entire body vibrate with pleasure.

“That’s what I was waiting for,” Ransome mumbled as he stroked my clit with his thumb. His eyes went from my breasts to where we were joined, back and forth, so appreciative that it would have brought tears to my eyes if I wasn’t coming so hard that I saw stars. That wasn’t enough for him, though, and he kept going, a steady rhythm that matched the movement of his thumb, until I was gasping for breath and moaning his name. I was on the verge of *another* orgasm when he said, “Compromise and I’ll let you come again, Celeste.”

“No! Four!” I yelled.

Ransome stilled completely, and when I tried to reach down to make myself come again he brushed my hand away. “Compromise.”

“Okay.”

He started moving again, and I was instantly back on the precipice when he asked, “How many?”

“I don’t know,” I moaned as I reached up to cup my breasts, my aching nipples begging for attention. “Five.”

“More, Celeste.”

He kept fucking me, but barely stroked my clit, giving me just enough pressure to stay right on the edge so I finally agreed. “Six. Six is enough.”

“One more, Celeste.”

“One more orgasm?”

“Not yet. More.”

“Oh God,” I whimpered as I considered begging him. Finally, I couldn’t stop myself. “Please, Ransome. Please. I’m so close.”

“One more, Celeste.”

“Six?”

“More!”

“Seven! Seven! Seven!” I chanted as I came like I never had before. I was still whispering the number when Ransome collapsed on top of me. “You’re

horrible, you know that?”
“Seven, it is!”



“Do you know how many times I’ve tried to get Ransome to let me buy things for his apartment?”

I smiled at my friend as I held the door open for her to walk ahead of me into the store and said, “Technically, I’m buying stuff for *our* apartment, so you still aren’t getting to do that.”

“Your apartment. That is so awesome!” Rachel let out an excited squeal, and a few customers turned to stare at us. “I’m so happy you two are finally together.”

“Finally?”

“I’ve been waiting for *years!* I thought you would never be a couple since it hadn’t happened by now.”

“You still haven’t explained how exactly you worked that whole thing out.”

“It was simple. You needed a rescue, and I knew if I figured out a way to get him in position, he’d jump at the chance.”

“Yeah, but how in the world did you get him to the wedding that day? He *never* goes on deliveries.”

“That’s true. It’s like pulling teeth. He only goes when the contract specifies that he has to be there for some reason. Before your almost wedding, that had only happened a few times.”

“What were the stipulations that got him to the ones before mine?”

“One of them needed decorations at the last second because of the heat. It was an outdoor wedding, and with a bare cake . . .”

“Bare?” I interrupted.

“The cake has icing between the layers and just a little spread around the outside. They’re kind of rustic but . . .”

I nodded. “I know what you’re talking about now.”

“Anyway, that wedding was in August, and it was hot as Hades outside, so we kept the cake in the van with the AC on full blast and the decorations in a mini fridge James helped him wire to a car battery. Ransome put the final flower on that cake not five minutes before they cut it.”

“And the others?”

“One wedding had a Willy Wonka theme, and there was an actual river of chocolate flowing from one tier to the next. It was gorgeous, but *very* intricate because the chocolate had to be tempered just perfectly to flow correctly.”

“Wow. That sounds amazing.”

“It was awesome. I have a video of it on my laptop. Remind me later, and I’ll show it to you.”

“Oh! I almost forgot to ask you about those files that are missing!”

“What files?”

“There’s a customer that Ransome made a special cake for a few years ago, and she wants one just like it for their anniversary party. Ransome said you might have the old files stored somewhere he doesn’t know about since you’ve been working off and on in the office for him and Holly.”

“I’ve got a file cabinet in the attic that I consider File 13.”

“That’s where my dad says to put things that are trash! He’s the only one I’ve ever heard use that term.”

“My dad does that, too, but that’s what I call the files where I archive anything over a year old. It should be up there. If not, it might be in my office. I’ve got a few of the more in-depth ones there for reference, but you can take them now and organize them together your own way, if you want.”

“I’d like to do that in the next few days. I was working on a contract for Ransome, and he mentioned that the cake was just like one he’d done a while back, but I couldn’t find the file.”

“They’re all on the computer too,” Rachel said with an exaggerated eye roll.

“He insists on having printed copies, but I’ve got everything saved on a hard drive in case something happens to them.”

“Something like putting them in File 13 when they’re more than a year old?”

“Exactly. If he had his way, there’d be piles of folders from here to Timbuktu and no computer in sight.”

“He’s old school.”

“Yeah. That’s a nice way to say archaic stick in the mud.” I laughed, and Rachel smiled at me. “You’ve been so good for him, Celeste. Everyone has noticed the change in his attitude since you came along.”

“I’ve always known he was considered a grumpy guy, but he’s never been anything but nice to me.”

“He’s a gruff guy, but deep inside, he’s a marshmallow. Putting up with him

until you get to that mushy interior is something that most women aren't willing to do."

"Lucky for me they didn't have any staying power."

"No, it's lucky for us that you do!"

I stopped in front of a couch that was arranged with a recliner, a grouping of rustic side tables, and a large wood plank for a coffee table. "How attached is Ransome to his couch?"

"It's a cast-off from when my mom finally convinced my dad to let her redecorate. The only reason he has a couch at all is that Mom insisted he and the cousins come get it to put it in his house instead of donating it."

"He doesn't really seem to care about things like furniture. God knows he needs a new mattress and bed frame. A bigger one. I'm all about cuddling, but the man's a furnace and the bed is so small that I don't have anywhere to go when I get too hot."

Rachel got a disgusted look on her face but then shrugged. "He probably needs a new mattress too."

"Shouldn't he come with me to pick it out?"

"In public? As if!"

"I'd really like to have a new mattress," I said wistfully.

Rachel pulled her phone out of her pocket, and I heard Ransome's irritated voice come through the speaker seconds later.

"What?"

"I was just talking to Celeste, and she mentioned that she'd really like a larger bed, and she also found a couch she likes."

"Can I pay for this stuff over the phone, or do you need to come back to the shop and get my card?"

"I'll pay for it, Ransome" I said, just loud enough for him to hear.

"Like hell you will!" Ransome yelled, and even though I couldn't see his face, I could imagine the scowl.

"I will, and there's nothing you can do about it."

Ransome hung up, and Rachel laughed. "Well, I guess you told him, didn't you?"

I sat down on the couch I'd been eyeing and then stood right back up. "Not it."

Rachel had just settled into the cushions on the other end, and she shook her head. "Nope."

"On we go!"

In less than an hour, Rachel and I had sat on almost all of the couches that I was interested in before we finally narrowed the choices down to two. I was talking to the salesman about the cost of each set when I saw Ransome getting out of his truck through the store's front window. I glanced over at Rachel, and she grinned.

"How did he know where we are?"

"Mom insisted that I get a location app on my phone. When I balked at the idea, Ransome insisted that we should both get it for her peace of mind. Of course, he's always one of three places, so it's not like it's worth it for her to track him, but at least she feels better knowing my whereabouts at any given time."

I glanced over at the salesman and smiled sheepishly. "Give me just a minute to talk to my boyfriend, and I'll get back with you." The salesman looked toward the man walking in our direction with a thunderous expression on his face and nodded frantically before he scurried off. I smiled at Ransome as I walked out into the aisle where he stopped and frowned at me. "Hello, handsome." I tiptoed up to give him a kiss, and when I finally took a step back, the clouds had parted, and my happy guy was smiling. "I'm glad you came. Even though I'm paying for all . . ."

"Like hell you are."

"Okay, fine. I'll pay for half of it then."

"Still no."

"What happened to compromise?" Ransome raised one eyebrow, and I mimicked his expression before I said, "I bet I can turn the tables . . . or in our case, the desk, and get you to agree."

"There's a table over there that would work," Ransome said as he pulled me into his arms. "I'm game if you are, but I never pegged you as someone that would enjoy putting on a show."

I rolled my eyes as Rachel groaned theatrically. "Stop. I just had lunch."

"I'd like to buy the furniture."

"Why?"

"So I can contribute something to our household."

"You. That's all the house needs in it to make me happy."

"But I'd like some comfortable furniture too."

"Then pick out what you want and let me buy it."

"Compromise, Ransome."

Ransome sighed. "Fine. You pick out whatever you want for the living

room, and I'll deal with it, but I want input on the mattress, and I want to pay for the bedroom stuff."

"Including the sheets and bedding?" Rachel chimed in.

"Stop helping, Rachel!" I snapped before I smiled at Ransome. "I agree to your terms about the furniture, but you need to know that it might take three or four stores before I find some bedding I really like, so . . ."

"You can buy that shit."

"I thought that might be a sticking point."

"So, let's find the mattress now, and then I'll leave my card with you to pay for that and the other bedroom stuff."

"He's starting to twitch," Rachel teased. "He's been out in public for at least twenty minutes, and it's starting to wear on him."

"I'm gonna wear on you," Ransome threatened.

Rachel laughed as she put her hands up in mock surrender before she said, "Down boy! Kiss him again, Celeste! He's about to lose it."

"You don't have to tell me twice," I said happily before I gave Ransome another kiss. "I'm glad you joined us and found a way to compromise with me."

"You drive a hard bargain," Ransome said as he looked around the showroom. He spotted the line of mattresses at the other end and grabbed my hand before he took off down the aisle. "Come on, babe. This is the most important furniture in the house."

I heard Rachel gag theatrically behind us as I hurried to keep up. When he realized he was walking faster than I could easily accommodate, he stopped and looked down at my shoes.

"Those are nice," he said slowly as his eyes trailed up my legs to the knee-length skirt I was wearing. His head fell back so he could stare at the ceiling. "Did you remember my rule, Celeste?"

"Yep."

My simple answer made him groan. He took a deep breath and blew it out forcefully before he looked down at me. "You're killing me. You know that, right?"

"I just did as you so kindly asked, sweetheart."

"No panties?"

"Nope."

Ransome took my hand and started walking again, this time a little slower to make it easier for me to keep up in my heels. When we stopped at the end of

the aisle and he looked at the long line of beds in front of us, he cursed.

“Let’s narrow this down,” Ransome said as he waved the salesman over. The man had been hovering off to the side, keeping his eye on us in case we needed anything. Before the guy could even open his mouth, Ransome asked, “Do all of these come in California king?”

The salesman shook his head and pointed out the ones that didn’t. Ransome sighed before he said, “That eliminates a few, but there are still so many. We better get started.”

“What size is your bed now?”

Ransome looked pensive for a second before he said, “Queen. I think.”

“You don’t know?”

“I’ve had the same bed since I moved out after high school.”

“If that’s the case, then it’s just a full,” Rachel said helpfully. She looked over at me and winced. “No wonder it’s too small for both of you.”

“Why don’t we just move up to a queen then?”

“No. California king,” Ransome said firmly. He glanced at the salesman before he asked, “Which one is the widest?”

“A regular king is wider than a California but not quite as long.”

“Then we want a king-sized mattress. Does that narrow it down?” The salesman shook his head, and Ransome sighed before he sat down on the nearest mattress. He laid down and then sat right back up. “This is a no.” He stood and walked to the next one and did the same thing. “Also a no.”

“I think we should consider a queen.”

“Can’t do it. We need the widest bed possible.”

“Why?”

“So our kids can crawl into bed with us when they get scared. I don’t want to accidentally squish them, so we’ll need some extra space.”

“Kids?” Rachel squeaked.

“I’m working on it,” Ransome said as he walked past his sister to try another mattress.

“Holy shit,” Rachel whispered.

“Again, a no,” Ransome barked before he asked the salesman, “Do you have any beds that aren’t made out of concrete?”

“Let me show you some of our pillowtop models, sir,” the salesman said as he motioned toward some mattresses farther down the line.

I started to follow them, but Rachel grabbed my hand and spun me around.

“You’re trying to get pregnant?”

I blew out a breath and waved my hand back and forth before I answered, “I am not trying to *not* get pregnant.”

“Huh?”

“Is this really a conversation you want to have about your brother?”

“Not at all,” Rachel said, still dumbfounded. Suddenly, she snapped out of her stupor and screamed, “You’re going to have a baby!”

“Seven babies,” Ransome called out from quite a distance away. “Not all at once, though.”

Rachel’s shock was back in full force. “You want to have *seven* kids?”

I laughed softly but couldn’t help but smile at the memory as I said, “I agreed to that under duress.”

“What?”

“He was . . . torturing me, and I had no choice but to agree. I was firm at four, but he just kept saying higher and higher numbers, and then I didn’t have any other choice but to compromise with seven.”

“Torturing you?”

“Orgasm denial. It’s a thing. Look it up,” Ransome shouted. I saw him nudge the salesman and say something that looked a lot like, “It works.” I wanted to punch him in the face. When he looked over at me, he realized what he’d done and cringed. “My bad. I’ve been out of my cave too long and have developed verbal diarrhea. That’s a thing too.”

“Holy shit,” Rachel whispered. She looked excited, traumatized, and disgusted all at the same time.

I couldn’t help myself and had to push her over the edge. “What can I say? Even if he doesn’t have an inside voice or the ability to give a shit about what complete strangers think, he does have skills in the bedroom.” Rachel gagged, and I laughed out loud. “Lots of skills. The kind that makes a woman agree to have seven kids.”

“Your happiness makes me nauseated and thrilled at the same time. I didn’t even realize that was possible.”

11.

RANSOME

I heard women's laughter coming from the end of the hall and thought about turning around to go back downstairs when I realized that it was coming from my open doorway. I sighed, not ready to face my sister and all of my cousins. I just wanted to take a long shower and then snuggle on the couch with Celeste after we cooked dinner together and I got the kitchen back in order.

I had realized early on in our relationship that Celeste was not a cook. She could heat up anything you put in front of her and was a master at ordering takeout, but cooking from scratch was not a skill she'd ever developed. However, she'd expressed interest in learning how to cook, and I'd agreed to teach her what I knew.

Baking was my passion, but I liked cooking too. And I really enjoyed bringing Celeste into at least a little part of my world. She was eager to learn, and I was eager to spend as much time as possible with her, especially if that time was spent with her dancing around the kitchen in one of my old T-shirts and a barely-there pair of shorts.

She'd realized along the way that, while I may have mad skills in the kitchen, I was sorely lacking in my music knowledge and had decided to change that. Each night, she chose a different artist to play. Some of them had current hits, but most of them had been around for ages and had an extensive catalog of music to choose from. We were currently working our way through the East Coast-West Coast hip hop rivalry and enjoyed arguing about our favorites.

I hadn't laughed so much in my life and never knew that teasing and joking around with the woman I loved would bring me so much joy. I couldn't imagine what life would be like when we had kids, but I knew that I'd embrace it wholeheartedly just like I had having the woman of my dreams working, living, and sleeping alongside me every day and night. Thus far in life, I'd really just preferred my own company, but when things started happening with Celeste, that changed. I couldn't wait to talk to her after we'd been apart for any length of time, and I craved her touch at random times throughout the day. Just hearing her voice made me smile, and that had affected everyone else around me.

My employees had stopped shying away when I walked by them, and they even popped into the kitchen to exchange a few words with me for no specific reason every now and again these days. Hell, I'd had a really good conversation about making my own vanilla extract with Ronnie, and she'd even called her mom to ask what she uses to make hers. When she got to work the next day, Ronnie came straight into the kitchen and handed me a mason jar full of the best vanilla I'd ever tasted in my life. She just handed it to me and smiled like we were old friends who exchanged random gifts all the time.

I had to admit, I kind of liked it, and I really enjoyed the smile on her face when I sent her home with a fresh loaf of french bread, a jar of my mom's peach preserves, and a container of bacon jam for her father to try out and give me feedback on. She came in early the next day and told me how much her family enjoyed the treats and then asked if she could be my helper in the kitchen sometimes so she could learn more about baking.

The old me, the pre-Celeste me, would have balked at the idea. But the new me, the head-over-heels-in-love-with-Celeste me, instantly agreed so I could train someone to take my place when I wanted to spend the day in bed with Celeste or take her on vacation. I'd never considered doing either of those things before because my bakery was literally my entire life.

Now, Celeste was, and someday, our children would be, and the bakery would take a back seat to the life I never dreamed I could have.

I stopped in the doorway and was amazed at the transformation Celeste and the other women in my family had made of my living room. It looked like a . . . home. A home where two people who loved each other spent comfortable time together rather than a place where a frat party could spring up at any given moment.

Celeste was standing in the middle of the living room with an eager look on her face, and without even thinking about it, I stalked toward her and then picked her up in my arms. I caught her mouth in a fiery kiss that I hoped would explain what I couldn't find the words to say and only let her go when I heard my mom clear her throat from somewhere off to the side of where we were standing.

"I guess he likes the new furniture," I heard my sister say from the kitchen.

"Did he even notice it?" my cousin Avery asked.

There was laughter, and then I heard my cousin Lana say, "I've never seen a man quite so happy about a couch before."

My cousin Tawny laughed before she said, "I agree with Avery. I don't think he saw a damn thing in this room before he spotted Celeste and decided to maul her."

"I think it's sweet," Lake said dreamily.

"You would," her sister Lara said with a laugh. "That's how Mark acts with you, so the rest of us are used to it."

"Must be a grumpy guy thing," my sister said with a laugh. "I guess I need to hunt for one of my own." I shot her a glare, and she kept laughing. I couldn't help but smile as I shook my head. "Hey! I've got to do something. Every time I see you together, you're mugging down like lovestruck teenagers who are about to be torn apart."

Celeste leaned into me and laughed softly. "You've gotta quit doing that, and I've gotta quit letting you."

"Nope. It's gonna happen every time I see you until I'm too old and decrepit to pick you up, and then I'll just hold you tight while we kiss."

“Aww,” I heard at least three women say in unison.

“Hey, you two,” I heard my mom say. When I turned around, I saw that she had her phone aimed in our direction. “Smile.” Without even thinking about it, I clutched Celeste closer and smiled at the camera. My mom took a few shots and then studied them with tears in her eyes. “I finally have a picture of you smiling!”

“Surely, that’s not the only one!” Celeste said in shock.

“The next time you come over, I’ll show you his baby book. He’s had a perpetual frown since the day he was born,” my mom explained. “I’m going to frame this for the mantle.”

“I’d like a copy too,” Celeste said as she walked over to my mom to see the picture. “I love it!”

My mom beamed at me and whispered, “I love you!”

I smiled and mouthed the words back, which caused the tears she’d been holding at bay to finally fall. She swiped them away and then waved her hand around, motioning toward all the new furniture and decor she’d helped Celeste and the other women arrange. “What do you think?”

“I think it finally looks like a home,” I admitted. “I love it.”

“I was worried it would be too much too soon,” Celeste said as she looked around the room. “You went from barely anything to a houseful of furniture all in one day.”

“Houseful?” I asked with a raised brow.

“All the rooms on this floor, at least,” Celeste explained, instantly knowing that I was wondering if our new bed frame and mattress had been delivered.

“We’ll work on the rooms upstairs over time.”

“Yeah, about once a year,” I mumbled so only she could hear. She narrowed her eyes at me, and I whispered, “Seven.”

Celeste huffed out a breath and turned around when my sister called her name. I glanced over and saw that my mom had been watching us, so I walked over and pulled her in for a tight hug.

“Whatcha lookin’ at?”

“Your smile.”

I decided to do something I’d never willingly done before and reached for the phone in her hand. I opened the camera and held the phone at arm’s length before I moved behind her and set my chin on her shoulder. “Smile!” My mom’s smile was bright enough to light up the room when I snapped the photo. Just for good measure, I took a few more. “There you go. Now you

have more than one picture of me smiling.”

“You’re such a shit, but I love you, Ransome Donovan.”

“What’s not to love?”



“You can’t honestly believe that Willie freaking Nelson is a better artist than Ray Charles,” Celeste said as she waved the wooden spoon in her hand toward the stereo. “There’s no flippin’ way!”

“I love it when you try to cuss, baby,” I teased before I reached out and wiped a speck of flour off her cheek. “You’re so cute.”

“You’re not going to change the subject, Ransome. We have to settle this right now.”

“Honey, it’s Willie Nelson.” I shrugged my shoulders before I said, “Who in their right mind doesn’t believe he’s the greatest artist of all time? Their duet is legendary because of Willie.”

Celeste stared at me in wonder and then shook her head. “That’s it. You’re not allowed to choose the music ever again because . . .” When I grinned at her, she narrowed her eyes and hissed, “You don’t even care, do you?”

“Not at all. I love the song they sang together but couldn’t tell you a single other hit by either man.”

“Ugh! You make me crazy!”

“I love it when that happens.”

“When what happens? I get so exasperated that I want to just . . . just . . . Ugh! I want to smack some sense into you!” Celeste growled, waving her spoon toward me now. “Why do you like it when I’m crazy?”

“I don’t just like it, baby, I love it. You get all worked up and start waving your arms. Next thing you know, all I can hear are your boobs talking to me.”

Celeste rolled her eyes and asked, “They *talk* to you now?”

“Oh yeah. They say, ‘Put your mouth on me, Ransome!’ or ‘Touch me, Ransome!’ and sometimes they even say, ‘You know you want to oil us up and watch your cock . . .’” I sputtered out a laugh when Celeste slapped my arm with the spoon in her hand. “What! I was going to say get hard! Jeez!”

“You’re nasty!” Celeste sassed.

“Come on, baby. You want to let me do that at least once, don’t you?” I teased as I pulled her into my arms.

“Not anytime soon, I don’t,” Celeste said as she pushed back a little bit to put space between us. “The girls are suffering from all your attention, and they’re a tad bit sore right now.”

“I’m sorry,” I said as I let her go. “I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“You didn’t,” she assured me. “They always get a little sore before I start, and that should happen any day now.”

“Which day?”

“My uterus doesn’t pay attention to the calendar, sweetheart,” Celeste told me. “There’s no way to tell. I’ve never been one of those girls whose body follows any sort of calendar, but there are usually signs.”

“I can always tell when Holly or Rachel are about to start because they start sprouting horns and speaking in tongues.”

“You did not just say that.”

“Oh, honey, believe me, it happens a week before they start, and they’ve been synced up for years now so we all tiptoe around both of them when it does.”

“I’ve never met a man who speaks so freely about a woman’s period.” Celeste looked amused for a minute before she added, “Or a man who has lived through accusing a woman who is on her period of sprouting horns.”

“No, it’s not while they’re on it. It’s the entire week before it happens, and then they raid my kitchen for anything and everything chocolate. I usually keep special snacks on hand to tame the beasts.” Celeste raised her eyebrows and I explained, “Holly likes chocolate-covered potato chips and Rachel prefers cookie dough - mint chocolate chip, to be exact. My mom always wanted bread. Any kind of bread.”

“My dad has been a soldier on at least three different battlefields and has seen things that would make a normal man cower in fear, but if I told him I was having PMS and needed him to make me a special treat, he’d probably pass out.”

“He didn’t ever run to the store to get you snacks and tampons?”

“Never.”

“Well, I will.”

“Really?”

“I’ll do it for our daughters, too, and then when they find a man they want to marry, I’ll make sure and train him right so he can take over.”

“That’s weird to think about but really sweet at the same time.”

“It’s just nature, babe. I’ve been surrounded by women my entire life. You’ve got to remember, I wasn’t just raised with one sister, I was raised with nine. My cousins have been a huge part of my life, especially Holly and the triplets since they’ve always been close to Rachel.”

“I never really thought of it that way.”

“We’re a big family, and everyone seems to enjoy being around each other, even me, and you know I don’t enjoy the company of many people at all.”

“The only time I ever experienced a big family was when I was in the States visiting my grandparents, and I ran around with your sister and cousins.”

“Because you were overseas all the time?”

“Well, we were stateside for a stretch here and there, but even then, I wasn’t around family. Neither of my parents had any siblings.”

“I’ve always wanted to ask about your mother but haven’t found the right time.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Where is she?”

“She died in a training accident when I was just a few years old.”

“A training accident? She was in the Army too?” When Celeste nodded, I asked, “Did you ever get to know her family?”

“The Army was her family. She was an orphan who went from foster care to the military. I have pictures, but I don’t remember her at all.”

“She sounds like a strong, independent woman.”

“She was, and my father has never really gotten over the loss of her in his life.”

“I can’t imagine not having my mom around.”

“It’s good that you don’t take her for granted. I feel that way about my dad. As gruff as he may be, I know that he loves me more than anything, and I love him the same way. He sacrificed a lot for me, and I appreciate that. Even though he makes me crazy sometimes, I know he has my best interests at heart.”

“I’ve only met him a few times, but I remember him being a very imposing man. Shit. I never even considered how he’d feel about us getting together. Should I be worried?”

Celeste laughed for a second as she shook her head. “I told him about us when we first started seeing each other, and he seemed relieved. He knew that I’d had a crush on you since I was a teenager and . . .”

“You have?”

“Oh yeah. Huge crush.”

“I never knew that.”

“Your sister and all of your cousins did. Even your mom knew.”

“I feel special.” I glanced over at the oven and asked, “Do you think it’s time to check the casserole?”

“Shoot!” Celeste yelled before she spun around and bent over to look through the glass of the oven door. I watched her move back and forth, trying to see the food from all angles, and felt my dick get hard at the sight of her panties underneath my old T-shirt. When she turned and caught me staring, she exaggerated her bend and held it for a second before she stood up. “I think it’s okay. The cheese is melting, but it’s not brown yet. I better finish the salad.”

“If you put the rolls on the top rack, they’ll be finished at the same time as the casserole.”

“Oh! I almost forgot!” Celeste gently pulled the hand towel off that we’d used to help the rising process and studied the rolls in the pan that I’d helped her make before she smiled at me. “Thank you for teaching me how to bake, Ransome.”

“It’s not a chore, believe me. Watching you dance around the kitchen is the highlight of my day.”

“It is?”

“Yep. It gets me all primed up for what I plan to do to you once we go to bed.”

“You don’t need any priming. You’re always ready,” Celeste said primly before she opened the oven door and slowly leaned over to put the rolls inside. As she was adjusting the pan with the potholder, I hurried around the island so I could get close to her the second she stood back up. Once I fitted myself to her back and she felt my cock pressed against her, she laughed.

“See what I mean?”

“Oh, I know what you mean, but I wanted to show you one more step in the cooking process.”

“Did I miss something?” she asked as she looked at the counter and then back at the oven. “I should set a timer.”

“No need,” I said as I kissed my way across the back of her neck and then nipped at her earlobe. “We’ve got just enough time for me to have my wicked way with you before we eat dinner and then I get my wicked way with you again for dessert.”

“Wicked, huh?” Celeste asked as she let her head fall to the side. “How wicked?”

I pulled the sides of her shirt up so I could hook my thumbs into the elastic of her underwear and then pushed them down so they could drop to the floor. I spun her around so that she was facing me and then gave her a heated kiss.

“Very wicked.”

Celeste grinned at me and dared, “Prove it.”

Since she’d mentioned that her breasts were sore, I made sure to avoid them as I dropped to my knees in front of her. Usually, I would give them plenty of attention before I got down to business, but tonight, I had one objective in mind - making her come in twenty minutes or less.

As usual, I was a very goal-oriented man, and I managed to accomplish my mission twice before dinner was ready and then twice more before we went to sleep, our bellies full of delicious food and ears ringing from our mutual shouts of pleasure.

12.

CELESTE

“Are you coming out to help us?” Holly asked from the office doorway. “We’ve got a million cookies to package up, and I’m going to be alone in a room with Ransome for *hours*. I think that’s against the Geneva convention or something.”

I heard Rachel call out from the kitchen in agreement, “If it’s not already, it oughta be!”

“He’s been working on those cookies since yesterday. I’m glad you ladies are here to help, but I have a few more files to sort through before I join you.”

“You’ve been here six weeks, right?” Holly asked.

“Right at,” I said with a nod as I pulled another file closer to me so I could sort through the notes and receipts, scan them into the computer, and then

recycle the file. I'd been steadily working my way through all the old files that Ransome swore held necessary information that couldn't be lost. All I had left were the files that Rachel had brought over from her house this morning. "It will be six weeks tomorrow."

"If Ransome had his fancy new oven, he'd have been able to finish those cookies in less than a day instead of it taking more than two."

"He's getting a new oven?"

"Yeah," Holly said with an odd look aimed my way. "That special oven that was in your contract."

I felt like I was missing something important but didn't want to let her know I was completely in the dark lest she shut down and stop talking, so I asked, "When was it supposed to be here?"

"A month, I think. Maybe that was just how long you were supposed to stay with him. I'm not sure because I never actually saw the paperwork. Rachel took care of it."

Even though my heart had stopped beating and I felt like I was about to pass out, I calmly said, "Oh yeah. I'll ask her about it later."

"Hurry and get finished so you can help us. Every year when we do this, I have to remind myself it's for a good cause so I don't run screaming from the room."

"The cookies are for the children's hospital, right?"

"Yes, ma'am. Ransome makes hundreds of cookies, decorates them beautifully according to their theme, and then all the Donovan businesses and a bunch of others around town sell them and donate the proceeds to the hospital."

"That's sweet."

"The Ls were patients there, and they must have taken very good care of them because they're all just fine now. They'll be over to help shortly."

"I'm going to pick up dinner! I'll be back soon," Rachel called out from the kitchen.

"Don't take too long, you hussy! I know you're just using that as an excuse to get out of work!" Holly said as she turned to go back into the kitchen. I heard her and Rachel going back and forth with a few words from Ransome, but I couldn't focus on what they were saying.

Instead, all I could focus on was the little information I had and my nearly overwhelming urge to jump right to conclusions. I reached for the file with my name on it that I'd tossed aside earlier. At the time, I didn't want to go

through it because the memory of that traumatic day was still fresh in my mind.

Just like everything else to do with the wedding, I let other people make the final decision about the cake. I realized now that I let that happen because I didn't really want to marry Jeffrey; I was just going through with it because I was 30 and ready to settle down and have a family with a man who was more agreeable than my father.

Instead, I had jumped from the frying pan into the fire and settled down with a man who was just as disagreeable but even more loveable than my dad. Or had I? Was Ransome only with me so he could get an expensive piece of kitchen equipment?

I scanned through the folder, skipping over the details about the number of guests and the flavors of cake and icing, barely glancing at the detailed sketch Ransome had made to plan out the cake presentation. Instead, I looked for any mention of a piece of equipment, namely an oven, that was used as a bargaining chip to bribe someone to take care of me.

It must be one hell of an expensive hunk of metal to get a man to promise his future to me of all people. Of course, my mind instantly went to all the things I considered physical flaws, and I heard Jeffrey's mom's voice in my head listing them out one by one as my eyes skimmed the paperwork.

My heart lurched when I realized that Ransome wasn't the one to negotiate the contract - it had been my best friend. She had bartered my happiness for her brother's gain, and she'd done it with a smile on her face. I knew that I'd never be able to forgive her and didn't know if our relationship would weather this, and that would put a strain on my friendship with the other girls since they were not only close to Rachel but related to her too.

My best friend, who I had shared all my secrets with since we were too young to have any important ones, had plotted and planned my future right along with my father, the one person I had always thought had my best interests at heart. He'd *sold* me for a kitchen appliance! How fucked up was that?

I finally found the detailed information about the oven and snatched my phone up from the desk to search it. I gasped when a page came back giving the specs and prices of the thing. I laughed bitterly as my eyes filled with tears.

I was worth approximately eighty thousand dollars before tax, shipping, and delivery fees. Maybe more if you considered installation and maintenance.

I supposed that was better than three cows and a mule. I wouldn't really know, though, because I'd always been appalled at the entire dowry process since we'd covered it in history class. I was even more disgusted now that I was the poor woman who was being traded for a piece of equipment because no one would love her without being bribed.

I flipped over the page I'd been reading and glanced at the back of it before I started sorting through the rest of the file to find the next page. From the count on the bottom of the page in my hand, I could tell that I was missing three pages. I wondered what else was on them. Was there some fine print that said he'd lose it all if he wasn't able to convince me he was in love?

Oh my God! Was there something in the contract that said he had to sleep with me? Would Ransome get a bonus if he knocked me up sooner rather than later?

I thought of all the times that we'd had unprotected sex and felt tears spill down my cheeks. I'd hoped beyond hope that one of those times had been successful and I'd end up pregnant with a beautiful baby who had my skin and Ransome's eyes. I'd imagined holding him in my arms and watching him grow up as I nurtured more little ones, hopefully a girl or two, and then throwing myself into Ransome's arms when they got old enough to go out on their own.

Since I was a teenager, I'd played out a million different scenarios in my head. Soccer games, football games, gymnastics competitions, first dates, proms, weddings, grandchildren - all the things that would happen when Ransome and I became parents. And in every situation, he was right there beside me, cheering on our child or trying to hold back tears at their newest accomplishment before he held me so I could have a good long cry.

Ransome had been my ultimate man. My unattainable unicorn. He was my best friend's older brother, for crying out loud. How often did that ever turn into anything notable and worthwhile? And for the last six weeks, I'd been living that dream only to find out that it was all for show. My bubble had burst, and all I wanted to do was cry. Well, there was also rage. I felt it bubbling up within me right along with the crying jag I knew was on the horizon.

I wasn't sure what to do first - throw a fit or burst into tears. Hell, maybe I'd embrace the crazy and do both at the same time.

When the phone in my hand rang, I came back to reality with a loud squeal and glanced at the screen. It was my father, just the man I wanted to talk to

right now . . . or at least one of them. Lucky for Ransome, my father might relieve him of at least a portion of the rage that was about to come spewing out of me.

“Father. I’m so glad you called.”

“What’s wrong?”

“What in the world makes you think something might be wrong? It’s a perfectly beautiful day outside. The birds are chirping, the sun is bright, and I’m just so happy to get to talk to my dear, sweet father.”

“Great,” I heard my father grumble. “You’re doing the fake nice shit, and you know how that pisses me off.”

“Does it piss you off as much as finding out that your father had to *pay* a man to give her attention?” My dad’s bark of laughter shocked me so badly that I almost dropped the phone. “You think that’s funny?”

When he was finally able to control himself, he said, “I guess you got so pissed off at the thought of us cooking up this plan together that you missed the part where Rachel explained what was really happening. After the email I got from Ransome three days after your called-off wedding, I figured everything was out in the open.”

“Well, it’s not. Rachel didn’t explain shit to me, and she’s not going to because I’m never speaking to her again. As a matter of fact, I might not ever speak to you again either!”

“What?”

“You sold me for a stove, and you think I’m just supposed to be okay with that?”

“I did no such fucking thing, Celeste, and I can’t imagine why you’d believe I would. That’s . . . well, it’s fucking ridiculous is what it is. If you’d put your emotions aside for a second and think about it, you’d . . .”

“Of course. Put my emotions aside. That’s your go-to, isn’t it? I think with my heart and you think with your brain, therefore I’m just dumb little Celeste who needs someone to take care of her.”

“You do need to be taken care of because you’re my daughter, and your taste in men is absolute *shit*. You could walk into a room full of strong men who will do anything to protect you and provide for you and pick out the only one whose balls haven’t dropped yet!”

“Jeffrey was a good man!”

“He very well might be, but he would never have been strong enough for a woman like you. You’d have been bored within a fucking year! Hell, you

were bored before you even started planning the goddamn wedding, or you'd have been more involved, and I wouldn't have had to step in and fix things!"

"Well, you don't have to fix me anymore, Dad! You have been relieved of duty, Colonel Sweet, effective immediately!" I pushed the button to end the call and then let out a primal scream of rage before I slammed it onto the desk. I put my hands on the top of my head and screamed again. "That son of a . . ."

"What the fuck is going on?" Ransome demanded from the doorway. "Why are you fighting with your father?"

"I don't have a father just like I don't have a boyfriend. However, you've got a new bestie and business partner to go with that fancy fucking oven you want so badly."

Ransome reared back as if I'd slapped him. "What are you talking about?"

"Do me a favor, and don't pretend you're the innocent party in all this, Ransome. Have a little more respect for my intelligence than that."

"I do respect you! I've never shown you anything but respect and love, Celeste!" Ransome roared, now full of his own anger, probably because he'd been busted and the gig was up. He clearly knew he wouldn't get the goddamn oven without me, and after pretending to be attracted to me, *to love me*, for the last six weeks he was watching his dreams go down the drain.

"Fuck your father, and fuck that goddamn oven! I love you for you, and I'll burn this whole goddamn building down to prove it."

"That's a little dramatic, don't you think? Besides, if you burn the building down, where will you put your new mother-lovin' freakin' oven?"

"Stop being so goddamn cute when I'm pissed at you!" Ransome yelled back.

"Hey! Hey! Let's take it down a notch or two here, people," Holly calmly interrupted from the doorway. "We've got customers cowering under the tables right now because they're afraid the roof might cave in from all this screaming."

"Tell them they'll be fine because the fight is over. It's all over. Everything is over. I'm out of here!" I started to walk around the desk, but at the last second, I snatched up the folder that held the contract in question and then slapped it against Ransome's chest as I walked past him. Without thinking, he lifted his hands to grab it before it fell, and his fingers brushed my hand. I snatched my arm back as if I'd just touched something hot before I hissed, "There's your flipping contract. If I were you, I'd give Colonel Sweet a few days to calm down before you try to collect."

“Fuck the contract!” Ransome yelled before he took a deep breath and leaned a little closer to me. “Let’s calm down and talk this through, baby.”
“I’m not your baby, Ransome Donovan, and I never will be.”

13.

RANSOME

“What the fuck just happened?” I whispered as I watched Celeste brush past Holly and run through the kitchen.

I heard the outer door slam and winced at the sound but knew better than to follow her. Over the years, I’d learned that taking a step back when I was upset helped me calm my temper so I could think a little more rationally, and I hoped the same held true for Celeste. Surely, if she took a minute to think about things, she’d realize that she’d jumped to the wrong conclusion. Maybe I could explain my part in this whole fiasco to her once she’d calmed down. I’d let her know that I never agreed to take anything for my part in rescuing her from that tyrant of a woman and her weak-as-shit son.

“I don’t know what to do,” Holly said as she looked from me to the door and

then back again. “Are you okay? Should I follow her and make sure she’s okay?”

“Just give us both a few minutes to calm down, and I’ll go talk to her.”

“Are you sure?”

“I need a goddamn minute, Holly!” I snapped. I instantly regretted using that tone with my cousin, but she seemed to understand and nodded before she reached out and patted my chest. I watched her walk away and then dropped down into one of the extra chairs we kept in front of the desk in the office. I heard the door shut behind Holly and took a deep breath before I let out a scream of frustrated rage. “*Fuuuuuck!*”

I let my head fall forward and realized I was still holding the folder. The urge to rip it into a million pieces and then set them on fire was almost overwhelming, but I resisted. Instead, I flipped it open and started reading.

The first part of the document had details about the price of the cake, the venue where it was to be delivered, and our contact’s information. Below that was some legal mumbo jumbo that I scanned past quickly so I could turn to the next page. I saw the highlighted section that listed out the specs of the oven I’d always dreamed of owning and had the almost irresistible urge to burst into tears.

As I flipped to the next page, a few words caught my eye, and I hurriedly went back to the previous page and then to the one before it.

“What the fuck?” I muttered as I held the papers closer to my face, as if my eyes were deceiving me and looking closer might change the words I was reading.

“What happened?” I heard my sister say a split second after the door flew open and smacked against the wall. “Where’s Celeste?”

“She took off because of this shit!” I barked as I held the papers up and shook them. “What the fuck is this, Rachel?”

“That’s a bullshit contract that I knew you’d never read because you *never* take the time to look at anything but the specs for the cake you need to make.”

“It’s a membership form to our gym!”

“I know,” Rachel said with a grin. It fell away almost instantly, and she said, “I didn’t want to put anything legal and binding, but I needed something that looked official just to fill the space.”

“And you just threw in the part about the oven in between cleaning up for yourself and not beating off in the locker room?”

Rachel's nose wrinkled and she reached for the papers as she asked, "Is that really in there?"

"No, it's not fucking in there. I made it up just like you made all of this shit up! Now Celeste thinks her father is paying me to be with her and doesn't believe I really love her!"

"You sent him an email about the oven just a few days after . . ."

"It was the morning after the first time we were together, and I knew that I was already half in love with her," I said softly as I remembered pouring my heart out to Celeste's father in an email I wasn't sure I'd ever have the guts to send.

"Did you read his reply?" I shook my head. "Of course you didn't because you only use technology upon threat of death." Rachel let out a tortured breath before she explained, "He confessed that he's always known you'd be perfect for Celeste, but he wasn't sure how to get the two of you together and help you past all the troubles you would face. He said that, in his experience, putting soldiers in close quarters turned them into a cohesive unit, and he thought that would happen between you and Celeste. I don't know shit about soldiers, but I know you and I know her almost better than I know myself. She's been in love with you since we were kids, and you've been looking at her with mooney eyes for ten years now."

"I do not . . ." I started to argue but then sighed. "I probably do."

"I need to find her and explain what her father and I did."

"How the fuck are you going to explain that he's giving me an \$80,000 fucking oven in exchange for falling for his daughter?"

"He's not!"

"How is she ever going to believe that I love her for who she is and not because I was paid to pretend?"

Rachel looked at me like I was crazy and then put her hands up to the sides of her head and screamed in frustration. "Read your goddamn email, Ransome! Jesus!"

"Fuck the email, and fuck you! I've gotta find Celeste and make this right!"

"You'll read that fucking email if I have to hold you down and tape the goddamn laptop to your face," Rachel threatened. "I'll call Colonel Sweet and see if he has any idea where she might have gone."

"She doesn't have anywhere to go, Rachel! If she was ever trying to escape something, she would come to us. Our family is all she's got in the entire fucking country, and now she thinks we've all betrayed her, so there's no

telling where she might go!”
“Fuck!”



I collapsed onto the couch that Celeste had picked out. I was exhausted but knew I'd never get any sleep if I went up to our . . . my bedroom. It wasn't ours anymore because everything that had belonged to Celeste was gone now. By the time I'd finished yelling at my sister and made it upstairs to talk to Celeste, she'd disappeared.

She'd mentioned before that she always traveled light because there was no telling when she'd have to move again, and I understood exactly what she meant now. All of the things she'd so happily chosen to decorate our home were still here, and the only thing she'd taken with her were some of her clothes and her toiletries. I had a closet full of gym bags and suitcases but the only thing missing from that area was the large green bag with her last name stamped on the side. She'd mentioned that it had belonged to her father years ago before he moved up in ranks and that it had been with her through multiple trips to various countries, carried her belongings on hundreds of flights, and had lasted longer than any luggage you could buy on the market. Apparently, it was the one thing she could depend on now since the people in her life had failed her so fucking miserably.

I had failed her by not being honest from the start and telling her that the only reason I let her stay with me in the first place was for my own gain. I'd coveted a piece of equipment enough that I'd been willing to set aside my irritation at having someone else live in my apartment and then neglected to explain that part of the deal to her even after I'd sent an email to Colonel Sweet telling him he could keep his fucking oven because I was going to keep his beautiful daughter.

I thought back to Rachel yelling at me about reading the man's email and sighed. There was no time like the present because obviously I wasn't going to get any fucking sleep again tonight. It had been four days since Celeste

stormed out of my life. I couldn't sleep knowing that she was out there alone, her heart torn to shreds with no one to turn to so she could share her pain.

If I could just find her and explain, I could hold her in my arms again, but the girl was elusive, I'd grant her that. In less than twenty minutes, she'd packed up and taken off for parts unknown. We had a private investigator hunting for her along with half of my family, and god only knew how many poor men from the Army had been tasked with finding Colonel Sweet's baby girl.

Celeste didn't want to be found, and I had a feeling that unless there was some sort of divine intervention, we were going to come up empty.

I blew out a breath and opened the app to check my email. I had to scroll through a couple hundred ads and other bullshit before I found it, but in just a few minutes, I had Colonel Sweet's response to my declaration about mine and his daughter's future.

Ransome,

It's been a few years since we've spoken, but I can tell from your email that you're the same stubborn piece of work that you've always been. I appreciate that in a man: the ability to be himself without worrying about how the world views him or feels about him. I have that trait myself, and in a way, it's very freeing. On the other hand, it can be stifling too.

As my hair gets grayer and my bones' aches deepen, I've started to see things in a different light. Events that I took for granted years ago seem more important, and things I missed out on have become regrets that can never be rectified. I realize that even though I thought I was raising Celeste to the best of my abilities at the time, I really wasn't. I put the heartache of losing my wife before my daughter's happiness. I filled the gaping hole that grief had made inside me with military life rather than being present for my daughter, the last little bit I had left of my wife. Rather than surround Celeste with the people who loved her most, I dragged her from one army base to another with little thought of how that might affect her future and the decisions she'd make in life.

I missed out on so many chances to make things right because I was too stubborn and bullheaded to admit that I needed help or that I wasn't the best person to raise a little girl. I dragged Celeste all over the world, jumping from base to base, and at times, putting her way too close to conflict that could have taken her away from me . . . all because I was

running from my pain. I should have stopped and taken stock of what I had in front of me rather than trying so desperately to escape the past. I should have paid attention to my daughter rather than wonder if my wife and I would have had more children as we had planned. I should have settled down in suburbia somewhere and gotten a desk job that let me be home in time to cook her dinner rather than expect her to meet me in the mess hall on the off-chance I had a spare minute or two to sit and eat with her. I should have considered how lonely she must feel surrounded by strangers who she'd have to leave just as she got settled in and how she'd never be able to develop long-lasting friendships with the lifestyle I had chosen for us.

I should have done a lot of things for Celeste that I didn't. When she told me she was marrying that little kitten of a man, I thought it was too late for me to make up for all the times I'd let her down. She was doing everything in her power to establish roots far away from me with someone whose outlook and drive was the exact opposite of mine. I pushed Celeste so hard that her only way to find a moment's peace was with a man who couldn't stand up to his own shadow.

My girl is strong, Ransome. Strong-willed, strong-minded, and strong-hearted. She's a powerhouse, both mentally and physically, and she would never have been happy with a man who couldn't mirror those qualities she can't even see in herself. Life with Jeffrey and that bitch who spawned him would have broken her down to nothing and put her right back into that lonely existence she lived while growing up.

I knew my daughter well enough to realize that forcing her to give him up, even if it was for her own good, wouldn't have worked. I had to let her come to that conclusion on her own, and believe me - I was sweating bullets by the time she called me, sure that she was going to go through with that farce of a marriage and be miserable for the rest of her days. I made plans just in case she decided to go AWOL, and I pulled your sister in to help me.

I haven't been able to give my daughter much in her short life, but I thought I could make up for it by giving her a man I knew could love her, protect her, coddle her, support her, and be her strength during those times when she didn't even realize she needed help. I wanted someone who would wade into an unknown situation and start swinging in her defense, someone who would risk his own future and safety just to

make sure hers was secure.

I needed to find a man who would leave his home in the middle of the night and fight his way through half a dozen strong, young men to defend my little girl's life, soul, and future happiness from those who were set to do her harm.

Thankfully, I knew a man just like that, and he'd already been tested. Years ago when you waded in to rescue your sister and my daughter, I knew you were the one. She did, too, and had for years but thought that was just a pipe dream. It was just a crush as far as she was concerned. I knew differently.

I might be a military man down to the marrow of my bones, but there's a little sliver of a romantic in there somewhere. That part of me wanted my daughter to have the happily ever after of her dreams. Luckily, that happily ever after includes you.

If you take a moment to read the fake contract your sister and I created, you'll see that I am not paying you to fall in love with my daughter; I'm giving you a piece of equipment that's going to help you support her and the family you will create together. Even if you hadn't discovered how perfect you are together, I'd still have sent you that machine because I've been searching for a way to repay you for that night you rescued my daughter.

You might say I don't have to do that or that it's something any decent man would have done in that position, but I call bullshit. I've known many men who would have looked the other way. I thank God every day that you weren't one of them. I have spent my life traveling on the government's dime and have hoarded every spare penny possible so I could give my daughter everything she wanted or needed and maybe buy myself a little cabin in the mountains if I'm ever able to drag myself away from the duty that I've made my life.

In the course of my travels, I've met many people from all walks of life. I've dined with royalty and scum, sometimes sitting between the two at the same table. A few years ago, I met a man who was being wined and dined by the US Army so they could get a discount on a product he'd created. It wasn't a new invention by any means, but it was updated, state of the art, and very expensive. Of course, the Army didn't want to pay top dollar, so they tried to pluck at his heart strings by showing him how much his product could help the poor soldiers who were doing their

duty and protecting their country.

Now, we all know that's bullshit. In the field, good food is scarce and that's probably never going to change. However, a man like myself who has worked his way up the ranks into a cushy office job becomes accustomed to the finer things in life. Things like freshly baked bread and flaky pastries. Creations like yours. The best way to get those finer things is to use top-of-the-line equipment.

Like the oven my friend Sal Drago invented.

When I found out that you'd opened a bakery, I approached my friend about buying one of his ovens. He'd met my Celeste and seen her on several occasions over the years, and she'd charmed him with her brains and wit just like she does with everyone else. When I told him about the near miss she'd had while visiting my parents in Marlboro, he was almost as pissed as I'd been at the time. I explained what you and your cousin had done to protect my daughter, and he understood that I wanted that price-cut the Army had been chasing him about years before.

He wasn't willing to bend for the Army, but he was more than willing to give me an oven at cost so that I could send it on to you to help you realize your dreams. It seemed a small price to pay since you'd given Celeste a chance at fulfilling her dreams rather than becoming damaged by things out of her control.

I would never consider paying you to watch over my daughter because a man like you would take on that task willingly and might even be offended at the thought of payment. However, your sister and I knew it would take a little push to get you into position so that Celeste could have a chance to bowl you over with her charm and let you see the wonderful woman she's become.

A man like me doesn't get this far without having faith in a higher power, and I prayed day and night that my daughter would come to her senses before she walked down that aisle. Just in case she did, I wanted to make sure that she had a protector at the finish line, and that protector had to be you. You took that baton years ago, and I knew that you'd be more than willing to pick it back up if you had the right incentive. Since Celeste wasn't in any danger, just a horrible situation she needed help escaping from, I suggested that your sister fake a contract that dangled that one little thing that was just out of your reach

- a fancy fucking oven that is probably smarter than both of us put together.

Luckily, you took the bait, and your close quarters with my sweet girl were enough to open your eyes to the wonder that is Celeste, and now the two of you are in love. You might not think it's come that far yet, but I assure you it has. No man who is as invested in his passion as you are would pass up the opportunity for such a fine piece of equipment unless he realized that there was more to life than the dreams he'd had forever - because he was right in the middle of the dream come true that is life with my daughter at his side.

I'm happy to welcome you into our little family, and I couldn't be more pleased to know that your family will embrace my daughter as one of their own like they've been doing for almost twenty years.

Enjoy your new equipment, Ransome. Let it take over part of your workload so you can spend more time with the woman you love. I expect you to give her the family she's always longed for and stand by her side as you watch my grandchildren grow up. Someday, I'll give up this glamorous life and move closer to Marlboro so I can do the same.

With my kindest regards and never-ending thanks,

Colonel Sweet

I let my head fall forward as unchecked tears streamed down my cheeks. I had almost gotten everything I'd ever wanted - a successful business and a smart, beautiful woman who loved me regardless of my faults.

No, not almost.

I had everything I ever wanted right now, but it was just out of reach. I wasn't a stranger to hard work, and I'd do everything in my power to get my hands on it again. As soon as I found Celeste and explained everything to her, I'd have the life I wanted back, and then we could live it together.

A life we'd both dreamed about.

14.

CELESTE

I leaned against the cushion behind me and watched the clouds drift across the sky. It was so peaceful here on the lake that I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to make myself leave. The cabin I'd been staying at for the last few weeks was a luxurious oasis smack dab in the middle of nowhere.

Okay, it wasn't technically nowhere, just a large swath of land that had been carved out in the middle of a copse of trees with a deck out back that led to a dock that jutted out into a peaceful lake that was perfect for dipping your toes in while you watched the sunset. The little fishing boat that was moored there made lazy afternoons even lazier once I rigged a rope to the bow and tied it off to one of the posts so that I could float to my heart's content but not drift too far from the dock. I'd made that mistake once and floated away

while my mind floated into a barrage of memories, wishes, and what could have been. It took me half an hour to paddle back to the dock, so with that lesson learned, I'd made a temporary anchor that would let my mind float away while my body was somewhat moored, or at least a close distance to safety.

Normally, I wouldn't consider floating alone on a lake unsafe, but things had changed over the last few weeks. Not just my life and my future, but then again, I guess those had changed first for the worst and now for the better. At least, that was how I saw it.

I might not have the life I'd always dreamed of, but at least I could have a portion of it. It might not be the same without the man I loved, but the baby I'd someday have in my arms would keep me happy. It would have to because it was all I had now besides my memories and shattered dreams.

I knew that this peaceful existence wouldn't last forever. Hell, it probably wouldn't even last another week. By now, my father probably had the entire US Army searching for me. If he had his way the FBI, CIA, and all the other alphabet agencies would be involved, which meant my days alone here on the lake were numbered.

As if he'd read my mind, I heard Jeffrey call my name from the end of the dock. I lifted my hand to acknowledge him but kept my eyes closed and made no movement otherwise, hoping he'd leave me alone with my thoughts rather than try again to convince me to go back and give Ransome a chance to explain himself and convince me that he really loved me for me and not for what he could gain.

My hopes were dashed when the boat rocked and then started to glide across the water. I lifted my head to glare at Jeffrey and his new husband, Smith.

"I'm not done with my afternoon nap."

"Which is not to be confused with your morning nap or evening nap," Jeffrey said sarcastically as he pulled the rope hand over hand until there was a coil laying by his feet and I was just a few feet away. "All you do is sleep."

"No, all I do is puke. Sleep comes after."

"I brought you some more anti-nausea meds."

"Thank you, Smith." I gave him a blinding smile before I asked, "Can you prescribe me some alone time on the lake?"

"I think you've had plenty of that, sweetheart."

"I've got news," Jeffrey taunted.

"I don't want to hear it," I mumbled as I sat up and started gathering my

things. Once I had my tablet and snacks put away, I handed the bag up to Jeffrey and then stood so he could help me out of the boat. When my feet hit the wooden dock, I sighed. I realized what their arrival meant and perked up before I asked, “Did you bring more apples?”

Jeffrey frowned as he answered, “Yes, but you need to eat something other than apples, Celeste. You’re withering away to nothing as it is, and you’ve got Marvin to think about.”

“Tammi. I’m having a girl.”

“I still think you’re going to have twins,” Smith said, causing me to glare at him now rather than his husband. He didn’t notice since he was staring at my now prominent bump. “I really think you should let me make an appointment with one of my associates, Celeste. It’s never too soon to see a professional, especially if you are having multiples.”

“You said my blood tests came out fine, so I’d like to politely decline until my first trimester is over.”

“But you don’t know when your date of conception was so . . .”

“I can do the math, Jeffrey.”

“How is it that I’m the one with his last name but the two of you sound like an old married couple?”

“We almost were,” Jeffrey mused.

I couldn’t help but retort, “We probably would have been if he’d have put out.”

“You disgust me.”

“Ditto,” I replied with a grin.

“Children! Can we try to get along for at least a few hours? Dinner’s getting cold, and arguing while we eat is bad for digestion.”

“Is it really, though?” I asked. “It’s so much fun to argue with Jeffrey. We never did that while we were together.”

“Because he couldn’t speak around his mom’s nipple,” Smith said drolly. Jeffrey gasped at the same time I burst out laughing. Smith grinned and admitted, “Sometimes I just can’t resist.”

“You know, Smith, I think you just might be the best thing that ever came of my relationship with Jeffrey,” I said as I linked elbows with my new friend and walked beside him toward the house. “Of course, I never came when he and I were together, or at least, I never did with his help.”

“I’m standing right here!” Jeffrey shouted from behind us where he was tying up the boat.

“He’s actually pretty good at making me come, but I can see where he might balk at the idea of helping you out.”

“Still here people!” Jeffrey yelled. “I don’t like it when you talk about me.”

“Okay,” I said with a shrug before I grinned at him over my shoulder. “We’ll just talk about your mom instead.” Jeffrey was still bitching when Smith closed the door behind me, and I laughed when I glanced out the window and saw him glaring at the house. “Oh, he’s big mad now!”

“We’ve gotta quit talking shit about his mom.”

“No, we don’t. I would say you’re the best thing that’s ever happened to him, but I really think getting away from her takes that prize.”

“Isn’t that the truth? I thought I’d lost him.”

“What’s her latest?”

“She tried to block the sale of the house . . .”

“You guys are selling her house?”

“Not the one where she lives. The one where we used to . . . I mean . . .”

“Where you used to meet up? I’m not a complete idiot. Well, I’m not anymore.” I laughed before I added, “If he had really been playing that much golf, he’d be on the pro tour by now.”

Smith laughed and then whispered, “He’s never even touched a club.”

“Oh my God.” I rolled my eyes and then looked Smith up and down before I teased, “Obviously, he’s touched at least one.”

“I love you.”

“I’m glad somebody does.”

“He’s still searching for you, Celeste. So is your father. You can’t hide out here forever. The longer you’re away, the harder it will be to get everything settled.”

“Prove it.”

“I’m not all about helping you have a home birth, especially out here in the sticks.”

“I’m not going to stay that long.”

“Are you sure? You said you were only going to stay here a few days, and it’s been weeks.”

“The longer I stay, the harder it is to imagine facing him again,” I admitted.

“I ran off in a snit and didn’t even give him a chance to explain, but at the time, I didn’t care.”

“That night we drove you out here, you said you thought it was all a ruse. Do you still think that?”

“That was my anger talking. The more I think about it, the more I realize there’s no way he could fake it that well for that long. Although, I have been duped before,” I said as I motioned toward the window where we could see Jeffrey walking up the dock.

“So, what’s keeping you here?”

“Sheer terror.”

“Of what? You think he’ll do something when he’s angry?”

“No! Ransome would never hurt me. I’m afraid of going back after all this time and having to face it if he’s moved on.”

“He hasn’t. He’s actively looking for you. The only reason he hasn’t gotten the cops involved is because you finally called and left that voicemail on his business line. For some reason . . . okay, for obvious reasons, he hasn’t thought to talk to Jeffrey, but if he does, we’re going to tell him the truth.”

“I almost wish that would happen.”

“What? You want him to find out we’ve been hiding you this whole time and beat the shit out of us?”

“No! I daydream that he just appears on the dock one day while I’m floating, and everything is forgotten.” I sighed heavily. “But then I’ll still have to deal with Rachel and my dad.”

“So, you’ve forgiven Rachel for her part in it?”

“Yeah. She was just looking out for her brother. I’m sure she wasn’t trying to hurt me.”

“And your dad?”

“That’s a tough one. Did he think I couldn’t land a good man on my own, so he tried to buy me one? That’s really the only thing I can think of, as horrible as it sounds.”

“If he was trying to find you the perfect man wouldn’t he have dropped a soldier in your lap?”

“Hell no. He forbade me from dating anyone in any of the armed services, and I agreed willingly. I refuse to fall in love with someone who could be gone for months at a time or might have to pick up and move at the whim of the government. I’ve lived that life, and I’m not going back.”

“I see your point there, but they do look good in a uniform. I’m especially fond of the Marines.”

“I know, right?” There was silence for a few minutes as we watched Jeffrey tidy up the furniture on the dock. I glanced over at Smith and jokingly asked, “Can I just be the third in your relationship without any expectation of sex or

intimacy?”

“No.”

“Any chance you might change your mind?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Do you think that Ransome will forgive me if I feign a head injury and pretend I’ve lost my memory?”

“That only happens on daytime television.”

“Okay. Maybe I could pretend I was kidnapped by aliens, and when they finished probing me, they dropped me in a corn field.” Smith stared at me and then rolled his eyes dramatically. “It sounds feasible to me.”

“It sounds ridiculous to anyone else.”

“Are you sure I can’t just stay here forever?”

“I’m positive. This is supposed to be our retreat, but you’d probably be scarred for life if we came out here to unwind and let loose.”

“It might be hot.”

“Sometimes I wonder about you, Celeste. I think there might be some kink hidden underneath that sweet exterior.”

I thought about all the times I’d begged Ransome to spank me and how much I’d enjoyed it when he tied me up. I couldn’t hold back a grin when I said, “Still waters run deep, Smith. Very deep.”

“Jeffrey wouldn’t have been able to handle you even if he was straight as an arrow. You’re probably going to give Ransome a heart attack.”

“I think he’s been close a few times.”

“Maybe you can get him there again soon.”

“I doubt it. There’s too much water under the bridge for that to happen, but I guess a girl can dream, right?”



RANSOME

“There’s someone at the counter who’d like to speak to you.”

I glanced up at Ronnie, and she winced, so I schooled my expression to a more pleasant one before I asked, “Who is it? I’m not really in the headspace to deal with a pissed-off customer right now.”

“It’s not a customer, well at least not one that’s pissed off. He bought a

coffee from Holly and talked to her for a while, and then he came over here and asked for you.”

The back door opened, and I looked over my shoulder to find my sister rushing into the kitchen, breathless with her hair askew and her shirt on backwards. “What the fuck is going on? Are you okay?”

“I was . . . in the middle of something when Holly called.”

I raised my eyebrows and asked, “Do I even want to know who?”

Rachel grinned and shook her head. “Nope.”

“What did Holly say that got you to rush down here looking like you just dropped out of a tornado?”

“That you’ve got a visitor. She asked me to come down and talk to him with you.”

“Why?” I asked, glancing over at Ronnie with narrowed eyes. “Who is it?”

Ronnie shrugged and shook her head, her expression telling me that she truly had no idea what was going on.

Rachel answered instead. “It’s Jeffrey.”

I felt my eyes widen as my entire body tensed. “What the fuck is *he* doing here?”

“He wants to talk to you about Celeste, but he asked Holly to come for backup to make sure you don’t try and kill him.”

“Why would I want to kill him?” I asked. Even I could hear the calm menace in my voice. I heard Ronnie scurry away before she had to experience the fallout. I hadn’t been an easy person to be around since Celeste left, although I’d tried harder than I had before I met her. Sometimes, I just couldn’t make myself be civil, and when that happened, I made sure to let the employees up front know that I needed my space rather than just snap at anyone who crossed my path. “Does he know something about where Celeste might be?”

“I’m not sure, but that would make sense if he really thinks you’re going to hurt him.”

“I’m not going to hurt him until he tells me where she is and that she’s okay.”

“And then?”

“I’m going to rip his fucking arms off and beat him to death with them.”

“Ransome!” I heard my sister yell from somewhere behind me.

I was too busy to care, pushing past the front counter employees so I could find that sawed-off little shit. When I found him, he was standing behind my cousins, Mike and Jax.

“What the fuck is going on?”

“Dude, I’ve got no idea, but Holly called and said she needed us over here pronto. When we walked in, she pointed at this guy,” Jax explained as he used his thumb to point over his shoulder at Jeffrey and another man standing beside him.

Mike nodded in agreement before he added, “We’ve both got clients on the table waiting, half-tattooed and probably a little bit pissed, so if you could make this murder quick and clean, I’d appreciate it.”

“Where is she?” I asked, my fury aimed solely at Jeffrey now.

“I’m not telling you anything until you calm down and listen to what I have to say.”

“Okay,” I said with a shrug as I grinned at him. “I’ll just beat it out of you. How about that?” I put my hands on the counter and vaulted over it to land on the other side before I stalked across the room toward my cousins and my intended target. “Move.”

“Can’t let you do that, man,” Jax said as he put his hand up in front of him to brace against my chest when I got closer. “We’ve all managed to stay out of prison so far, but if you kill him with all these witnesses, you’ll be the first to go.”

“Okay,” I said again before I tilted my head so I could see Jeffrey between my cousins’ shoulders. I smiled at Jeffrey, and his eyes got even wider when I said, “I’ll drag him into the kitchen first.”

“I didn’t protect Celeste when we were together, but I’m going to make up for that now,” Jeffrey said as he stood a little straighter. “You can do whatever you want to me, just know that I’m here to help you, and she has no idea that I’ve decided to tell you where she’s been staying. Do I have your solemn promise that you won’t lose your temper when you see her?”

“Absolutely not. I’m probably gonna yell, but I imagine that she will too.”

“But you won’t hurt her?” the other man asked.

“Who the fuck are you?” I barked, irritated that he was injecting himself into our drama when all I wanted to do was yank Jeffrey up and shake the information out of him. “Why are you . . . shut *up*.”

“I’m Smith.”

“So?”

“I’m his husband, and I’m here on Celeste’s behalf. We’ve become good friends over the last few weeks and . . .”

I put my hands up and ran them through my hair, kicking myself for never considering that she might go to her ex for help. “You’ve known where she

is this whole time?”

Jeffrey nodded. “She called us while she was packing, and we picked her up a few blocks from here. She made me promise to keep her location a secret while she took a few days to get her thoughts together and figure out where she wanted to go, but . . .”

“That was almost six fucking weeks ago!” I roared.

“We may have made her a little too comfortable, and now she’s worried about talking to you since it’s been so long,” Jeffrey admitted. “I’m afraid that she’s just going to give up and take off to parts unknown.”

“She wouldn’t do that,” Smith insisted as he shot a pointed look at Jeffrey. He raised his eyebrows and nodded toward me before he said, “You know she wouldn’t do that.”

“You’re right. She wouldn’t, but she considered it for a little while.”

“What changed her mind?” Rachel asked from beside me.

Smith and Jeffrey shook their heads, and I knew they wouldn’t answer that question or any others until I promised to keep my shit together when I saw Celeste.

“I’d never hurt her. There’s nothing she could say or do that would even make me consider it. I’m not that kind of guy,” I promised. “I just want to make sure she’s okay so I can call her dad before he goes AWOL again and . . .”

“Again?” Smith and Jeffrey asked at the same time.

“Technically, he’s one of the bigwigs, so it wasn’t really considered AWOL, but he *did* hop on a plane and come to Texas without telling anyone,” I explained.

That had been a shit show of epic proportions. The Colonel was an imposing man on a good day, but when his daughter was missing, the fact that he was trained in hand-to-hand combat and wasn’t afraid to shed blood was terrifying, especially when it was my blood he was more than willing to shed to find out his daughter’s whereabouts.

“That was rough,” Holly mumbled, and I heard Rachel agree.

Jeffrey cringed and leaned around Jax to inspect me, probably looking for splints or casts. “You’re okay, though?”

“He didn’t hurt me, but I can’t say that he won’t rip you limb from limb when he finds out you wouldn’t tell me how to find his daughter.”

“Be gentle with her, Ransome. I almost broke her by not standing up for her with my mom and lying to her through our entire relationship, but you put her

back together. When she found out it was all an act . . .”

“It wasn’t fucking acting!”

“I know you couldn’t have been. She’s a wonderful woman, and there’s no way a man like you wouldn’t just snatch her up and give her the world, but from the outside looking in, you can see why she might think her father bribed you into taking her in.”

“She didn’t read the contract before she reacted.”

“Technically, none of us besides Rachel read the contract,” Holly admitted sheepishly. “If I had, I would have known to keep my mouth shut, and none of this would have happened.”

“Where is she?” I asked in a much softer tone of voice. “I’ll beg if I have to. I’ll give you anything I have if you’ll just tell me how to find her so I can figure out how to win her back.”

“Tell her the truth. That’s the only way.”

“I won’t have to tell her anything because I’ve got the proof on paper,” I said as I pulled three folded pages out of my pocket. “I printed out the email I sent to her father and his response. It explains more than just the stupid fake contract, and I think she needs to see it.”

Jeffrey put his hand out, and I handed him the paper. As he unfolded it, I told my cousins, “I promise I’m not going to do anything that’s gonna land me in jail. You guys can go back to your shop.”

Mike narrowed his eyes and studied my face before he nodded. “You call us if you need any help, okay?”

“I will.”

Jax squeezed my shoulder before he turned to go, and Mike gave me a salute before he followed our cousin out of the door. I watched Jeffrey and Smith read the pages I’d handed to them for a few seconds until Rachel leaned into my arm and sighed.

“I fucked this up so badly.”

“It wasn’t just you, sis. We should have told her from the start that there was a contract. We probably would have gotten a good laugh out of the whole thing.”

“Nobody’s laughing now.”

“Give me a few days to win her back, and I’ll open the door for you to get in there and do the same thing.”

“I’m not going to use the same tactics, just so you know. Neither of us swing that direction.”

“That would be awkward,” Holly chimed in from my other side. “You know if we don’t cut all this shit out, our business is going to get a reputation.”

“You think?” I swung my gaze over to my cousin and raised my eyebrows.

“The fact that my little sister is standing here with her clothes on backwards and her . . .”

“What?” Rachel shouted as she pulled her shirt away from her chest and stared down at it. “Dammit!”

“The shirt is nothing compared to that hair,” Holly teased. “Talk about FFL. Damn.”

“What’s that?” I asked. When Holly grimaced and shook her head, I rushed to say, “Nope. Don’t want to know.”

“No, buddy. You really don’t.”

15.

RANSOME

It felt like the drive to the remote cabin took forever, but when I finally arrived, it took me ten minutes to talk myself into getting out of the car.

This was it. This would probably be my only chance to have a private conversation with Celeste and explain what happened so we could get past this misunderstanding and move on with our lives. Together.

But there was a chance that she'd want to move on separately, and I wasn't sure how I'd ever get over that.

I took a deep breath and then rolled my neck back and forth a few times to relieve the tension before I got out of my truck. Ready to get this over with, I brushed my hands over my shirt and put my shoulders back. Holly had encouraged me to think positive thoughts all the way here to put the 'vibe out

in the universe' or some shit. Instead, I'd worried about what Celeste would say when she saw me.

Would she tell me to fuck off or run toward me and jump into my arms?

My guess was neither, considering I wasn't sure she knew how to really cuss and she wasn't really the jumping type. No matter how many times I'd told her how much I appreciated her body or how many times I'd worshiped it, she still believed that she was too thick, too tall, too . . . something. Hopefully, I'd have about sixty more years with her, and in that time, I'd keep trying to convince her that she was perfect in whatever way made her happy.

I jogged up the steps and knocked on the door before I lost my nerve and then took a step back when she didn't answer. I tried again and didn't get a response, so I sent a quick text to Jeffrey asking him if he was positive she was here today.

His response made me cringe. I wondered how such a vivacious woman had gone for over a month without leaving the house. She'd seen Jeffrey and Smith quite often from what I understood, but she hadn't spoken to anyone else in weeks. I was the unsociable ogre in my family, and I couldn't imagine going that long without seeing more than a handful of people. Of course, that might be because my extended family only needed one more tent to make a circus, and they were all loud and in your face with their nosiness that my mom insisted was just a sign they cared about me.

As expected, word of Jeffrey's appearance had spread through the family like wildfire. Within ten minutes of my impromptu trip, I'd fielded five calls. That far exceeded my usual quota of interaction, so I turned my ringer to silent and stuffed my phone in my pocket so I could ignore everyone else, even if they were just calling to lend support and wish me luck.

I walked across the porch and then down the steps so I could follow the footpath around the house but stopped in my tracks the second I spotted Celeste sunning herself in a small boat tethered to the dock. She was so still that I wondered if she might be napping until I saw her reach under her glasses and swipe her eyes.

I walked as quietly as I could down the dock, hoping I could get a better look at her before the fireworks started and was happy when I reached the end and was able to sit and take off my shoes without her realizing she had company. That worried me just a little since she'd apparently spent most of her time floating on the water, most likely lost in thought and oblivious to the world

around her.

I heard her sniff and then watched her wipe away tears again before she put down her phone and picked up the book that was resting over her stomach. As she held it up, the boat started to turn in the current, and I was able to make out part of the title and what I thought might be two avocado halves on the front cover. It took me a second, but I quickly realized she was reading a cookbook!

That was new and different but sad at the same time. I wanted to be the one to teach her how to cook, not some stranger who would probably focus too much on calories and serving sizes. The boat rotated just a bit more, and the sun glinted off the cover. After I'd blinked my eyes a few times, I focused again and realized that my girl wasn't reading just any cookbook.

It was a cookbook for expectant mothers.

Holy. Shit.

My entire body tensed with shock and terror, but within just a few seconds, I felt a sense of euphoria come over me unlike anything I'd ever experienced. I was still reeling when Celeste moved the book aside as she lifted her hand to cough into her closed fist. Apparently, she was turned enough now that she spotted me, and I realized I'd scared her when she let out a sound that was half cough, half scream.

It took a second for her to recover from her coughing fit, but she finally asked, "How did you find me?"

"Jeffrey and Smith came into the bakery, and we had a talk."

"Are they still alive?"

I slowly nodded, not at all offended by the questions since I'd mentioned several times that Jeffrey needed a serious ass whooping for leading her on for all that time. "I didn't touch a hair on their heads."

"That leaves a whole lot of real estate that you could have damaged."

"I didn't even get close enough to have shaken their hands."

"I guess they just couldn't leave well enough alone, could they?"

"You consider hiding out in the forest 'well enough'?"

"I wasn't hiding from everyone - just you, Rachel, and my father."

"He's been worried sick about you, baby."

"I miss talking to him."

"Did you miss talking to me?"

"I didn't want to."

I took that as a good sign. She didn't say she hadn't missed me, just that she

hadn't *wanted* to miss me. At this point, any thoughts about me at all was a good sign. That meant she hadn't completely written me off yet, even if all she wanted to do was yell at me and tell me to go to hell.

"I missed you every minute of every day." Celeste looked away rather than add to the conversation, so I kept talking. "I want you to know that I didn't mean to lie to you. I didn't even think that I was. I never actually read the contract and . . ."

"Your initials were at the bottom of every page, and your signature was at the end right next to my father's."

"I know. I am prone to signing things without reading them when Holly or Rachel stick them in my face. That's completely my fault." Celeste narrowed her eyes, and I hurriedly continued. "All I ever care about is what I need to create and that some money comes in to keep the bills paid. I am not willing or equipped to deal with the rest of the paperwork. Obviously, my sister knew that when she typed up the contract since it was just a copy of the membership form they use at our gym."

"You're kidding." I slowly shook my head, and Celeste laughed before she said, "The only thing that matters to you is baking and creating new recipes."

"Nope. The only thing that matters to me is you." I didn't say anything about the baby she was carrying because I wanted her to tell me in her own time. "I love you more than I ever thought I could love anyone, and I'd give up everything if it meant that I could call you mine for even just one more day."

"How can I be sure that you really love me, Ransome?"

"I want to read something to you."

Celeste shrugged her shoulders and scoffed at the same time. "I'm not exactly in the mood for poetry."

"That's good because I'm not a poet." I laughed for a second before I asked, "Do you really think I'm going to try and get you back by writing a sonnet or something? I've heard some of the music you like. Almost every love song sounds like grounds for a restraining order." Celeste burst out laughing, and I waited a second before I said, "I could stay awake just to watch you breathe? Really? Step away from the window and let the woman sleep, man. It's fucking creepy."

Celeste laughed even harder, and I noticed that when her stomach flexed, the small pooch didn't move at all. She had to be at least six weeks pregnant by now, if not more. I wasn't sure how soon women usually started to show, but

even I knew that six weeks was a little early for a bump, so she had to be further along than that. She could be almost three months along if it happened the first time we were together.

When her laughter trailed off, I asked, "So, can I read this to you?" Celeste shrugged and I asked, "Will you listen?" When she nodded, I leaned to the side so I could pull the papers out of my back pocket. As I unfolded them, I told her, "I've been carrying these around with me for five weeks now, hoping that when I finally found you, you'd let me tell you what they say." "Go ahead."

I cleared my throat and nodded at her before I started.

Dear Colonel Sweet,

I found out a few days ago that you were willing to offer me a Drago just for helping your daughter escape from her wedding. At first, I wondered why in the hell you didn't do it yourself, but after talking to Celeste, I realized that your hands were tied.

I'm glad to report that she's adjusting well to the single life. So well, in fact, that she's agreed to be my girlfriend.

Before you start thinking that it's too soon or I'm not good enough, let me just go ahead and tell you that I don't give a shit about your opinion on the matter. I'm in love with her, and your feelings won't change that. Obviously, you know that she'll make her own decisions in life since she clearly wasn't swayed by your objections to her marrying that douchebag and his mother.

Celeste laughed out loud, and I smiled at her before I continued.

I want you to know that I won't accept any deliveries from you even if that oven is the thing of every baker's fantasies. It's been on my wishlist for years, but taking it from you when the true gift is Celeste would be wrong.

Even though I've known her forever, I feel like I've never really noticed the wonder that is Celeste Sweet. I've always thought she was beautiful and have admired her from afar for the last ten years or so but never acted on it. I wasn't positive I was good enough for a woman like her, and I thought for sure she only saw me as her best friend's annoying older brother.

I can tell you right now that the first part is right. I'm not good enough for her, but maybe if I try my hardest for the next fifty years or so, I will be. I'm willing to work toward that every single day until I leave this

earth.

One single smile from your daughter is enough to get me through the worst of days, and the sound of her laughter makes my heart jump for joy. I was shocked to hear that she's carried a torch for me through the years, too, and had to wonder if all the things we've experienced up until a few days ago were just forks in the road that led us to finding our other half.

That's what she is, you know. My other half. The good half. The caring half. The smart half that is strong enough to correct me when I'm wrong and admit when she is too. She's the better part that will always make me the very best version of myself.

Someday, when we have children, she'll be that example for them too.

And just so you know, we will have kids. I want a full house and will work hard to get her to agree with me. But if all she wants is one, I hope it's a little girl who has the same fire, attitude, and open heart that makes everyone love her mama. I hope she's funny, smart, strong, and independent. I also hope that she looks more like me than Celeste because I don't know if I'll ever be able to get a letter like the one I'm writing to you today without burning the town down around me in utter anguish at the thought of losing my little girl.

But really, I won't be losing her at all . . . just like you won't be losing Celeste. No matter what you do or say, she'll always forgive you because that's just who she is. She'll love you no matter how gruff or grouchy you are, no matter how bossy you try to be, and no matter how you drive her crazy.

I hope that she'll love me someday despite the fact that I'm all those things too.

So, after all that rambling, I hope you understand why I can't accept the terms of your contract. As a matter of fact, I won't even accept payment for the cake I made for the wedding. It was a work of art, but not nearly as perfect as your daughter. I hope that Jeffrey and his mother choked on it. That alone would be payment enough.

I hope you understand where I'm coming from and can at least respect the fact that I wanted to tell you outright that I'm going to marry your daughter someday and work tirelessly to make sure that her life is filled with love, laughter, and happiness for the rest of my days. As her husband, that won't just be my job, it will be my honor.

Respectfully,

Ransome Donovan

P.S. One last thing - I'd like to propose another contract that I'm positive will be amenable to both of us. If you send me that oven, I'll make sure I find Jeffrey and kick his ass at least once a week for the next ten years. Of course, I'll probably do that anyway just because he upset Celeste and I can't abide that, but I'd kind of like to have the oven as a bonus.

I looked up and realized that Celeste had slowly pulled the rope so that the majority of it was coiled at her feet and she was closer to me. She was almost within arm's reach now, and the urge to jump off the dock into the boat that held her was almost impossible to deny. When I looked up at her and saw the tears on her cheeks, I almost did it, but she put her hand up as if she knew exactly what I was thinking.

"I need to talk now, Ransome."

"Go ahead."

"You can't beat the shit out of Jeffrey every time you see him."

"I won't. I didn't kick his ass this morning, even though I really, *really* wanted to."

"Well, keep resisting because he and I have made peace, and he needs a friend right now since his entire life has been turned upside down. All of that started with me jumping out a window to escape marrying him."

I sighed, but it was just for show, and I realized Celeste knew that when she smiled at me.

"I love you, Ransome. I think I've always loved you, but I never thought you were the right man for me. You're brash, pushy, and the complete opposite of me in too many ways to count. I swore to myself I'd never date a man who was so opinionated and obstinate, but here I am pledging my love to you and promising to carry that love forever, no matter how crazy you make me or how much I want to shake you until your teeth rattle." I smiled and started to tell her I loved her, too, but she put her hand up again. "I'm sorry I overreacted and ran off without giving you a chance to explain. I promise I'll never do anything like that again if you promise to never try and control me with lies or manipulation." When I started to argue, she shook her head. "I understand that you didn't do either of those things, but you didn't tell me my father had tried to either. That's not quite as bad as what he did, but I'll deal with him later. Right now, I want to fall into your arms and let you kiss me

until the world falls away and I forget how miserable I've been for the last few weeks without you."

"If you fall, I'll always be there to catch you, Celeste."

"I know you will."

"I'm not sure how much longer I can take being apart from you, even if it's just a few feet now."

"Pull me in and help me out of this boat so I can show you how much I've missed you."

I grabbed the rope and started pulling as I smiled at the love of my life.

"Gladly, but I'm probably going to have my way with you the second I feel you in my arms. That might include a swat or two on that luscious ass of yours, and I know how that makes you scream."

Celeste waved her hand toward the lake and grinned. "We're all alone out here without any neighbors to hear us, so do with me what you will, sir."

"Somehow, you always know how to get me right where you want me."

"Right now, that's either above or beneath me. It's your call."

"Good. I choose both."



I lifted my head so I could kiss Celeste behind the ear as I rested my hand on her stomach beneath her belly button. "When are we going to talk about this?"

"Is it that obvious?"

"I had no idea until I saw the book you were reading in the boat."

"I'm not exactly sure how far along I am, but Smith did a blood test and confirmed that I'm definitely pregnant."

"Were you ever going to tell me?"

"Did you see my bags by the front door?"

"I did."

"A few minutes before you showed up, I sent Jeffrey a text asking him to pick me up so I could come home."

"You still think of our apartment as home?"

"Home isn't just a place, Ransome, it's wherever you are."

"And our baby." I kissed her neck again before I added, "The first of many."

Celeste sighed and pretended to be irritated when she said, "Not seven."

“We agreed.”

“It was under duress. That doesn’t count.”

“Do I need to remind you that you were adamant about seven children? If I recall correctly, you screamed that number many, many times just to make sure I understood how serious you were about the subject.”

“I don’t remember that at all.”

“I’ve got years to talk you into it.”

“I’m already 30, and I’m not having babies after I’m 40. I want to be able to keep up with them and enjoy them at the same time.”

“I’ll be there to help you. Besides, even if we have seven children, you won’t be 40 before they’re all born.”

Celeste laughed. “Did you bump your head while you were out looking for me?”

“No. That’s always been the plan.”

“For me to be pregnant seven times in the next ten years?”

“No, the next seven years, unless we have twins.”

“Honey, we’ll have seven kids as soon as you figure out how to give birth to at least three of them yourself.”

“Look at us. We’ve only been back together for a few hours and we’re already arguing.”

“Because you’re foolish.”

“You did not just . . .”

“Oh, I did. What are you going to do about it?”

First, I told her, and then I showed her. Within the next half hour, she was screaming my favorite number over and over.

EPILOGUE

CELESTE

I had just straightened up from grabbing an errant sock from the floor that I must have dropped when I carried the last load of clothes from the dryer to the bedroom when a labor pain hit me. It was so bad that I almost fell to my knees, so I leaned over and gripped the edge of the couch as I waited for it to pass. As soon as it ended, I slowly made my way over to the intercom so I could let Ransome know that the pains were coming closer together now. He'd been on edge the last few days, sure I was going to give birth any minute and afraid he'd miss even a second of the process. I had just stopped beside the front door when I felt a pop deep inside. As I pushed the button to call downstairs, warmth spread between my legs, soaking my favorite pair of maternity pants.

“Mama went pee pee in her pants,” I heard my three-year-old say with a giggle before my seven-year-old gasped.

“Is it time?”

Another pain hit, and I bent forward and rested my hand on the wall, wishing I had something to hold onto as I breathed slowly through the cramp. “Yeah, sweetie, it’s time.”

“Did you call Daddy?”

“Not yet.” I glanced up at the button before I looked over at my daughter. Another pain hit, this one even more intense than the last and way too soon to be normal. I wasn’t scheduled to deliver until next week and had assumed the pains that I’d felt off and on this morning were false labor. They might still be, but even then, they shouldn’t be so close together. “Take your sister downstairs and tell Daddy it’s time.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I felt Cassia touch my back, and I tried to stand up straighter so I didn’t worry her. When I looked down, I saw that she wasn’t fooled at all. She kept her hand on my back as I walked the few steps to the bench below the hooks where we hung our coats and scarves. Once she was sure I was settled, she called out for her sister. “Come on, Raya. Let’s go get Daddy.”

I watched my girls go through the doorway just as another pain washed over me. I spread my knees apart so I could bend forward and stretch out my back where the pain seemed to be focused. By the time I sat back up, I was out of breath and worried about how fast this seemed to be progressing. I knew better than to try and walk downstairs alone. Ransome had been insisting that I wait for him or one of his cousins to walk down in front of me in case I stumbled since my belly was bigger than it had been during my first two pregnancies. Besides, I wasn’t sure I could even make it to the stairs right now, let alone get down them.

“Hey, Celeste,” I heard Avery, one of Ransome’s cousins, call out as she passed by the door. Before I could ask her to help me, she gasped and said, “Shit. That doesn’t look good at all.” She suddenly appeared in front of me, but I couldn’t say anything because I was in the grips of another blinding pain. “You are *not* gonna pull a Lana and have this baby here.”

I frantically shook my head as I reached for her hand. Finally, I was able to catch my breath enough to whisper, “Call nine one one.”

Avery dropped to her knees in front of me as she pulled her phone out. In the next second, she had the dispatcher on the line and was giving her all the

necessary information to get the paramedics here. When someone else walked by the door, Avery interrupted her conversation with the operator to order them to make sure Ransome was on his way up and then stand at the door downstairs to wait for the ambulance.

“You’re gonna be okay, Celeste,” Avery said reassuringly.

“I know,” I said as I tried to catch my breath. “It’s Ransome I’m worried about. You know how he gets.”

“I told Jax we should have bought a tranq gun after what happened last time.” I tried to laugh, but the pain was too much, and I groaned instead. Finally, I was able to choke out, “This time, make sure he doesn’t bump his head when he passes out.”

“I’ll try, but I can’t make any promises. He really doesn’t need another concussion, but the man is twice my size.”



RANSOME

“I swear. Next time, I’m going to make you wear a helmet for the last six weeks of her pregnancy,” Smith grumbled as he pulled on a pair of latex gloves.

I shook my head and winced at the pain it caused before I said, “No more. I can’t do this again.”

“*You* can’t do this?” my sister growled. “Were you the one screaming at the top of your lungs less than an hour ago while you tried to push out a baby with a head the size of a bowling ball?”

“He must have gotten that from his father,” Smith mumbled. “You do have an abnormally large head.”

I chuckled. “You have no idea, man.”

“Good lord,” Rachel snapped before she stood up and stomped toward the door. “I’m going to check on Celeste while the two of you compare the size of your dicks. I swear, I’ll never get used to the way you men brag about shit that’s probably not even significant enough to measure.”

“I would show you mine just to prove you wrong, but I’m not really big on people like you looking at my junk,” Smith teased.

“People like me? You mean stunningly gorgeous women who wouldn’t give

you the time of day even if you were straight?”

“I was actually talking about people who might be inclined to slice it off and throw it out the car window as they sped away from the original crime scene.”

I laughed again, and the dull ache in my head turned into a sharp throb.

“Don’t make me laugh, man. It hurts.”

“It should hurt. I told you to stay up by her head last time, too, but you didn’t listen then any better than you listened today.”

“I wanted to see what was happening!”

“If you had a brain, you would have learned that’s not a good idea back when Cassia was born and I had to give you stitches on the other side of your head. But no! You had to look when Raya was born, so I could give you stitches on the back of your head. If you have many more children, you’re going to have more scars than Frankenstein’s monster.”

“This is it. No more.”

“Have you told your wife that?”

“Surely, she’s finished. There’s no way either of us can live through another round of morning sickness and mood swings.” I thought about it for a second and said, “Although, the mood swings didn’t seem to affect Celeste the way they did me.”

Smith chuckled. “Listening to her chew your ass about planting your demon spawn in her again was pretty amusing.”

“Yeah, but you should have seen the look on her face when they told her we finally had a little boy.”

“I can’t believe you think she’s going to stop at three. You know she’s had seven boy names and seven girl names picked out for years, right?”

“That was always just a joke. Three is plenty. Four would be pushing it. But seven? Hell no.”

“I guess we’ll see.”

THE END

Please take just a few minutes to leave a review of this book on Amazon and feel free to share the link with your friends. I enjoy discussing my books and characters and would love to hear from you. Check out Cee Bowerman on Facebook. You can also find information about the author and her books on www.cebowermanbooks.com.

COMING SOON

Emerald

Rojo Gems, Book 1

COMING OCTOBER 15th, 2023!

To outsiders, it might seem that Emerald Hamilton has led a charmed life. She has a loving and supportive family, a daughter that holds her entire heart, a beautiful house in a great neighborhood, a successful career, and friends that would do anything for her. She's got it all, or so you might think, but the path that brought Emerald to this point in life was a rocky one. As strong as she seems, she still has doubts and fears about what she could become. Those fears get in the way sometimes, and no matter how hard she tries, she just can't get past them.

Emerald has experienced more than her fair share of pain in her life, and that has shaped her into the strong and independent woman she is today. She finds that even the strongest people need help sometimes after an injury brings her down and renders her nearly helpless. Luckily, she's got the support of her friends, a group of people that have grown up together and know each other almost as well as they know themselves.

Join Cee Bowerman as she explores the life of the young woman who stole a place in readers' hearts, and discover the woman she's become as she finds the happily ever after she deserves.

About the Author

Cee Bowerman is a proud, lifelong resident of Texas. She is married to her own long-haired, tattooed biker and is Mom to three mostly adult kids - a daughter and two sons. She believes in love, second chances, rescue dogs, and happily ever after.

Cee received her first romance novel along with a bag of other books from her granny when she was recovering from surgery at 15. She has been hooked on reading romances ever since. For years, she had a dream of writing her own series of stories, but motherhood and all the other grown-up responsibilities kept getting in the way. Luckily, with the support of her family and the encouragement of her son, she purchased a computer and let her dreams become a reality.

With over fifty published books, Cee is still happily writing and creating new worlds for her readers to enjoy.

You can find her on Facebook @ceebowerman or online at www.ceebowermanbooks.com.

Look for more fun romances in the coming months and get updates on the Facebook page for more information on characters and stories that are in progress.