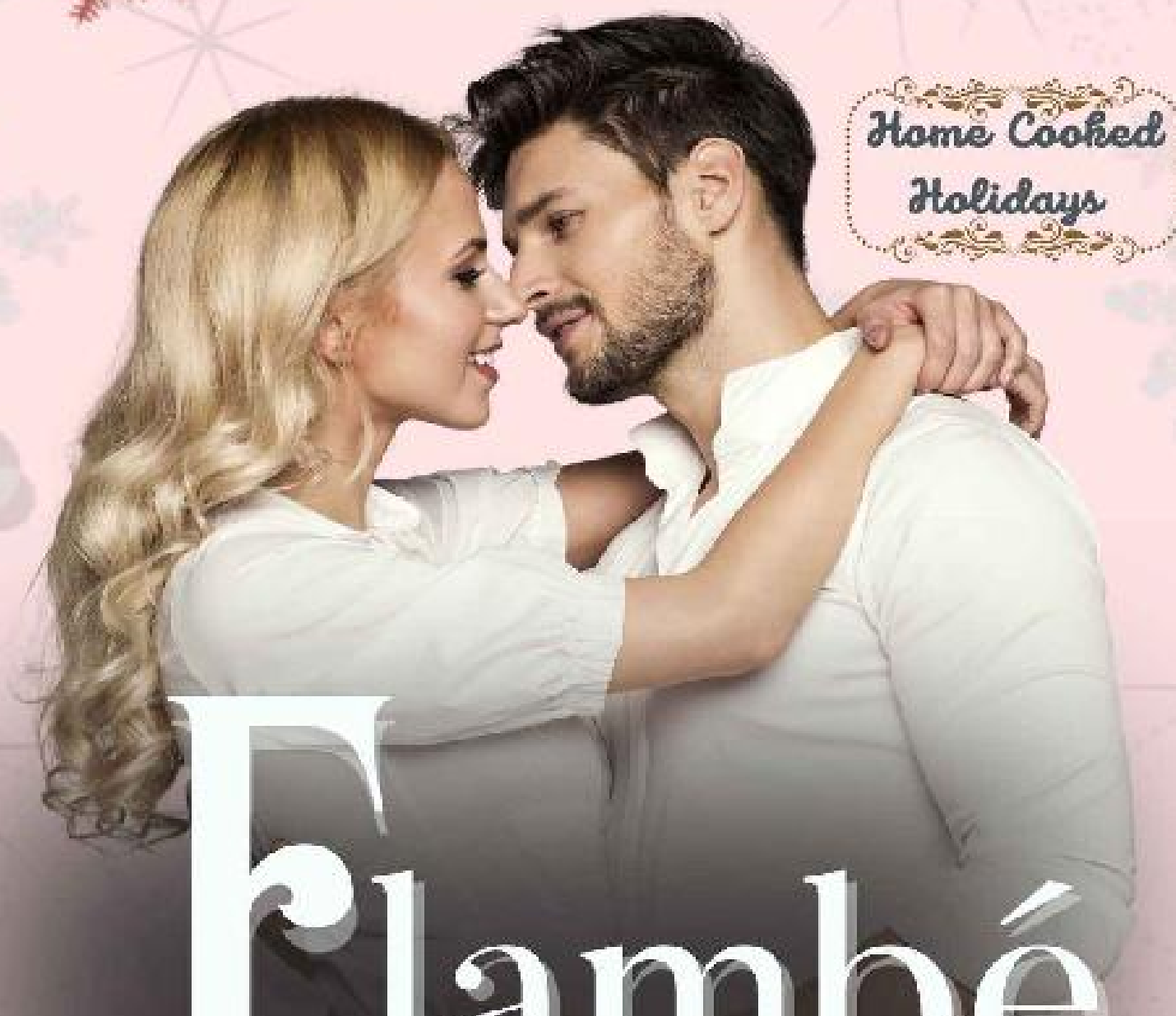


CHRISTINE KELSEY

*Home Cooked
Holidays*



Flambé
with
Finn



Flambé with Finn

Home Cooked Holidays

Christine Kelsey

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Chapter 1

Delilah

A smile spreads over my face as Grandma slips her arms through the crook of my elbow, pointing with a delighted *ooh* in the direction of the small-choir's worth of carolers jammed into the gazebo in the center of the town square. Snow drifts lazily through the air, and I can't help the sigh of contentment that slips through my lips.

Coming home to Pine Ridge wasn't an easy decision to make, not after feeling like I'd upended my own life's trajectory in New York City, but the past year has been healing. It doesn't hurt that Grandma was finally ready to step away from Sunny Side Cafe, leaving it in my care. After a remodel and a menu refresh, I've found peace with my past failures and contentment in where they landed me.

"Delilah!" My head jerks around, and my cheeks hurt from the force of my grin at the sight that meets my gaze. Darting through the crowd, with absolutely no regard for the people she bumps into along the way, is my long-time best friend, Nia. Her rosy cheeks peek out from behind the large, round rims of her glasses, red hair streaking behind her as she practically bowls over a few errant teenagers in her rush to get to me.

Her eyes sparkle with mischief as she skids to a halt on the hard-packed snow beneath our feet, spraying bits of ice and slush over my legs. “Hi, Mrs. Cooper!” She shouts jovially before forcing her way between us and wrapping her arms around both of our waists.

“Nia, you scoundrel,” Grandma chides with a tittering laugh as I shake my head at my bestie’s antics. “What trouble are you stirring up tonight?”

Nia pulls her arm from around my waist, crossing her heart with her forest-green mittens before pulling me close again. “I’m on my best behavior, Mrs. Cooper! It’s Christmas, I can’t risk going on the Naughty List!”

“For the twenty-sixth consecutive year,” I tease, and Nia gasps before hip checking me with enough force to send me stumbling.

“Fuuu—” The expletive gets caught in my throat as a hand wraps around my bicep.

A heady scent meets my nose, something familiar like cedar and... sandalwood, maybe? And my eyes jerk up as a deep, masculine voice says, “Whoa, there!”

Heat curls in my belly at the sight of the intense, blue eyes staring down at me as the man behind them steadies me on my feet. He takes a step back and runs a hand through his dark-brown hair, slicking down the strand that had fallen out of the styled undercut. The face of an undoubtedly fancy watch flashes beneath the light of the nearest lamppost. I don’t have to stare at his face to know he’s handsome—it’s already seared into my memory.

Hastily, I take a step backward, eyes fixed on the ground and the tips of his cognac-colored shoes. They’re about as

impractical as the three-piece suit he wears beneath an expensive wool peacoat. But practicality isn't something Finn Vittatoe has ever cared about in the past, so it doesn't surprise me that he's hilariously underdressed for the weather now.

I hope his ears get frostbitten. Asshole.

“Are you ok—”

“I'm fine,” I bite out, cutting him off as I move to hook my arm through Grandma's once more. I don't like the way her eyes narrowed when I turned back toward her, face undoubtedly flushed from the fury curling through my body in nearly debilitating waves. Nia takes a step forward, brushing past me with a glimmer of excitement in her green eyes as she takes in the so-clearly-out-of-place man behind me.

“My, my, my, aren't you a sight for sore eyes,” she starts as I whirl around, reaching for her. I snag my fingers in the hood of her coat, yanking her back before she can do something stupid. Like engaging this asshole any longer than necessary.

When she turns her head over her shoulder to glare at me, I hiss “*sugar plum*” at her through clenched teeth. Her lips purse for a quick second before her brows shoot to her hairline. I shake my head at her, quick and sharp, and her features darken before she backpedals a step and squares her shoulders, standing slightly in front of me.

Finn's gaze skips from my best friend to me, brows furrowing as Nia crosses her arms over her chest.

Bless her.

Bless our years-old panic phrase.

Bless having a bestie who knows when to back off, even if you can't give her all the reasons in the moment.

“I’m sorry, ladies,” Finn starts, a charming smile curling his lips on one side as he takes his own step back. “I didn’t mean any offense—I just didn’t want anyone to get hurt. It looked like you were going to eat dirt, Miss...”

He trails off, and I glare. *This asshole.*

“Cooper,” Grandma supplies helpfully, and my eyes widen with my shock as she steps around me and Nia to offer her arm. Finn doesn’t miss a beat, taking her elbow in a show of chivalry and letting her lead him through the square. “I’m Ellen, and that’s my granddaughter, Delilah. I’m sorry for her manners, I promise I raised her better than that. The other hellion is no relation!”

“Hey!” Nia calls as we rush after them. *What in the hell is she doing!*

“Grandma, maybe we should get home?” I offer, but she doesn’t halt, leading Finn by the arm through the square with me chasing after them.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Cooper.”

Grandma chuckles, and I can feel my eyes widen. *Are you shitting me?* Is this real life, or have I been sucked into the world’s worst episode of *The Twilight Zone*?

“You’re not from around here,” she says, and I can just spot her patting his hand affectionately as I catch up to them.

“What gave me away?” Finn’s undivided attention is focused on Grandma, his eyes never straying from her rosy face and warbling smile.

She hums in the back of her throat, and I throw a panicked glance at Nia. “Do you want me to trip him?” she mouths, and I shake my head no. Because surely Grandma would go down

with him, and I'm not trying to take a trip to Holly County Memorial tonight.

"I've lived in Pine Ridge long enough to know all of the eligible bachelors here—Delilah isn't going to get herself married."

He chuckles, finally glancing in my direction with a quirked eyebrow. I offer the nastiest glare I can muster in return as I exclaim, "Oh my god, Grandma!"

"And you're too skinny, which means you haven't been eating any of the excellent food at Sunny Side Cafe." *For the love.* I open my mouth to reprimand her, to remind her that I'm doing just *fine* and don't need her inviting the world's biggest asshole to darken the doorstep of my restaurant when she continues, "You should stop by in the morning and let Delilah cook you up something nice."

Heat unfurls deep in my belly when Finn and I lock eyes over Grandma's head, and my mouth gapes as he offers me a lascivious grin. "Mrs. Cooper, I have been exploring the *finer* dining options in Pine Ridge and Delilah certainly seems like she's on that list."

"Okay, absolutely not," I say as I step toward Grandma, not-so-gently yanking her hand from his arm. For good measure, I glare at Finn one last time before pulling Grandma away from him. "*Fine dining* isn't on the menu for you, asshole. Take a hike—Pine Ridge isn't buying what you're selling."

"Delilah LeeAnn Cooper!" Grandma chastises. I drag her away from Finn, shaking my head as Nia, eyes wide, laughs and chases after us.

Tempering my breathing, I pull to a stop when we've reached the edge of the town square. I turn, crossing my arms over my chest as I feel my eyes bulge. I take a deep breath, heart careening in my chest as I glance between my not-even-close to chagrined grandmother and my gleeful best friend. "Grandma, have you lost your goddamn mind?"

"Delilah, when a man that good looking steps foot in town, you have to snatch him up before someone else gets him! And unless you want to start dating Keith Lawson, you're running out of options!"

"Grandma," I say, inflecting as much levity into my tone as possible, hoping that my next words will help her understand the gravity of the situation. "That was *Finn Vittatoe*."

Nia's face pales, and Grandma's mouth falls open. "Oh, fuck," she whispers, the craggy lines around her mouth smoothing with the force of her frown.

Glancing across the square, my jaw tightens at the sight of the man staring steadfastly back in my direction. It's not the mature thing to do, but I raise my middle finger in the air and turn on my heel to stomp away.

Finn Vittatoe being in Pine Ridge is my worst nightmare. The man ruined my freaking life, and to add insult to injury—he doesn't even remember me.

Chapter 2

Finn

I've always been a take-life-by-the-horns type of guy. I make decisions, I stand beside them, and if I fail, I cut my losses and move on. If a business venture isn't going the way I expect, I don't sit back and let it bleed me dry. I nip it in the bud and start over somewhere else.

There isn't time to second-guess myself, which is why I find it so fucking strange that I can't get the woman from last night out of my mind.

Delilah Cooper, a small-town beauty with a big-city attitude.

The dismissal in those chocolatey brown eyes of hers should have warned me away, not intrigued me. The way she stood at the edge of the square and flipped me off after dragging her downright *delightful* grandmother away from me should have told me all I needed to know about her. But somehow, I found myself wanting to know *more*.

For example, how the hell does she know me all the way in Holly County, and why does she dislike me with such fervent vitriol?

Vittatoc Holdings is a nationally recognized brand, but in a backwater town like Pine Ridge? I shouldn't even be on her radar.

“The mayor is proving to be more *difficult* than expected,” I say as I step into the frigid afternoon air, squinting against the harsh sunlight reflecting off the snow in the square. I prop my phone between my shoulder and my ear as I drag my leather gloves on. “I’ll need to spend a bit more time here than expected.”

I glance both ways before jogging across the street, away from the Municipal Building and my failed meeting with the stubborn mayor. Opening a fine dining experience in the town square, lining my pockets, and increasing my holdings in Holly County should be my top priority. But as I cross another block and head toward the street behind the square, all I can think about is Delilah’s smart mouth.

“Finn, honey,” my mother’s voice drags me out of thoughts of putting Delilah’s mouth to work in the *right way*. “This isn’t the time of year to be wasting your efforts. We’re very busy with the Van Horn and Lavorre parties this week, and there’s still so much planning to do for your father’s event.”

I slow my pace to a stroll, watching through curious eyes as patrons of the town shuffle in and out of the shops on this road as well. The potential for the town is out of this world, but dollar signs are the last thing on my mind as I spot the kitschy sign for Sunny Side about halfway down the block. My heart skips a beat in my chest, but I try not to overthink it.

“Mom... Taylor, Lance, Haley, and I have been working non-stop on Dad’s event. When have we ever let you down?”

“Yes, but it’s for the *children*,” she says with a sigh, and I can’t help the laugh that puffs through my lips as I pause outside of the restaurant. Glancing inside, I can already tell it’s everything I *hate* about chic, farmhouse style restaurants and

prepare myself for a menu of deconstructed salads, sandwiches, and overpriced coffee.

“Mom, the event is well-planned, and Dad would be proud of the effort, just like every year in the past. The *children* will not be disappointed, nor will the hospital when the funds are delivered. Stop worrying. Now, I love you, but I need to go. I have one last appointment in Pine Ridge before I head home.”

I usher my mother off the phone with one last guarantee that I’ll be back in time to follow up with the philanthropic director at the children’s hospital. Shaking my head, I slip my phone into my pocket and square my shoulders.

I stride into the restaurant and a sugary, caramel scent hits my nostrils as the door closes behind me. My eyes widen at the sight of Delilah bent at the waist at the table nearest the door. Her long, blonde hair is pulled into a low ponytail at the base of her neck and her ass sways enticingly in a pair of form-fitting black pants.

Struggling, I pull my eyes away from her curves and watch as she sets an unlit butane torch on the table, rolls up the sleeves to her white button-up shirt, and picks the torch back up, lighting it before going in on a crème brûlée sitting at the edge of the table. The group of old women twitter excitedly as she steps back and extinguishes the flame on the torch.

“That looks... *delectable*,” I mutter, leaning over her shoulder. With a start, Delilah turns in my direction, and I’m rewarded with a sneer that does things to my gut that it absolutely should not.

“Didn’t I tell you,” she starts as she brushes past me, the scent of sugar clinging to her in a way that makes my mouth water, “that we’re not buying whatever you’re selling?”

I let my eyes dip to the curve of her waist as she pushes toward the end of the bar, darting behind the counter and leaving me on the other side to peel my hands out of my gloves. “Yes,” I start as I begin unbuttoning my coat, “but I am *very* interested in buying whatever it is that *you’re* selling.”

Her plush, pink lips curl into a devious smile as she crosses her arms over her chest, pushing her tits up in a way that’s impossible not to stare at. She clears her throat, so I stare a moment longer for good measure before meeting her eyes with a smirk.

“Fine. The corner booth’s open. I’ll be right there.” She turns away, and I swear I hear her murmuring something about a *self-important asshole* under her breath. A thrill of excitement rushes down my spine, but I try to ignore it. I’m sure there’s something to be said about liking the fact that she’s bratty, but that’s not a book I’m willing to read right now.

I settle into the booth, glancing at my watch as Delilah moves unhurriedly behind the counter, stopping every few feet to talk with one of the other few employees I spot or laugh with a customer who sits on a stool pressed against the aged, wooden counter. She takes her time, and I try not to let it ruffle me as I pull my phone out, tapping into my email app and opening the proposal I’d sent to Mayor Hayes. The asshole hadn’t even bothered to open it before our meeting.

Gritting my teeth, I glance back up, stomach clenching when I don’t spot Delilah behind the counter. I’m pushing to my feet when she breezes through the door from the kitchen, another ramekin and butane torch balanced on a tray. Her eyes narrow in my direction, and I drop down, leg bouncing as she approaches. Something about the way she moves with the tray

propped over her shoulder seems almost... *familiar*, but I brush it off. Opening restaurants is what I do for a living. Hand any person a tray with something balanced on it and it would probably seem familiar to me.

I jolt when she drops the tray on the table, the ramekin rattling with the force.

“Sorry,” she says, though her tone suggests that she’s not at all sorry. Not even close. My eyes catch on her hands as she reaches for the torch, and the tremor I see running through them gives me pause. Glancing up, I’m surprised to see her steadfastly looking anywhere but in my direction.

“Are you okay?” I ask, a note of genuine concern in my voice as her posture stiffens and her shoulders tense. Her brows furrow and I can make out the indent in her cheek that suggests she’s chewing the inside of it. She lights the torch and I lean back, the heat sudden and intense as she leans toward the desert.

“Is there something I can—”

“*No.*” It’s direct. It’s assertive. It’s not what I want to hear when she’s obviously so rattled.

“Look, if there’s something I’ve done to offend you...” I trail off as I turn more fully toward her, leg half out of the booth.

She scoffs and shakes her head.

“There isn’t paper long enough for that list,” she mutters. I cock my head as she turns the torch on the dessert with badly shaking hands. “This is a hot honey caramel brûlée, it’s a little experimental, but it’s been a town favorite so far.”

I hum in the back of my throat, swallowing nervously as her hands continue to shake. I glance at her posture, taking in

the heavy rise and fall of her shoulders. “Listen, if you need to maybe take a step back, or...”

“Shit!” She exclaims, and my stomach tightens as she loses her grip on the torch, fumbling with it as it sails toward the floor. Stupidly, we reach for it at the same time, and I’m only faintly aware of the smell of burning cloth before heat tickles my thigh.

“Fuck!” My head spins as she deftly turns the torch off, whips a bar towel out of the waistband of her apron and beats out the small flame from the inner thigh of my pants. She presses the towel against my leg with shaking hands, and my brain short circuits. “Are you okay? I’m so, so sorry!”

“I—” I pause, unsure of what to say as she peels her hand away, giving us both a chance to glance at the quarter-sized hole singed in my pants. “I’m fine?”

But I’m not. Because the feel of her hands on my body? Divine. And I know I’m in so much fucking trouble. Because I’ve heard of hot honey crème brûlée before, and I’m pretty goddamn sure I know why Delilah Cooper seemed so familiar to me with that tray in her hand. A lead weight sinks in my stomach.

“You should leave.” She says softly, eyes lowered. I nod along numbly, pushing to my feet and gathering my belongings. Her hands shake as she gathers her things back up, and I want to tell her that it’s going to be okay, but I don’t, knowing without a doubt that she won’t want to hear it. I take a few steps away from her before she calls out in a small voice, “And don’t come back.”

Fat fucking chance. Delilah Cooper just set my world on fire, and I’ve never been one to back down from a challenge.

Chapter 3

Delilah

“You’ve got to be shitting me,” I murmur before dropping down on my haunches, crossing my fingers and hoping for a Christmas miracle that Finn fucking Vittatoe didn’t see me behind the counter as he reached for the door to the restaurant.

My heart beats a war song in my chest as the bells above the door tinkle their merry sound into the empty dining room, and I screw my eyes shut. Why couldn’t he have waited five more measly minutes? I was *this close* to locking the doors, counting the money, and heading home for the night.

It’s the week before Christmas—the square is filled to the brim, and we’ve been slower than usual here at Sunny Side. I sent Mark, the evening’s cook, home half an hour ago and I’ve twiddled my thumbs ever since.

“Are you okay down there?”

Motherfucker.

I sigh heavily, tipping my head back and popping my eyes open to see Finn leaning over the counter, head cocked slightly to the side as his brows draw together. He paints a convincing picture of concern; I’ll give him that. Still, I feel the heat of a blush creeping up my neck, so I frantically run my hand under the counter until my fingers connect with something, literally *anything*, on the floor.

Popping up, I flourish an embarrassingly dusty fork as I say, “Yeah, I just dropped this.” I place the fork on the counter, maintaining steadfast eye contact as I cross my arms over my chest. Finn doesn’t bother glancing at the fork, cocking an eyebrow in disbelief as he leans back.

“What do you want?” I ask as the blush creeps toward my cheeks. It takes everything I have to maintain eye contact. A few days ago, I set this man’s pants on fire. Margaret Gibbs and Nellie Cameron have spread the news all over town, and Keith Lawson made sure to stop by and tell me the fire department was just a call away if I needed to be talked down from future cases of arson or assault by fire.

“To talk.”

The words are out of my mouth before I can even consider them. “There’s no chance in hell.”

I suck in a sharp breath as he places his hands on the bar and leans toward me again, and the face of another expensive watch flashes in the warm glow of the Edison bulbs hanging over the bar. The sight of a vein popping in his neck shouldn’t distract me, nor should the woodsy scent of his expensive cologne.

But as he invades my space, I lose myself in the memory of his muscles bulging beneath my fingers as I pressed them into his upper thigh. I *hate* the rush of heat in my core, but I remind myself that it’s biology.

After all, Finn is nothing if not stupidly attractive. The eyes, the hair, the watch and expensive *suits*? A girl would have to be willfully ignorant to not be affected by a man like him.

“Delilah Cooper,” he says. The sound of my name falling from his lips drips through me like the hot honey I use in my signature holiday dessert. Instinctively, I suck my bottom lip into my mouth and bite down, my center heating to boiling as his eyes dart to follow the move. “Are you holding a grudge over *Ambiance*?”

The name of the restaurant is like a bucket of ice water, cooling me in an instant. “So you *do* remember me?” I accuse, taking a step back as he smirks, proud of himself for slapping me in the face with the reminder of my failure.

“I had to look up personnel files to be sure, but not every pastry chef in New York is going around serving something like hot honey *crème brûlée*. Experimental, is that what you called it?”

“Get. Out.”

He sucks his teeth and shakes his head, the smirk morphing into a full smile now. The self-assured pride pushes me to the brink and my chest heaves with the labored breaths I push through pursed lips. *Ambiance* was nothing more than another business venture to Finn. To me and the other chefs, though? It was our everything. He only gave us six months before he pulled the plug.

The night he swept into the kitchen with his horrendous date—the woman complained from the start of the meal until the very end—and told us we weren’t making the money necessary to be a viable investment was the worst night of my life. I poured years of my life into culinary school. The other chefs and I poured our hearts and souls into the concept for *Ambiance*, giving it every little bit of ourselves before it was just... *gone*.

“It was just business, Delilah. No hard feelings.”

“I suffered through six months of hard feelings,” I spit as I take a step forward again. My hands shake as I brace my weight on the counter, pushing up on my tiptoes to get in his face. His grimace comes and goes in a few seconds, replaced by the same easy smirk he started the conversation with in the blink of an eye. “And now you’re here, in *my hometown*, in *my restaurant*, to do what? Taunt me? Fuck off. I’ve already told you that Pine Ridge isn’t buying whatever you’re selling, Vittatoe.”

His chest expands with a deep, slow breath. His eyes narrow as he studies my face. There’s something hiding in his eyes that I can’t quite decipher, and my stomach clenches uncomfortably.

“I’m here to open a restaurant. It’s not about you.”

I scoff. Pine Ridge isn’t a fine dining destination, and that’s all Finn Vittatoe does. We do hometown here, and we’re proud of it. If nothing else, I know I’ll have Monty Hayes and all the Historical Society on my side.

“You’ll open a restaurant here over my dead body. Don’t get your hopes up,” I seethe.

My breath catches in my throat when suddenly he reaches up, wraps a hand around the back of my neck, and drags me closer to him. His eyes are blue fire as he whispers, “I don’t hope, Delilah. I plan, I execute, and I win.”

“Let go of me,” I demand half-heartedly, eyes snagging on his lips as his tongue darts out to wet them. I am but a simple woman, beholden to her vagina. And dark, smoldering Finn Vittatoe is like a stocking stuffed full of Christmas candy. I want him. Badly. And I fucking hate myself for it.

Finn finally closes the gap between us, taking my lips in a demanding kiss. I wrap my fingers around the edge of the counter to keep myself from reaching for him when he nips at my bottom lip until my mouth falls open for him. A jolt of electricity shoots through my veins when he tips my head back further, deepening the kiss until I'm a tingling mess.

When he pulls away, dropping his hand from my neck and taking a step back, he says, "Not without a fight, Cooper."

"I thought this wasn't about me?" I call as he turns away from me, strutting toward the door with a self-assured gait that only stokes the fire of angry arousal within me.

"I've never been a very good liar."

The tinkling of the bells above the door echo in my brain as I stare after him in shock. What the fucking hell was that?

Chapter 4

Delilah

“Yes, Mom, I realize that I missed an appointment with the director of the foundation but Lance and Haley were still there, so I don’t understand what the issue is.”

Of course he doesn’t understand what the issue is. I roll my eyes. The thought of Finn Vittatoe inconveniencing someone has probably never once crossed his mind. Men like him never hold themselves accountable. His poor mom.

“Keep making an ugly face like that and one day it’ll stick,” says an amused voice from across the bar.

I grit my teeth but take a deep breath, calming my racing heart and clearing my head before turning my attention away from the corner booth. I offer Grandma a smile as she settles onto a stool next to Nia, who slides her half-drunk cup of coffee over to my grandmother before I can turn to make a cup for her. Grandma pats her arm gently before swigging from the cup.

It’s sweet—in a very gross sort of way.

“I’m glad you’re here, Mrs. Cooper! Delilah is being very uncooperative about her stalker.”

“Who, Finn?” Grandma asks before twisting in her seat, a smile lighting her face when she spots the man in the corner.

He raises his hand to her and she waves back energetically before turning back toward me with a wistful sigh. “Delilah, if you don’t take that man for a test drive soon, I’m going to.”

“Oh, she *has* test driven him,” Nia chimes in. My answering blush is fiery and immediate.

“*Sugar plum!*” I hiss. She laughs and I lunge for her. She slides off her stool, dancing out of my reach.

Nia steps just behind Grandma, hiding her face in her hands as she giggles. My body vibrates with annoyance as she leans over, a look of impish delight on her face.

“They kissed here a few nights ago,” she says in a stage whisper. “And then again in the square yesterday. And Delilah had a very naughty dream about him last night.”

“*Sugar plum, sugar plum, sugar plum!*” I repeat, snatching a piece of ice out of her water and launching it at her head. I told her about Finn cornering me under some mistletoe in the square yesterday and kissing me until my legs quaked with desire. And Grandma doesn’t need to know about my wet dreams. Is *nothing* sacred between best friends anymore?

“Oh, that’s delightful!” My mouth falls open, shock rocketing through me and stealing the response on my tongue. Grandma has always been a little less than appropriate, but calling my spicy dreams delightful? I sputter as she continues, “Tell me, Delilah, is he as good in bed in your dreams as I imagine he is in real life?”

“Anyone that I know?”

Nia spins, a delighted giggle falling from her lips as Finn approaches. He throws a familiar, infuriating smirk in my direction and drops onto Nia’s recently vacated stool, propping

his elbow on the counter and offering Grandma a winning smile.

“Finn, darling,” Grandma says as she turns toward him, leaning in and taking a noticeable deep breath. My eyes widen and I thread my fingers through my hair, lacing them behind my head as I count my breaths. She smiles wickedly. “I’ve heard you’ve been kissing my granddaughter all over town.”

“Grandma—”

“And inspiring some rather... *spicy* dreams,” Nia adds conspiratorially, her voice pitching down an octave as she wiggles her eyebrows suggestively.

Someone call the sheriff. I’m going to jail for first-degree murder.

Finn’s heated gaze as he turns toward me *should not* send a spear of want straight to my core. The way his eyes flit over my body in a slow perusal shouldn’t cause my breath to catch in my throat. And I hate that it does.

“Really?” He asks, voice low and heated. My cheeks burn.

“Yes, and I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you to make an honest woman of her before it’s too late.”

“*Sugar plum, you incorrigible Grinches!*” I shout. Heads turn in our direction from all over the restaurant. Margaret and Nellie frown disapprovingly and I gesture angrily in Grandma’s direction. Margaret smiles fondly—always less perturbed by my grandmother’s antics than I am—and I roll my eyes. Can I not get support anywhere today?

“All of you need to leave.”

“Delilah LeeAnn,” Grandma starts, but I cut her off.

“No, ma’am. You’re not behaving yourself and I have a business to run. You can take Nia and go be nuisances elsewhere.”

A deep chuckle meets my ears and I turn narrowed eyes on Finn. He adjusts his cuffs before glancing up at me, a half-grin cocked on his lips. My stomach flutters, and I press my lips into a thin line.

“And what about me?”

“Get lost,” I say as I turn toward the door separating the dining room from the kitchen. “Forever.”



“You realize,” Finn’s low, sultry voice startles me. I clutch my hand over my chest as he steps away from a sporty car parked a few spaces down from the front door. “I can’t get lost when I’m living in your head rent free.”

I turn back toward the door, pulling a face as I jam the key in the lock with shaking hands. “Do me a favor and try.”

The heat of his body pressing against my back causes a shiver to race down my spine, and I stiffen as his hands drop to my shoulders. My skin prickles as he pulls my hair to the side, the cold leather of his gloves caressing my skin before he drops his lips to my neck. Oh my god, did I fall asleep in the office again?

“Unlock the door,” he commands, and I shake my head ‘no.’ The warm puff of his breath over my neck as he chuckles sends a tingle of anticipation through my core. “Why not?”

“I’m not supposed to let you take me to a secondary location.”

“I’m not going to murder you, Delilah,” he murmurs before pressing another hot kiss to my neck. He trails a series of butterfly-light kisses to my ear, nibbling on my lobe before releasing it and whispering, “I’m going to get you off.”

I’m definitely dreaming. Because there’s no way my mortal enemy just outright said he was going to make me come all out in the open, right? As he trails kisses back toward the crook of my neck, biting down gently as his scruff scratches my neck in a way that pulls a full-bodied shudder out of me, I decide that I’m *definitely dreaming*.

But holy crap, it’s a hell of a dream. With quivering fingers, I twist the key in the lock and push the door open, falling inside with him in a flurry of movement. My muddled brain barely keeps up as he takes the keys from me, locks the door from the inside, and tosses them on the counter. And then his mouth is on mine, hot and demanding. His hand travels down to the small of my back, and he yanks me forward. I gasp at the feel of his erection pressing against my stomach, and he takes the opportunity to slide his tongue into my mouth. God... the taste of him is divine.

Bending down, he palms my thighs and lifts me, guiding me to wrap my legs around his waist. “Is there an office?” he asks between feverish kisses.

“Through the kitchen,” I answer as he kneads my ass in his strong grip, a sigh falling through my lips. I bury my face in his neck, relishing the feeling of the friction between our bodies as his hurried steps grind me against the thick, hard cock pressing up against me.

Lips parting, I groan into his neck as I take in the scent of his cologne. A shudder racks his frame and I lick a trail from the crook of his neck to his ear, biting gently at his skin before

soothing it with kisses. He yanks at my ankles, uncrossing them from behind him, and I shriek as he drops me to the floor unceremoniously.

Blinking owlishly, I realize with a start that he'd moved us with horny efficiency through the restaurant, quickly finding the small office in the very back of the building. Finn reaches for my coat, but I beat him to the punch, unzipping it and flinging it over the small table in the corner, knocking over a picture of me and Grandma from my opening day in the process.

I ignore the sound of shattering glass. Honestly, it's probably for the best. Grandma shouldn't be audience to what's going to happen next because dreams don't feel this damn good.

I start to unbutton my top, but he shakes his head. "Bottoms only."

"But—"

He tsks, crossing his arms over his chest as he leans against the closed office door. "You will do as I say if you want what I have to offer you."

"What if I don't?" But my traitorous, breathless voice reveals more than my words ever could. He smirks, quirked an eyebrow, but I don't have the wherewithal to keep fighting. Not when my insides are burning, my legs are trembling, and every part of me feels seconds away from combusting.

"Take your pants off. Leave your panties on. Then bend over the desk like a good girl."

I suck my bottom lip into my mouth, chewing for a second before my hands drop to the button on my slacks. I kick my shoes off as Finn chuckles. My eyes follow the slow way he

peels his gloves off before unbuttoning his coat. Trembling hands push my pants over the swell of my hips and my breath hitches in my throat as he takes a step in my direction, carefully placing his coat on the office chair as I straighten and step out of my pants.

Finn points to the desk, arching a brow. I open my mouth, but all I manage is a squeak as he takes a step forward and gestures in the direction of my workspace. My knees all but give out as I collapse over the desk, turning my head to take in his profile as Finn leans over me. His breath puffs over my cheek as his chest presses against my back, stealing the breath from my lungs from the pressure. I gasp, eyes slamming closed when he cups me over my underwear.

“Mmm, you’re so fucking wet I can feel you through your panties,” he murmurs before he pushes my panties into my folds, the material scratching over my clit with enough force to make my legs quiver. “Have you been thinking about this since last night? What it would feel like to have me teasing you?”

I pant out a moan, hands pushing toward the edge of the desk until I can grip the side. Finn circles my clit through my panties before pulling his hand away to trace his fingers along the edge of the band above my pelvic bone. “Is this how you dreamed it would be?” he asks, voice low and gravelly as he pushes his fingers past the elastic band, slowly applying pressure as he inches closer and closer to my clit.

“No,” I manage through clenched teeth. He stills. I push up on my toes, desperate for his fingers to descend the few inches necessary to send me to the edge of bliss, but he pulls his hand up, tutting.

“How is this different? Tell me what you want, and I’ll give it to you.”

“For starters,” I say as I push against his chest, creating enough space to prop up on my elbows as I turn my head fully to face him. He angles his head until our lips are inches apart, our breath mingling in the space between us. I smirk, acting a hell of a lot surer of myself than I feel, as I continue, “In my dreams, your mouth is too busy for you to keep fucking talking.”

Finn growls before closing the distance between us, capturing my lips in a bruising kiss as his fingers slide downward, circling my clit with light, teasing pressure. I moan into his kiss and our tongues tangle as I grind my hips, aching for the pressure he seems so determined to deny me.

He circles my clit softly a few times more before his fingers slip even further down. I cry out, wrenching my mouth from his and dropping my forehead to the cool surface of the desk as he sinks two fingers into me, pumping them experimentally before finding a rhythm that pulls soft mewls of pleasure from my lips. I gasp when he curls his fingers and grinds the heel of his palm against my clit, eyes crossing with pleasure as he hits just the right spot over and over again.

Heat builds to a nearly unbearable level in my core and my orgasm overtakes me with surprising force. My legs give out entirely, and I drape over the desk, fingers aching with the force of holding onto the side as I shudder through my release.

“That’s my good girl,” he mutters, and another violent shudder racks my body.

I murmur unintelligibly in response.

“I know you don’t believe me, Delilah,” he says as he pulls away, straightening my panties and helping me stand. He grabs my pants before helping me back into them, gently zipping and buttoning them as he drops little kisses along my brow. “But I *am* here for you. And I’m going to prove to you that I’m worth it.”

Emotion clogs my throat and I glance in the direction of my coat in the corner, the ruined photograph underneath it reminds me that I have more to lose than just my pride. I heave a breath, but he shakes his head, cutting me off as he says, “We host a Christmas Eve fundraiser for the children’s hospital every year in my dad’s memory. Come as my date?”

The ‘no’ is on the tip of my tongue and I think Finn can sense that because he leans in and kisses me until I say yes.

Chapter 5

Finn

We're barely two feet in the door, and I already know I've made a hell of a mistake. Delilah looks stunning in a floor length, black gown. Where she scrounged it up on such short notice, I don't know, but the open back and deep v at the front pulls more than one head in her direction as we cross the ballroom.

If she's nervous, she doesn't show it. My hometown beauty has all the grace of any of the high society women here, and it doesn't escape my notice that eyes, both male and female, track each step we take through the room. They're going to try to eat her alive here.

I see my younger brother Taylor standing across the room, and our eyes meet. He quirks his head toward Delilah, who has moved her arm around my waist, pulling me against her until we're plastered together. Glancing down, I see a secret smirk pulling her lips up slightly at the corner and I turn to see some flashy woman glaring at her back.

Oh, they might think they'll eat her alive, but my Delilah bites back.

"What are you doing?" I ask as we start our rounds through the ballroom.

She smiles politely to a benefactor who stops to talk about how beautiful the trees are around the room. I remind the man that he can bid appropriately to support the children's hospital. His eyes rake down Delilah's frame and he smiles lasciviously until I pull her away.

"The same thing as you," she replies easily as we sidestep a stalled couple near the center of the ballroom.

"Which is?"

"Ensuring that those women staring at you like a piece of meat understand that you're here with *me* tonight. You dragged me here kicking and screaming, you're not abandoning me for a closet tryst with a socialite."

I huff out a surprised laugh, dragging her to a stop to stare down at her. A small smile quirks her lips up at the corners and I shake my head at her. Delilah Cooper, making a joke? I must have died and gone to fucking heaven.

Getting her here took every ounce of my stubborn willpower. Convincing her that I'm worth the pain in the ass I seem to be to her is the only thing on my mind. Somehow, showing her that *Ambiance* wasn't personal—that it really was just business and that I commit to the things that matter—is all I want out of this night.

Leaning down, I kiss her quickly before pulling back just far enough to whisper, "You're adorable, Cooper." I pull away from her, smiling at the slightly dazed look on her face. She clears her throat, and I very chivalrously don't mention the blush staining the apples of her cheeks.

"And you're at my mercy, Vittatoo," she says with a breathless laugh that slowly trails off as an older woman steps into our path, a simpering smile on her face.

“Mrs. Van Horn,” I say, nodding my head before stepping away from Delilah with one last squeeze of her hip. I take the woman’s proffered hand, dropping a kiss on the back of it before spinning back toward my date with an easy smile. “Delilah, this is one of my grandmother’s dearest friends, Edith Van Horn. Mrs. Van Horn, this is Delilah Cooper, my date for the evening.”

“I’m afraid I don’t recognize the name,” Mrs. Van Horn says. I fight the grimace that wants to pull over my face as she stares down her nose at Delilah. *Here we go...*

The blonde at my side offers a polite, unaffected smile, brushing her long hair over her shoulder as she extends her hand politely. Mrs. Van Horn takes it in a weak grip before dropping it. Fire burns in Delilah’s eyes and my stomach tightens as her mouth falls open to respond.

I’m not afraid of what she might say—she’s welcome to stand up for herself—but I know the damage someone like Edith Van Horn can do when she feels slighted. Her opinion doesn’t matter, *not really*, but I’d hate for her to get to my grandmother before I have the chance to introduce Delilah to my family properly.

As my date.

As my girlfriend.

As my future wife if I’m fucking lucky enough.

“That’s because she doesn’t belong here, Mrs. Van Horn.”

Delilah whirls, eyes wide and shoulders tense, and I take a long, deep breath. *Can nothing go my way tonight?* My jaw clenches as I turn, but I know the face of the viper waiting at my back. Jacqueline Grant. Poised. Gorgeous. Cruel.

“Jacqueline, that’s incredibly unnecessary,” I say to my ex, reaching my hand out to wrap around Delilah’s wrist, holding her in place as Jacqueline smirks down her perfect nose at her. Delilah tries to shake my grip away, but I hold onto her steadfastly, unwilling to let her go. Not like this. Not because of these people.

Jacqueline turns her sneer on me, hazel eyes narrowing as she props her hands on her hips. I’m vaguely aware of Mrs. Van Horn standing behind us and the small crowd circling around us, putting on appearances by chatting in small groups, as to not appear to be listening to the awkward, tense exchange.

Polite society, my ass.

“Is it? How else am I supposed to react, Finny?” My teeth grind as I clench my jaw and I remind myself to breathe. The reminders are for naught, though, and I choke on my breath when she continues, “You’re with *her*, some worker from a restaurant that you closed *for me*? When did you lower yourself to dating the help? You’re better than this.”

“*The help?*” Delilah snaps. I can feel my future crashing and burning around me as she yanks her wrist from my grip. She takes a step in Jacqueline’s direction, but the socialite stops her in her steps with her next ugly sentiment.

“I’m sorry, would you prefer I call it what it is? Slumming, by the way,” Jacqueline tears her hateful gaze from Delilah and turns it toward me instead. “That’s what you’re doing, Finn. *Slumming.*”

Whispers rise in the crowd around us as Delilah scoffs, shoulders loosening in the second before she throws her head back and laughs. *What the fuck?* My stomach tightens as she shakes her head and reaches up to wipe her eyes before

shrugging. I take a step forward, reaching for her once more. Easily, she side-steps me, passing me a glance that's impossible to decipher before shoving past Jacqueline with enough force to make the other woman stumble on her sky-high heels.

"Delilah," I call after her, stepping around Jacqueline as Haley, Lance, and Taylor push through the circle of spectators. They take up spots at my back as my ex rights herself and sneers in the direction of my date's back.

"Not worth it," Delilah calls out easily, not bothering to look at me over her shoulder as she walks away.

"She's totally worth it," Haley hisses at my back. "She almost floored Sacqueline—she's a keeper in my books. Go get her, or I will!"

I huff a laugh at my sister's unflattering nickname for my ex, but my amusement withers as I glance at Jacqueline and Mrs. Van Horn in turn. The challenge is clear in their eyes—follow Delilah and disgrace myself in our social circle. Stay and maintain the status quo.

The problem? I've never given much of a shit about status quo and the woman I'm falling in love with is currently walking out of the ballroom.

"Tell Mom I'm so sorry and I'll make it up to her. But I'm not letting my future walk away from me," I say to my siblings, heart pounding as they offer nods and smiles of encouragement. Haley offers me a thumbs up and Lance thumps my back before I turn on my heel.

Pushing through the crowd, I can't help the desperation that slams through me like a ten-pound hammer. I already knew I was leaps and bounds ahead of Delilah in the feelings

department and now I have no idea if I've lost her before I really had a chance to win her.

Determination sets my jaw as I push out onto the street, eyes scanning frantically for any sight of her. I will not accept her walking away from this, not when the potential between us is explosive, and beautiful, and everything I could never deserve from life.

Delilah Cooper has another thing coming if she thinks I'm giving up on her this easily.

Chapter 6

Delilah

“What are you doing?”

I don't bother glancing over my shoulder, knowing full-well what a disapproving frown looks like on Finn's face without needing to see it in real life. “Trying to convince your security guard that I'm not going to steal your television.”

“Luis, Ms. Cooper was here with me earlier,” Finn says over my shoulder. I roll my eyes. I'd also reminded the security guard that he'd called me by my name on the way out the door earlier, but...

“Mr. Vittatoe, admittance to the penthouse is restricted and she was not on the approved list.”

My lips purse and I grind my teeth. And there's the crux of it all.

I'm good enough to be openly flirted with in Pine Ridge. Good enough for him to get me off in my office. Good enough to flaunt on his arm at his family's annual Christmas Eve fundraiser. Not good enough to remember. And certainly not good enough to be on the list to be let into his home, where a suitcase with my belongings is splayed on one side of his king-sized bed.

My heart wrenches in my chest and I swallow thickly around the emotion threatening to spill over. Luis offers me a sympathetic smile, and I try to remind myself that he's just doing his job—that it's not his fault the mega-douchebag behind me tricked me into thinking he's capable of anything other than trying to make a fast return on his investment.

“Well, now that we've cleared that up, I'd love to go grab my things.”

“*Delilah,*” Finn groans as Luis offers me a card for the elevator, grimacing over my shoulder at the man behind me. The weight of Finn's hand dropping on my shoulder turns my stomach as I grapple with the feelings of affection that want to flutter to life there. I take the card with a nod, turning toward the elevator and shaking Finn's hand off me as I go. “*Delilah!*”

I jam the button on the small, discreet panel, steadfastly ignoring Finn as he shoves himself between me and the door. Crossing my arms over my chest, I watch the numbers ticking lower as I count down the seconds in my head, measuring my breaths with each floor the elevator passes.

“Are you seriously going to stand there and ignore me?”

Yup. Because I might do something stupid if I don't. Like kiss you and tell you none of this matters.

“Please tell me that you aren't putting merit to Jacqueline's words.”

I heave a deep sigh, shoulders aching with the tension I've held in them since I climbed into the back of Finn's car at The Beekman. It wasn't Jacqueline's implication that Finn had lowered himself to be with me—that he was *slumming*. That ugliness was precisely what I expected from some of the partygoers tonight. No, the actual insult was the fact that *she*

remembered me from *Ambiance* when Finn had to look me up in personnel files.

Good enough to mess around with. Not good enough to be more than just another conquest.

That's a lie, an ugly little voice whispers in the back of my head, but I push it away. I don't have time to let anything other than my disappointment fuel me. I cannot be hurt by Finn Vittatoe again and I have to hold onto that with both hands.

The doors slide open behind him, and I offer a tight smile before squeezing past him, waving the card over the access pad at the bottom of the panel before hitting the button for the penthouse. Finn ducks into the elevator with a long-suffering sigh and an awkward, uncomfortable silence fills the space around us as we rocket toward the top floor of the high rise.

I ignore the view the wall of windows offers as the doors slide open into the entryway of Finn's home. Instead, I toss the card onto the table next to the elevator and stomp toward his bedroom, heels clicking against the marble floors as I move through the space with angry efficiency.

"Delilah, this is ridiculous!" Finn finally explodes when I pass the threshold into his bedroom.

Whirling, I yank my arms out of my coat and throw it on the floor. Blood whooshes in my ears, and I cross my arms over my chest, nails digging into my biceps painfully as I grip them to keep from reaching for him and shaking him. "Did you really close *Ambiance* just because your girlfriend didn't like it?"

"W-what?"

I throw my arms up and turn toward my luggage, yanking a pair of jeans, a t-shirt, and a hoodie out of the bag. Grabbing

the edge of the suitcase, I balance on one foot and then the other as I unclasp my heels, allowing them to fall, clanking angrily against the marble when they hit the floor.

“I cannot fucking believe that you were so pussystruck that you closed my restaurant, smashed my dreams, and ruined the lives of countless others just because she didn’t fucking like it!”

I reach for the zipper on the side of my dress, yanking it down viciously as he splutters. His eyes widen as I step out of the way-too-expensive black dress, bare chest heaving, and reach for my t-shirt. To his credit, he only stares at my tits for a nanosecond before my words seem to hit him.

He wrenches his eyes away from my body, face turning sour as he asks, “What the hell are you talking about? What does *Ambiance* have to do with anything? You aren’t mad about what Jacqueline said—that I’m slumming with you? Because that’s not what this is!”

“I’m fucking *furios*,” I correct him as I yank the t-shirt over my head, hands shaking as I reach for my pants. I change my mind halfway through, whirling and stomping in his direction to shove my finger against his chest. “But I don’t give a shit about *slumming*. Why the fuck did you close *Ambiance*?”

“Because it was too experimental, in the wrong area, and it was never going to make its money back!”

“You only gave us six months!”

“I know a bad investment when I see one, Delilah.”

“So do I, Finn,” I say before turning away, the words ash on my tongue. My stomach tightens when his hand wraps around my bicep and he jerks me back around, pulling me

flush against his body. His chest heaves, pressing against mine as he wraps his free hand in the hair at the base of my skull and yanks my head back.

“Take it back,” he seethes. My breath catches in my throat at the heat in his eyes. Anger simmers there, but something darker, more lustful sits in front of the fury and heat pools in my core.

I whimper as he drags me closer, digging his hard cock into my stomach as he grinds his hips forward. My whisper is breathy, my tone giving away what my words refuse to as I reply, “No.”

“Delilah,” he warns as he lowers his face until he’s dangerously close to pressing his lips against mine with each word he speaks, “I’m all in. You can’t take that away from me.”

“What if I’m not worth it?”

“My God,” he whispers, his breath hitching as he presses his forehead against mine and closes his eyes. A heartbeat of silence passes as he catches his breath and when he opens his eyes, the emotion shining there knocks the breath loose from my lungs. His voice drips sincerity as he continues, “You are.”

“What if I’m a bad investment?”

“The only thing you are is infuriating,” he growls, teeth gritted as he drags his free hand down my spine before palming my ass, massaging it to the point of pain as he grinds his dick against me. The moan that falls through my lips is a travesty—an embarrassment I’ll never recover from—and Finn responds by taking my lips in a bruising kiss.

Shaking fingers work the buttons of his jacket loose and I scrabble against the heat of his body as I yank his shirt loose

from his pants. He tips my head back, spearing his tongue into my mouth with demanding force when I pull away from him enough to work my fingers over his belt buckle and the zipper of his pants. Heat erupts low in my belly, spreading with the fervor of a wildfire as our clothes fall away in a rush.

I groan his name when he steps away from me to kick out of his shoes and pants, mouth watering as the planes of his muscles flex with each of his deft, measured movements. Sucking my bottom lip into my mouth, I bite down hard enough to draw blood as he takes a step toward me, cock bobbing with the promise of what's to come. As he reaches for me, my heart thuds in my chest weakly, reminding me that there's more to this than simple lust. I force my attention to his hands.

His touch isn't gentle, hands running roughly over every inch of me as he crowds me backward, toward the opposite side of his king-sized bed. When I try to reach for him, to lace my arms around his neck for another one of his hungry kisses, he wraps his hands around my biceps before lifting me just enough to drop me on the side of his bed with a soft bounce.

"Stop being a fucking brat for once," he starts as he runs his hands down my body until they rest on my knees. Shivers follow the paths of his fingers as he wrenches my thighs apart and falls to his knees between my legs. His eyes smolder when he glances up at me and my stomach erupts in a flurry of butterflies. "I'm in this for you, Delilah. It's only ever going to be you and the faster you fucking accept that, the better."

"Finn," I start, but words fail me entirely when he leans in and runs the flat of his tongue over me. "Oh fuck," I moan as he does it again, dragging a low groan out of me as he massages my thighs no less gently than before. All conscious

thought leaves my brain and I lean into sensation as he laps at me like a man starved.

Fireworks explode behind my eyes when he pushes two of his fingers into me, curling them until they drag over my g-spot with enough pressure to lift me partially from the bed. Finn drapes an arm over my waist, holding me still as he drags the pleasure out so long I collapse again, quaking with the waves slamming into me relentlessly.

“You see, Delilah,” he says as he pulls his fingers from me, and I glance down. My core tightens at the filthy sight of him popping them into his mouth and swirling his tongue around them until they’re clean. He climbs to his feet before dropping a knee to the bed between my spread thighs, urging me to scoot further toward the middle as he follows me. As he makes space for his body between my legs, pushing them wider to accommodate the breadth of him, he continues, “It stands to reason that you wrongfully believe that the only thing I can focus on is business.”

My lips fall open on a breathy moan as he leans over me, propping himself up on a hand placed next to my head as he reaches between our bodies with the other. I gasp when he runs the length of his cock against me, grinding over my clit before he pushes toward my entrance. He quirks an eyebrow, stilling for a second as the breath leaves me entirely.

As I nod, he continues, “But it turns out that *you’ve* stolen all of my focus. You’ve wrenched it from me just like you’ve torn my heart from my chest. You see,” he says, his voice a ragged whisper as he pushes into me, “you hold all of me in both of your hands and I’m centimeters away from falling over the edge.”

My toes curl as I reach for him, dragging him closer as he pumps his hips in a slow, maddening rhythm. My nails rake down his back and my hips pulse up to meet his as he continues, “But I won’t fall over that edge unless you’re falling with me. It’s up to you, Delilah. Are you going to keep resisting this big, messy thing between us, or are you ready to get out of your head and just let go?”

My eyes flutter closed as he stills, and I push my hips toward him, grinding against him as best as I can with the weight of him, of *all of him*, pressing down on me. It’s too much. What I feel for him is too consuming. And I guess he can tell that because he’s silent for a beat before he picks up the pace, slamming into me with punishing force until we both topple over the edge of pleasure.

I wait until he’s snoring softly beside me to roll out of bed, gather my belongings from where they’ve fallen on the floor, dress quietly, and then slip out of his room. We’re too different—he’s a literal billionaire with the world at his fingertips, used to getting every single thing he wants on a whim. I finally feel at home in Pine Ridge, happily working in a restaurant that, while it might never make me a famous chef, is at least *mine*.

There’s no reality where we would ever actually work out and I’m reasonable enough to know that. So why does it still feel like my heart’s ripping in half in my chest as I walk away?

Chapter 7

Finn

Pine Ridge is the bane of my fucking existence.

No, scratch that. Pine Ridge is fine. It's the people who are going to be the eventual death of me. Between an obstinate mayor, a group of women on the Historical Society who would rather see me eat shit and die than hand an actual, usable property over to me, and the owner of a certain cafe who has been steadfastly ignoring every single one of my attempts to contact her since Christmas, I'm damn near at my wits end with the place.

I've sat in the corner booth of Sunny Side for hours waiting for even just a glimpse of Delilah. I've darkened her grandmother's doorstep and much to my chagrin, have gotten nothing other than the thrill of lovely conversation from those visits. I've stood in Nia's boutique and begged her to tell Delilah that I'm not going anywhere, so she needs to get her shit together and just come talk to me.

So far? No dice.

So for what feels like the eightieth time in almost three weeks, I sit across from Monty Hayes, scowling as he tells me no to yet another business proposal. Desperation spears through my gut—it's not even about business anymore. It

hasn't been for weeks. It's about showing Delilah that I'm serious about her *and* Pine Ridge.

Though it's mostly her.

My heart thuds in my chest. I don't give a shit about the old fire station I keep trying to convince the mayor to let me buy, but I need a reason to stay and I'm running through the list of things that people are going to accept from me without seeming creepy pretty fucking fast.

"I don't know how many times I have to explain to you that there are provisions for the types of businesses that are—"

My heart upgrades from pounding in my chest to slamming as I block out the mayor. *I need the space, the fucking chance to prove to Delilah that I'm in it for the long haul, more than anything.* "You're hemorrhaging an opportunity for the town for what, your pride?" He takes a deep breath, but I shake my head, nostrils flaring as I stare at my phone. "What is it with you people and your *pride* here?"

Hayes leans forward and even I stop listening to the drivel spilling from my lips as he snatches up my phone and scrolls through the listing for the station with intense focus. It doesn't take me long to realize he's not listening to me at all, despite all of my pleading. How the hell am I supposed to win the heart of my woman, and this pain-in-the-ass town, if I can't get anyone to take me fucking seriously?

"Are you listening to me?"

"There's some warehouse space on the same street as Sunny Side. Draw up a proposal for that instead of the fire station."

"You already shot down that proposal once!"

“Sorry, the space is spoken for already. Bring me a proposal for the warehouse space, or don’t. It’s up to you entirely.”

I splutter, feeling the heat of my anger spreading from my neck toward my cheeks. The fucking *audacity* of this man to finally give me the same thing I’d already asked for on the day after Christmas... He stole *weeks* from me that I could have used to convince Delilah that I’m in this for real. I can’t even look at the man, silently gathering my things as I shake my head and move toward the door.

But as I take that first step out of the corridor leading to his office, nodding my head cordially to his cheerful niece who works the front desk, a realization slams into me with the force of a Mac truck. This is the fucking start I needed. And, bonus points, being on the same street as Sunny Side means it’ll take an act of Congress for Delilah to avoid me entirely now.

With a spring in my step, I turn right out of the Municipal Building, a smile stretching over my face at the sight of the Bougie Booties sign swaying in the harsh winter wind. I can’t have a fine dining restaurant on the square, but Nia can have a novelty soap business alluding to asses in the name. I can’t make it make sense, but the bitterness I’d felt over the past six weeks melts away as I swing into the shop.

“Hi, welcome to Bougie Booties where we leave you with aromatic asses and—oh, it’s you.” Nia’s customer service smile falls and she turns her back on me in favor of pouring a mixture into the molds on her work table behind the counter.

I don’t have time for preamble, so I don’t bother with small talk either. “Where’s Delilah?”

Her shoulders tense and I watch the steady rising and fall of them before she turns back toward me. Nia swings her long

red hair over her shoulder before pushing her glasses up her nose and crossing her arms over her chest. Some days she's my biggest supporter. Others, she looks at me like I broke her best friend's fucking heart.

I wish I understood those days because I'm the one walking around with a ragged hole in my chest. Delilah's the one who disappeared on Christmas Eve after I asked her if she was ready to get out of her head and just let go. I'm the one who sat on the edge of my bed with my head in my hands and tried to figure out when I'd given her the power to absolutely fucking destroy me.

"Finn..." It's the pity in her voice that I can't stand.

Gritting my teeth, I mimic her stance, crossing my arms over my chest as I stare her down across the length of her shop. "Nia, I don't know what I have to say to convince you, but you have to know that I'm dying over here."

"Without you, she's just..."

"Please don't say happy," I beg, voice cracking in a way I'm not proud of. I shove my hands in the pockets of my coat, hiding the way they shake. Nia stares at me, mouth dropped open as she cocks her head to the side.

"Oh." It's quiet—and something about the way she says it punches me in the gut, leaving me breathless as she reaches her hand up to cover her mouth. Through her fingers, she softly says, "You love her."

Fuck. This is not the woman this is supposed to be happening with.

There's that heart slamming thing again, though.

"Yes," I admit, my voice raspy and barely audible.

“She hides in the office when you come to Sunny Side. She’s there now.”

Of course she does. I heave a sigh before holding the next breath I gulp down. We’re at an impasse, staring silently at one another as I try to figure out what in the actual hell I’m going to do here. After a moment, Nia nods toward the door, a small smile stretching over her lips.

I dip my chin and turn, only pausing when Nia calls after me, “For what it’s worth, beneath all of the confusing feelings that she uses to keep you at arm’s length, I think she probably feels the same way about you. She wouldn’t do this otherwise.”

I slip through the door and hustle around the back of the shop, cutting through the narrow alley to the next strip of buildings. I find the first break between the buildings, fingers brushing against the warehouse that’s soon to be mine, and barely look both ways before darting across the street to Sunny Side.

I storm through the restaurant, ignoring the shouts of the waitresses and cooks as I dip behind the counter and slam through the door into the kitchen.

“Hey, what the fuck, man?” One of the cooks says. He steps into my path, but I dodge him quickly, feet easily eating up the distance to Delilah’s office.

She appears in the doorway with her hair piled in a messy bun on top of her head and the top two buttons of her shirt undone.

“Hey, what’s going—” she starts, breaking off with a gasp when I crowd her backward into the office, kicking the door shut behind me as I reach for her.

“Finn,” she breathes, body sagging as I pull her to me.

I grip her chin between my thumb and forefinger, dragging her face up as I drop my forehead against hers. My breaths are ragged, pitiful things in my chest as I breathe her in for the first time in three very long weeks. My eyelids drop closed and I revel for one long moment in the feeling of her chest pressing against mine with each shaky breath she takes.

“What are you doing?” She whispers as her hands come up to press against my abdomen. She doesn’t push me away, but she doesn’t wrap her arms around me to drag me closer either.

“Aren’t you tired, Delilah?” I ask, lips a hair’s breadth away from brushing against hers. The heat of her body so close to mine stings with the force of familiarity and want.

Delilah fights my grip, trying to pull her chin away to turn from me. My eyes pop open, boring into hers as she purses her lips, brushing them against mine with the briefest touch. She gasps, as if shocked by the touch, and wrenches away from me. She takes a step backward, wrapping her arms around her middle as she deflates.

“*Why* do you insist on doing this, Finn? Wouldn’t it be easier for you to just go home, to leave Pine Ridge to me and stop torturing us both?”

“Because ever since you set my pants on fire, you insufferable brat, I’ve been head over heels in love with you.” I take a step toward her, a smirk crossing my lips when her ass connects with her desk. I drop my hands on either side of her hips, pressing into her as she sucks in a shuddering breath. “And I have it on good authority that you wouldn’t be acting like this if you didn’t feel the same.”

Chapter 8

Delilah

“We’re impossible—it could never work,” I murmur, heart careening in my chest as his breath puffs over my chest and neck.

“Why?” He asks. I shake my head, closing my eyes as I tip it back to rest on my neck. *This* is precisely why I’ve been avoiding Finn Vittatoe like my life depends on it. Because my heart is hanging in the balance and I’m so fucking afraid of getting it broken by him again.

Maybe that’s not fair, but I don’t think clearly when I’m around him. I should hate him—he took my dream and stomped it to bits—but there’s a part of me that whispers *everything happens for a reason* anytime I try to be mad at him these days. And that traitorous part of me wants to give into him and the useless feeling in my soul that lights up like a string of Christmas lights when he’s around.

I groan his name, the sound of an exaltation on my lips when he lowers his head and kisses a trail from the crook of my neck to the valley of my breasts. This explosive electricity between us has to be worth so much more than a muted heartbreak that landed me precisely where I needed to be with everything I wasn’t aware I needed.

Pine Ridge. Sunny Side. Finn Vittatoe?

Check. Check. And... check?

My heart slams in my chest, knocking the breath loose from me as he drags his tongue up the column of my throat.

“Delilah, you have to let go.”

It’s not that easy.

It’s definitely that easy.

“Whatever it is you’re overthinking, stop.”

I would if I could.

You can—stop being stubborn.

“Whatever it is you’re fighting, let it win.”

I’m not that kind of girl.

You can be for him.

“It’s time to go over the edge, love, and I already told you I’m not going without you.”

Why is he fucking perfect?

He drops a kiss on the corner of my mouth and I sink against the desk, allowing it to hold the weight of my shaky legs. Finn steps forward, pushing my knees apart to stand as close as possible to me as he rips away the little bit of resistance I’ve been desperately clinging to. Fuck, I’m in so much trouble.

“What if you hurt me?”

He chuckles darkly, dropping his head to my shoulder as he wraps his arms around me and pulls me to him.

“I would never,” he rasps, sending a shiver racing down my spine. “And before you tell me that I’ve hurt you before, save us both the heartache. I’ll spend the rest of my life on my

knees begging for your forgiveness if that's what it takes, but we can't keep hashing this out."

"I think you might have the power to destroy me," I whisper as I slip my arms around him, leaning into his warmth as his scent washes over me.

"Mmm," he hums in the back of his throat as he squeezes me, stealing the breath from my lungs before he loosens his grip and pulls back from me. His damnable smirk tips his lips up in one corner and I swear I turn into a puddle of snowmelt beneath the heat of his gaze. "I think what we have is the power of mutually assured destruction, Delilah."

"What does this look like?"

He groans, raising his eyes to the ceiling. "Why so many questions?" He asks with an exasperated sigh.

"It's just that..." I trail off, chewing my lip as I struggle to come up with the right words to convey all of the emotions battling for dominance within me.

Hope and fear are in the ring—I'm not sure which will get the knockout at this point. And love is a powerhouse standing at the side, ready to tap out whoever goes down first and pummel the shit out of the remaining contenders until my stupid fucking brain will just accept that what Finn Vittatoe is selling is *precisely* what I'm buying.

Finn loosens his grip around me as his head tips forward to consider me. He raises a finger to my lip, dragging it from between my teeth as he cocks an eyebrow in silent question.

"Finn, we're two entirely different people. I'm happy here in Pine Ridge; I have my restaurant and Grandma. And Nia too. And you have an entire life in New York City..."

“Delilah, haven’t you heard?” It’s my turn to cock a brow, tilting my head as a full smile spreads over his lips. “Mayor Asshole finally signed off on the warehouse across the street.”

My stomach clenches pleasantly, but I don’t let myself think too much into it. I can’t get my hopes up, just for them to be dashed. “So... You’re opening a business here? Congratulations.”

“You little fucking brat,” he teases as he draws his thumb over my lip. I squirm where I sit on my desk. “What it means is that I’ll be your neighbor.”

“You’re moving to Pine Ridge?” He nods, leaning in until our foreheads are pressed together once more. I close my eyes, taking a shaky breath before asking, “W-why?”

“Because I love you.”

My eyes pop open in surprise. I press my lips together for a second before a smile stretches over them.

“I love you too,” I whisper, a giggle passing through my lips in the second before Finn descends on them, kissing me like this is the last time he ever will.

“Say it again.”

“No,” I say, a trill up pleasure racing up my spine as he groans and reaches for my hips. He drags me toward the edge of the desk, grinding his hard cock against my core until I pant, “I won’t ever give into you that easily, Vittatoo. It’s what makes this fun.”

“I hope,” he says as he frees his hands from my hips and starts working the buttons of my shirt loose. He kisses a trail from my neck to my breasts, pausing to lavish my nipples with attention. His eager tongue draws a moan out of my mouth that’s so loud I’m positive the cooks can hear it. I shove my

knuckles in my mouth, biting down as he continues, “I really, truly hope that you understand that, while I’ll do everything in my power to give you everything you could ever want and more, I’m certain Santa is going to bring you truckloads of coal this year for how naughty you are.”

I let my fist fall from my mouth, giggling at the light feeling in my chest after living so long with a weight on my heart. Shaking my head, I reach for his buttons too, unwrapping him with haste.

“I’ll just have to work extra hard to stay on your good list then,” I respond.

“Let’s just start with you maybe not setting my pants on fire this year.”

I laugh, full and loud as the overwhelming feeling of love and acceptance slams into me with the force of a winter’s snowstorm.

“Deal.”

Epilogue

Delilah

Six months later...

I glance over my shoulder, swallowing a round of nervous giggles as Finn drags me through the darkened hallway. The low buzz of a chattering crowd at our backs sends a flurry of swirling butterflies through my stomach. I chew my lip.

“Stop overthinking it, baby.”

“Finn, there are *so many people here*,” I protest as I whip my head around to look at him. I stifle a surprised shriek when he suddenly yanks me forward, pressing me against the wall as he buries his head in my neck. I don’t bother shoving against his chest, knees already weak with the attention he pays to the delicate skin there. “We can’t.”

“We have to,” he murmurs between kisses. I blanch as a breathy moan spills from between my parted lips. “We’ve been so busy with the new house and the opening that we haven’t had time to really... *connect*.”

God, why does that sound so filthy?

“Okay, but the opening of the restaurant is not the right time, babe. Your entire family is here. And Grandma and Nia are out there with Margaret Gibbs and Nellie Cameron. Also,

I'm pretty sure your nemesis Mayor Hayes was just seated with Owen and Brynn. What if we get caught?"

The long-suffering sigh that meets my ears pulls another giggle out of me. Finn drops one last kiss on my collarbone before pulling away enough for me to see the ultra-serious look on his face. The gleam in his eye tells me the billionaire businessman is coming out to play before he even speaks.

"I'll make you a deal," he starts as he takes a step back. He catches my wrist in his grip, squeezing gently before slipping his hand into mine and twining our fingers. The serious look on his face gives way to a devilish sort of smirk as he continues, "We slip into the bathroom, take care of business, and we'll join our families before they realize we're missing."

Shaking my head, I laugh as he leads me into one of the private bathrooms, clicking the lock in place as I stride toward the burgundy settee. I run my fingers over the lush fabric as I sit on the edge, my own smile turning devious.

"There wasn't actually a deal in there, Finn. I think you're losing your touch."

"Mmm," he groans as he quickly closes the distance between us, taking a knee as he reaches for the hem of my long, dark gown. Goosebumps follow the path of his fingers as he drags the dress up, pushing it until it pools around my waist on the velvet settee. He runs his knuckles along the inside of my thighs as I spread my legs for him. "What do you know about business, Delilah Cooper?"

I wrap my hand around his forest green tie and drag him toward me, pressing a chaste kiss to the corner of his lips before muttering, "We've talked about Dolly Dearest—"

Finn jerks away from me, laughing as he shakes his head.

“For the last time,” he says as he reaches for his belt, “we’re not opening a Dolly Parton themed dinner theater.”

“Okay, but *you’re* the one who insists on calling Pine Ridge the Gatlinburg of New York!” I counter, eyes fluttering at the feeling of him reaching for my thong. I bite my lip, swallowing a groan as he slips it to the side and runs his fingers over me, his belt forgotten as he turns his attention toward me.

I push his hands away, leaning forward to hastily loosen his belt and unbutton his pants, eager for the feeling of him. After all this time, despite the silly arguments and disagreements about how we spend our time in Pine Ridge, I can’t get enough of him. I don’t think I ever will—and I’m so fucking okay with that.

Finn tugs himself free of his underwear, shoving my hands aside as he dips his fingers against me once more, coating himself with the moisture he pulls from me.

“It’s not a good investment,” he says as he lines himself up with my entrance, pushing into me with frenzied motions.

I scoot toward the edge of the settee, half collapsing until I’m propped on my elbows and staring as Finn works his hips. Losing myself to the sensation for a moment, I bite my lip and swallow the loud moans that fight their way up my chest. I gasp, jerking when Finn reaches for my clit, rubbing his thumb over it in frantic circles.

“You promised you’d never use the words *good* and *bad investment* around me again,” I mutter, trying and failing to focus on anything other than the intense pressure coiling in my core.

Finn promised me a quickie and I know with our families waiting on the other end of the long hallway it's all we have time for. But time spent losing myself in him is my favorite time and I don't want this to be over too soon. "Plus, Dolly Dearest is a really sound idea."

"It's not," Finn pants as he quickens his pace, thumb circling even faster as he pounds into me with surety. "I'm never going to agree to it."

I open my mouth to protest, but my words are replaced with a deep moan as his hips jerk faster. My nails dig into the soft cushion as I arch, body shaking with the lightning-fast orgasm that rips through me. Quivering, I collapse entirely, chest heaving as Finn doubles over me, dropping his head to the crook of my neck as he finds his own pleasure in my body.

The only sound in the room is our labored breathing.

After a moment, I unclench my hands to reach toward his head and run my fingers through his hair. He lifts his head with a lazy, sated smile. I worry the inside of my cheek for a moment before I giggle and ask, "But what about now?"

"Maybe," he concedes, and even though I know he doesn't mean it, I can't help the smile that breaks over my face with so much force it makes my cheeks ache. "I love you, you insufferable brat."



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Hot Honey Crème Brûlée

Ingredients

1 quart heavy cream

6 egg yolks

3/4 cup hot honey, divided

1 tsp vanilla

2 tsp cinnamon powder

1/2 tsp salt

Instructions

1. Heat over to 325 degrees.
2. Whisk together cream, egg yolks, 1/2 cup hot honey, vanilla, cinnamon powder, and salt until very well combined.
3. Pour mixture into eight 1/2 cup ramekins. Place ramekins in a baking dish, and pour enough water into the dish to come about halfway up the outsides of the ramekins.
4. Bake until set, about 35 to 40 minutes. Allow to cool. (Note: the brûlée is not firm when it comes out of the oven—it will set as it cools.)
5. Drizzle remaining hot honey on each brûlée and place in the oven to broil quickly. Remove when the honey begins to bubble and turn deep golden. Serve immediately.

Note: These can be baked a day in advance and chilled until served.

Home Cooked Holidays

This December, plan your holiday menu with your favorite authors as we put on our chef's hats and deliver small-town romance served with a side of home-cooked goodness. Let the Home Cooked Holidays series be your source for side dishes, desserts, main course recipes, and (of course) lots of love this Christmas season.

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