



FOUR WEEKS TO
FOREVER

KAREN BOOTH

MILLS & BOON
Desire

KAREN BOOTH is a Midwestern girl transplanted in the South, raised on '80s music and repeated readings of *Forever...* by Judy Blume. When she takes a break from the art of romance, she's listening to music with her college-age kids or sweet-talking her husband into making her a cocktail. Learn more about Karen at karenbooth.net.

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Four Weeks to Forever

Karen Booth

MILLS & BOON

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“I’m starting to feel like I can trust you.”

“You can.”

Colin stepped closer to Corryna, drawn to her in a way that he felt on a molecular level. “I hope you know that you can trust me, too.”

“I think I know that.”

“I want you, Corryna. One hundred times more than I wanted you that night, and I really, really wanted you.”

Pink colored her cheeks, making her even more impossibly beautiful. “I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want you, too, but this wouldn’t be like that night. Neither of us had anything to lose then. Now we’re working together on a wedding that is immensely important to our businesses. Sex will make everything more complicated.”

He reached for a lock of her hair and twisted it in his fingers. “It’s just you and me. Together in my bed isn’t complicated. It sounds perfect.”

***Four Weeks to Forever* by Karen Booth is part of the Texas Cattleman’s Club: The Wedding series.**

Dear Reader,

Welcome back to Royal, Texas! I'm so excited for you to read my contribution to the Texas Cattleman's Club: The Wedding series!

I found so much to love in this book as I was writing it. First off, I love writing florists, and Corryna, my heroine, owns a little flower shop right in the heart of downtown Royal. I so admire her determination and persistence as a small business owner and as a woman who's had to overcome a divorce. Then there's Colin, the Irish chef. I have quite the weakness for a rich Irish accent, especially when it's wrapped up in a package like Colin—tall and strong, brilliant, and more than a little sure of himself.

The conflict between these two is white-hot from the start, but I could see them together from that very first chapter. Some books are just like that—it feels like the characters are meant for each other. I hope you see some of that when you read it!

Drop me a line anytime at karen@karenbooth.net and let me know if you enjoyed *Four Weeks to Forever*. I love hearing from readers!

Karen

For Angela Anderson.
Thank you for being such a stellar ambassador for romance!

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About the Publisher

One

Corryna Lawson was placing a perfect peony in a bouquet when everything around her went black. The music she was listening to abruptly cut out. The light from the decades-old overhead fixtures in her floral shop disappeared. “What the hell?” she asked no one, speaking into the dark cavern that was now the back room of Royal Blooms. Hannah Waters, her main counter clerk, had gone home hours ago. Corryna liked to stay and work late, listening to music and getting lost in her designs. Her love for flowers and the artistry of arranging them were not only the reasons she’d started this business, they were also the parts of her job she never questioned. Plus, it wasn’t like she had anyone to go home to. Not anymore. Not since her divorce.

She grabbed her phone from the worktable and switched on the flashlight function, then wound her way past the buckets of blooms and into the front of her shop. The large picture windows facing downtown Royal were black as night. By the looks of it, the businesses across the street had also lost power. She unlocked the front door and stepped outside, momentarily blinded by the headlights of passing cars. Down the block, patrons were filtering out of The Royal Diner and onto the sidewalk, seemingly just as surprised as she was. In every direction, all she saw was darkness.

This was not good. Corryna had thousands of dollars of floral inventory sitting in the refrigerators in the back of her shop. She not only needed the blooms to fill upcoming orders, she needed them to work out the floral designs for the June nuptials of acclaimed bestselling author Xavier Noble and Hollywood actress/producer Ariana Ramos. Corryna had lived in Royal for nearly eight years, and the Nobles were long-standing pillars of the community. The wedding was more than three months away, but it was going to be the social event of the year, and Corryna was damn lucky to have such a prestigious job.

Morgan Grandin from *The Rancher's Daughter*, the upscale women's clothing boutique next door, stepped outside. "Oh, hey, Corryna." Morgan used a small flashlight in order to see while inserting a key into the dead bolt on her shop's front door. "This is a real pain in the butt, isn't it? I hate having to close early, but it was pretty slow."

Corryna flipped off the flashlight on her phone to save the battery. Luckily, there was enough ambient light from the moon to help her see some things, like Morgan's fair-complected face and striking red hair. "Any idea how long the power is going to be out?" Corryna asked.

Morgan shrugged and hooked her handbag in the crook of her elbow. "I just talked to my sister Chelsea. Her husband, Nolan, said the whole town is out. Who knows when it will be back on. I hope it's not days."

"Days? But...but... I don't have days." Corryna couldn't disguise the panic in her voice. She didn't have thousands of dollars to lose. Her shop was just barely breaking even, after she paid herself her pittance of a salary. She could not let her flowers go to waste. It would be a setback that would take months to recover from. "I have to save my flowers. They're all in my fridge which already doesn't work that well. It'll be a matter of hours before they start deteriorating. I have weddings this weekend. What do I do?"

Morgan stepped closer and eyed the front of Royal Blooms. "Well, shoot. I never thought about that."

"Seriously. I need you to help me think. Any ideas?"

"Uh... So you need another fridge, right?"

"Yes. A massive one." She so appreciated that Morgan was calm because Corryna's anxiety was making her shoulders bind up and her stomach sour.

"Except the power is out everywhere. So you also need a place that has a generator."

Dammit. Corryna blew out an exasperated breath. "Yes. Of course."

“They have both of those at the TCC.” Morgan was referring to the Texas Cattleman’s Club, which was the hub of social life in Royal. “But I know for a fact that their generator isn’t working. I guess they got a new one and it’s faulty.”

This mission was sounding more doomed at every turn. “Do you have any other ideas? I’m desperate.”

“Who else has a fridge that big and a generator? It would have to be a restaurant.”

As soon as Morgan said that, Corryna had her answer. The problem was she didn’t like it. In fact, she hated it. What was that old saying about desperate times calling for desperate measures? She had a feeling she was about to put that to the test. “What about Sheen?”

Morgan reached out and grasped Corryna’s arm. “Oh, my God. Yes. They have both.”

Morgan had so much sheer enthusiasm in her voice that it broke Corryna’s heart to think about what she was about to say. “The only problem is Colin Reynolds.” She could hardly spit out his name, she disliked him so much. The owner and head chef of Sheen was an arrogant, bristly, penny-pinching jerk. “He doesn’t like me. And the feeling is mutual.”

“No. How is that possible? Everyone loves you.”

“Not Colin.” Corryna knocked her head to the side. “We had two unpleasant run-ins. This was a while ago, but they were both bad.”

“Oh, really?” Morgan did like a bit of gossip, and there was always plenty to go around in Royal.

“Yes. The first was when he hit on me in The Silver Saddle at The Bellamy.” She’d been sitting at the bar of the tapas restaurant at the luxury resort, trying to gain some intel on who Ariana and Xavier were hiring to do their wedding flowers. “I told him that I was a lost cause and he should go chat up someone else. I thought I was being self-deprecating, but by the look on his face, he took it as a massive insult.”

“So you’re not dating at all?”

“Not really. I mean, I’d like to, but it has to be the right situation. I definitely don’t need a guy like Colin. Whenever he’s romantically linked to someone, it doesn’t last long.”

“I hear he’s quite the playboy.”

Corryna had heard the same. Colin’s reputation in Royal was notorious. Women fawned over him. They swooned. It was part of the reason it was impossible to get a reservation at Sheen. Frankly, it was embarrassing. Sure, he was far better than “good looking”—six foot five with messy, shaggy light brown hair, a square jaw and penetrating green eyes. But who wanted the arrogance that went along with the handsome exterior? “Two days later, he canceled Sheen’s contract with my shop. I took a massive hit to my bottom line. Plus, he was such an ass about it.” *My customers care about my food, not your flowers.* Even now, she could hear echoes of his annoyingly sexy Irish brogue. Corryna had a real weakness for a man with an accent. “He was just being vindictive. I think he figured out who I was and decided to get back at me. I don’t think his ego could handle it.”

“I wish I could come up with another option, but I can’t. No one else has a big enough fridge for all your flowers.”

Corryna grumbled under her breath. “Yeah. Okay. I guess I gotta do it, huh?”

“Are you going to call him first?”

Corryna shook her head emphatically. She was certain Colin would tell her no straight away. “I need the element of surprise. Plus, I figure if I show up with a truck full of flowers, it’ll be that much harder for him to say no.”

“What if he isn’t there?”

“Oh, he’ll be there. He’s a total workaholic.” *Sort of like me.*

“It seems like you know a lot about this guy you supposedly hate.”

Corryna had done some research online the night he’d canceled his account with her. She wanted to know his weak spots. Unfortunately, she couldn’t find a single one. He’d had a meteoric rise in the restaurant industry. Everyone thought he

was brilliant. He made piles of money, to put on top of the fortune he'd been born into. End of story. "People talk. I listen."

"Well, if you want, I can help you load up your flowers," Morgan said.

"Really? You'd do that for me?"

"Yeah. Of course. Let's do it."

Corryna led Morgan into her shop and grabbed the keys for the delivery truck, then they started ferrying buckets of flowers out into the back alley where the vehicle was parked. Twenty minutes later, the truck was full and Corryna needed to get on her way.

"Thank you so much, Morgan."

"Yeah. Of course. Good luck with Colin."

"Thanks. I don't just have a feeling I'm going to need it. I know I will." Corryna hopped in and started up the engine, then embarked on her trek to Sheen. With every traffic light in town out of commission, she had to drive with caution. Creeping down these familiar streets and roads at a snail's pace while everything was dark left her feeling like she'd landed on another planet. Once she got closer to Sheen, even that looked peculiar. The restaurant was built entirely of glass, so it was usually brightly lit and looking like a jewel box. Not tonight. A small soft glow from the center of the building was the only indication that Colin Reynolds's generator was indeed working.

She pulled into the parking lot and parked right next to Colin's ridiculously expensive show-off of a car—a black Jaguar SUV. One of the things she'd learned about Colin during her online sleuthing was that he came from incredible wealth and power. In his life, making a fortune from being a restaurateur was a family affair. As if he wasn't already intimidating enough.

This would have been an excellent time to chicken out, but she wasn't about to lose her business because of a blackout. She'd just have to face the handsome jerk, do her best to hold

her own, then make a swift exit. Colin Reynolds was not the sort of man she needed to spend any time at all with.

* * *

With his feet on his desk, Colin Reynolds was savoring another sip of his Redbreast 27-year-old Irish whiskey when headlights beamed into his office from the parking lot of his restaurant, Sheen. He immediately dropped his feet to the floor. He wasn't expecting anyone in the middle of a blackout. Peering through the window, he saw a white delivery truck and immediately recognized the colorful Royal Blooms logo emblazoned on the side. The headlights switched off, and for a split second as the light faded, he saw Corryna Lawson climbing out of the vehicle. Was he seeing things? He *was* on his second glass of whiskey, and at forty-two, his eyesight wasn't what it once was. She was wearing a white top, which made it easier to study her as she ambled toward the entrance to the restaurant. How life was full of surprises.

He immediately headed to the front door and unlocked it. "If you're here for dinner, we're closed." Even through the darkness, Corryna's flawless complexion seemed to glow. Her sexy, radiant beauty had been the reason he'd asked her out at The Silver Saddle the first time he'd seen her. To his shock and dismay, she shot him down. He'd been turned down once or twice in his life, but Corryna's rejection had really stung. She'd given him some line about how she was a lost cause. Any man could take one look at her and know that couldn't be further from the truth.

"Not here to eat. I need your help." Her voice was icy and defensive, as if she was expecting him to say no.

He prided himself on being at least a little unpredictable. Plus, he needed to extend an olive branch. The last time he'd seen Corryna, he'd said a few unkind things about her business. He wasn't proud of it, but his ego was bruised and he'd lashed out. "Sure. Of course. What can I do?"

Corryna stepped closer and narrowed her eyes. She was wearing a pair of jeans that smartly followed every sumptuous curve of her body, and the white blouse he'd noticed moments

ago skimmed the contours of her breasts perfectly. Her wavy brown hair went from dark to light in a sexy tumble. He'd seen countless gorgeous women in his life, and he'd taken more than a few of them to bed. But Corryna was an exceptional beauty, in part because she seemed oblivious to it. "What's the catch?" she asked.

"None. You said you need help. With what?"

"As you know, the power is out. Unlike you, I don't have a generator. And I had thousands of dollars of floral inventory in my cooler that I was about to lose."

"And you'd like to use my walk-in."

"If you don't mind. Yes."

"Sure. Absolutely."

"Really?" She still didn't seem convinced.

"Yes. Come on now. Get on with it." He marched past her to the rear of her truck and opened the doors. The interior light flickered on, revealing the volume of flowers she'd brought along. It was going to be tight in his fridge, but this was no time to go back on his promise.

Corryna joined him, standing at his side. "I'm begging you to be careful. I have two weddings this weekend. Many of these flowers are for that."

"What makes you think I'm not going to be careful?"

"Oh, I don't know. I seem to remember you telling me something about not caring about flowers."

"I didn't mean it like that." He grabbed several buckets and led the way into the restaurant. He trailed through the dining room then into the kitchen and back to the massive walk-in refrigerator. He set down the buckets and opened the door. A rush of frigid air hit his face. "Quickly. Can't keep the door open long. The generator can only do so much."

"Got it." She hustled into the cold room ahead of him.

"At the back, please. Just be careful of the beef. It's dry aging. A lot of money on those shelves." He followed her,

stealing a glimpse of her ass as she bent over to set down several buckets. It was a real shame she'd turned him down. He knew for a fact they could have a whole lot of fun together.

"Of course I'll be careful," she snapped as she turned back to him.

"No need to be angry. It's only a suggestion."

She sighed and looked him in the eye. "I'm sorry. I'm a little stressed, okay?"

He felt bad. Of course she was under strain. Until a few minutes ago, she'd thought she was going to lose the most precious thing her business could have—her inventory. "You don't need to apologize. I'm sorry if I'm being an ass. Let's get on with it and save your flowers."

They rushed back outside, and made six or seven trips back and forth in order to load up the refrigerator. "Thank you, Colin," Corryna said when they were finished.

"Can I interest you in a whiskey?"

"I should go home."

"You just did all that work, and I know it's been a hard night. It's just a drink. We'll sit and talk and you can tell me why you don't like me."

Corryna let out a dismissive tut. "You're the one who doesn't like me."

"Did I or did I not make a pass at you at The Silver Saddle? I didn't do that merely for fun. I did it because I thought you were gorgeous. I did it because I *do* like you."

"You're a terrible liar."

"Which is why I don't do it. I am an open book. And I don't invite people I dislike for a drink."

"I don't know..." She cocked an eyebrow, but seemed like she was open to a bit more persuasion.

"It's delicious. The best you'll ever have."

“Okay. Fine. I’m game. What else do I have to do? Go home and sit in the dark?”

Colin did his best to hide his satisfied grin. “That’s what I want to hear. Right this way.” He led her back to his office, where the whiskey bottle was still sitting on his desk. This was one of his favorite spaces in the restaurant—a true retreat, with modern earth-toned furnishings. Needing order in his life whenever possible, he kept everything as tidy as could be.

“This is so nice.” She ran her hand along the smooth tawny leather of one of two generous armchairs opposite his desk. “My office is about one quarter this size.”

“Thank you. I like it, too. Which is a good thing because I spend so much time in here.” He grabbed a match for his glass from the corner bar and poured them each a drink. He handed her one, then raised his glass in a toast. “To helping others.”

She clinked her glass with his, then took a sip. “Mmm.” She rolled the glossy amber liquid in the glass, admiring it. “This is delicious.”

“Just like everything that comes from Ireland.” He bobbed his eyebrows up and down at her in an attempt to flirt. He’d suffered her rejection once, but it didn’t mean he wasn’t willing to try again.

“You’re terrible.”

“I’m also delicious.”

Corryna laughed and shook her head, then sat on the edge of his desk. “Can you answer me honestly this time? Did you cancel my contract with Sheen because I turned you down at The Silver Saddle?”

“As I tried to explain before, I did not realize you were the same woman until you came into Sheen to yell at me. By then, it was too late. I’d already made my decision.”

She took another sip. “Why am I still not sure I believe you?”

“You said it yourself. I’m a terrible liar. I’m no good at it.”

“Okay. I guess that’s good to know.” She still didn’t seem convinced.

“I’ve nothing to hide. Ask me anything.”

“Why me that night at the bar? There were dozens of hot women there.”

She wasn’t wrong. “I just told you. You’re gorgeous. Plus, something told me you were a challenge. I love that. It gets my blood pumping.”

“Then why did you give up so easily?”

“Because you were trying to deflect. And there’s usually a reason for that.”

“But you still seemed disappointed.”

This wasn’t an easy topic for Colin to discuss. He didn’t enjoy ruminating over his failures. That was territory his father liked to tread, pointing out every instance in which Colin had come up short. “Of course I was. It was brutal. The most stunning woman had turned me down. I thought I had a chance. I guess I was wrong.”

She pressed her lips together tightly. “You weren’t entirely wrong. If I had been in a better headspace, I probably would have said yes.”

“That would’ve made me incredibly happy.” He reached out and brushed the back of her hand with the tip of his finger. “And I know I could’ve done the same for you.”

She watched his finger on her hand, then peered up at him with her remarkable pale green eyes. They swept back and forth in the softly lit room. She was still sitting on the edge of the desk and he was standing right before her. They were mere inches from each other, breathing in sync, electricity traveling across the tiny sliver of space between them. “You’re a player, right? Never get serious with a woman?”

He shrugged, then dared to reach out and take a lock of her silky hair and twist it around his fingers. “I’m whatever you need me to be.”

“Anything?” She bit down on her lower lip, and he sensed that he was getting somewhere.

He rubbed the side of her jaw with the back of his hand. “How long has it been since a man has made you feel good, Corryna?”

“It’s been a while.”

“I mean really, really good.”

“So long. So very, very long.”

He stepped closer, but with her sitting on the desk, he had to straddle her knee in order to get his legs against the edge. He pushed her hair back from her shoulder and leaned down to nuzzle the side of her neck with his nose. “Does this feel good?”

“Yes.” Her voice was soft and yielding, yet full of desperation.

It made everything below his waist go tight. He could set her on fire. He knew he could. With an open mouth, he kissed her neck. She grasped his shoulder and moaned in delight, then raised her knee until it was right against his crotch. That bit of pressure nearly made him lose all ability to see. “Corryna, I want you just as much as I did that night at The Silver Saddle. Maybe more.”

“Prove it to me.”

He was lightning fast unbuttoning her blouse while he worked his lips up and down her neck. He tugged her sleeves down her arms, then reached back for the clasp of her bra. She wrapped both of her legs around one of his, pressing the top of her thigh against his length, which was heavy and hard.

He pulled her bra off and gathered her breasts in his hands, rubbing his thumbs across her nipples as he kissed her. She angled her head to the side and took the kiss deeper. She delivered so much raw, unbridled enthusiasm that he wondered where it came from. Was she like this all the time or had he brought it out of her?

Not that he cared to know the answer. Not now.

He wasted no time unbuttoning her jeans, and she slid off the desk to give him better access. Tugging them down her legs, and taking her panties with them, he dropped to his knees. He was still fully dressed, every inch of him longing to bury himself in her. But he'd made a promise about making her feel good, and he intended to deliver on that.

"Sit," he ordered. "In the chair."

She did exactly as he'd asked, leaning back and letting him drink in the vision of her naked body while he took off his shirt, then his jeans and his boxers. He was so primed for her, but he wanted to leave her with something memorable. He dropped to his knees again, took one of her legs and hitched it up over his shoulder, then grasped her hips and pulled them forward until her butt was at the very edge of the seat. He spread her folds apart with his fingers, then lowered his head and swirled his tongue around her apex. She instantly curled her fingers into his hair and gasped. He knew that he was on the right track. He continued with his ministrations and it only took moments before she was digging her heel into his back and crying out.

"Colin... Colin... I want more," Corryna muttered.

"Good. I do too."

He hardly got the words out before she did something he never expected. She lowered her leg, sat up and pushed back on his shoulders until he had no choice but to lie back on the floor. Next thing he knew, she was on her knees. Then straddling his hips. Then she took his length in her hands, which made it impossible to think. She guided him inside her. He didn't have time to ask about a condom. *She must be on the pill*, he thought.

She dropped her chest against his, grinding into him hard. He met every movement of hers with a thrust as he kissed her, and dug his fingers into the fleshiest parts of her bottom. It was hot and fast and reckless. He'd had plenty of wild sexual experiences, but this was one for the books. The pressure was coiling in his belly so tightly that he couldn't hold on much longer. He felt himself on the edge. About to go over the cliff.

Then Corryna gave way again. She called out into his neck and he thrust once or twice more, the release slamming into him.

She collapsed against his chest, breathless. His hands squeezed her full hips. She was as luscious as a ripe summer peach. He wanted her again. And again. This blackout might turn out to be the best thing ever.

“That was fantastic,” he said.

She pushed up on her arms and looked down at him. “Um. Yeah.” She rolled off of him, grabbed her underwear from the floor and stood up. “It was nice.”

“Nice? I don’t do nice.” He rolled to his side, enjoying his chance to watch her step into her panties, even though it was unsettling to hear the way she stomped her feet when they hit the floor.

“It was ten minutes of fun in your office. Don’t make it more than it was.” She wrestled her bra on.

“Ten minutes? It was more like fifteen. You had two orgasms, Corryna. I’d say that seemed like more than fun.”

“I wasn’t keeping score.” She put on her top, fumbling with the buttons. She seemed rattled, which was incredibly confusing.

Meanwhile, he felt great. Relaxed. Ready for more. And she was ruining it. “I wasn’t saying you had to count. I was only feeling like I deserve some credit.”

“Please stop talking.”

He decided to stand up and put on his boxers. He couldn’t recline naked on the floor forever. “I don’t understand why you’re in such a rush. Unless you want to go to my place. Or yours.”

She stepped into her jeans. “No. Sorry. That’s not happening.”

“Why?”

“Because men are bad for me, and you are a man.”

He stood there frozen, blinking as he took in her words. This was not the normal postsex response he got from a woman. Usually they were begging for more of him. It was often *his* job to say things like “that was nice, but it’s time for me to leave.” “Okay...”

She strode to the door, then turned back to look at him. “I’ll come back for my flowers when the power comes back on. If you aren’t here, can someone else help me with them?”

“I’m always here.”

“Colin, that was my way of telling you that it’d be better for me if you weren’t.”

“Tell me how you really feel.” He watched as she again turned back to the door. “Corryna.”

“What?”

“You can avoid me for a few days, but you can’t ignore me forever.”

“Sure I can. You canceled your contract with me, remember?”

“I’m not talking about that. I’m talking about the Noble-Ramos wedding. We’re both working on it.”

“What? No. You’re just trying to rattle my cage.”

He shrugged and plucked his jeans from the floor. He didn’t have the strength to argue with her anymore. “I guess we’ll just have to see then, won’t we?”

Two

One month later

Corryna arrived for her Monday morning meeting with Rylee Meadows, the wedding planner, a few minutes early. She didn't want to risk being late. The Noble-Ramos wedding could make or break her business. Do well, and she'd have countless opportunities to work for some of the most prestigious members of the Royal community. Fail, and she would continue to struggle financially. She couldn't allow that to happen. She had two employees, who she adored, counting on her. Plus, her ex-husband, Dan, was expecting her to fall flat on her face someday. He'd always said she had no business sense. Every day she kept her doors open, was another instance of him being dead wrong.

She parked her car in the main parking lot at the Texas Cattleman's Club, a sprawling single-story dark stone and wood building with a slate roof. The history of the TCC was woven into the fabric of Royal, as it had been the hub of social life for over one hundred years. If there was a big party in this town, it most often happened here.

Corryna had very mixed emotions about the TCC. It was her introduction to Royal eight years ago, when she and Dan had come here from Dallas for a wedding. Over the course of that weekend, they both fell in love with Royal. Corryna was working in a flower shop at the time and desperately wanted to open one of her own, but couldn't find an affordable space in the big city. She and Dan drove through downtown Royal one day that weekend and spotted the vacant storefront that would eventually become Royal Blooms. He'd never been one to indulge her dreams, but he did that day. He not only wanted to sign a lease on the space, he was willing to uproot his own career in real estate. He'd said he could sell houses anywhere. It had seemed desperately romantic at the time. Little did she know he was running to get away from the husband of one of

his mistresses. His many betrayals were the reason why, even six years later, she did not trust men. But the Texas Cattleman's Club didn't only spark bad memories. Corryna also met her best friend, Jessica Lewis, who was serving at the wedding at the TCC, just as she did for all sorts of events now. Working with flowers, and her friendship with Jessica, had gotten Corryna through her divorce. And now she was so tied to Royal that she couldn't imagine ever leaving.

Corryna climbed out of her car and straightened her dress, a very professional off-white sheath with a wide dark brown leather belt and matching pumps. Not at all what she would normally wear on a weekday. Most days, she was in jeans, sneakers and a cute top, prepared for a day on her feet, arranging flowers and running her shop. As she was making her way across the parking lot, she spotted Rylee. Rylee was tall, blonde and absolutely stunning.

"Rylee!" Corryna called, hurrying to catch up to her. She and Rylee had met a month or so ago. Corryna had gifted her a gorgeous bouquet in an attempt to seal her spot as florist for the wedding. The next day, Ariana's best friend and maid of honor, Dionna Reed, had arrived at Royal Blooms with Rylee to see Corryna's talent on display. Luckily, Corryna's friend Tripp Noble, Xavier's cousin and best man, had given her a heads-up that they were coming so she had everything ready to knock their socks off. And she got the job.

"Corryna, hi." Rylee shook Corryna's hand. She looked every bit the part of wedding planner with a chic designer handbag hooked on her arm. "Thank you for meeting with me in person today. I'm really glad we're getting going on this. Xavier and Ariana were very clear. They want everything about the wedding to be seamless. I have to attend to every detail."

"Of course." Corryna had heard that the bride and groom had exacting tastes, and she was thrilled about having the chance to wow them with her designs. She and Rylee entered through the large central doors of the TCC and into the spacious lobby, with its soaring ceilings and an abundance of light from many windows.

“Two of the most important attractions at the reception, aside from our happy couple, will be the flowers and the food. Xavier and Ariana want their guests to feel something. They want it to be memorable. That’s why the three of us are meeting today.” Rylee opened the door of the main ballroom.

“Three of us?” Corryna followed her inside.

“Yes. You, me and the caterer.”

Corryna took one more step and saw him—Colin—standing next to a table in dark jeans, a crisp white dress shirt without a tie, and a midnight blue tailored jacket that drew attention to the straight lines of his shoulders. He looked so damn sexy that she wanted to bite the heel of her hand. Memories of their one night—or more precisely, fifteen minutes—flooded her senses. His hands on her naked body. Kissing him. Her losing her mind. He’d said and done everything perfectly. And she nearly hated him for it.

“Hello. I’m Colin Reynolds.” He held out his hand to shake hers. The second their palms touched, she thought she might catch fire.

Corryna turned to Rylee. “We actually know each other. He’s trying to be funny.”

He shrugged. “Some people find me hilarious.”

“Apparently, those people could not make our meeting,” Corryna said.

“Uh, is there a problem here?” Rylee asked. “Because I’ve heard things about you two, and I’m sensing tension. That’s why I asked you to meet me here, rather than at Sheen or Royal Blooms. We can’t have tension for this wedding. No problems. No disagreements or personal problems. Everything has to be perfect.”

“Understood,” Colin said, then pointed to a bakery box on the table. “I brought chocolate croissants, freshly baked early this morning by my pastry chef, Elena. Can’t have tension or problems when there’s chocolate and baked goods.”

“Oh. Wow. That was so thoughtful of you,” Rylee said.

Corryna was too busy trying not to drool. Colin was enough of a temptation in his own right. Then he had the nerve to bring her absolute favorite pastry? How was she supposed to function right now?

“Let’s go ahead and get started then.” Rylee led them over to a round table and sat.

Corryna took a seat, leaving an empty chair between herself and Rylee. Colin, of course, sat right next to her. Now it was the heavenly smells at the table that were hard to ignore. This close to him, she picked up on warm cedar and citrus, which only served to remind her of the way he’d smelled when they’d had their tryst in his office. It was intoxicating.

“As I was saying to Corryna out in the lobby, Xavier and Ariana were very specific with their instructions,” Rylee said. “After Dionna and Tripp’s recommendations, they know you two are the best and are certainly up to the task. The theme is Hollywood glamor, and Ari and Ex want the entire wedding to be as cohesive with that theme as possible. An immersive experience for their guests. With Xavier being a writer and Ariana in the film business, they appreciate masterful creativity more than anyone. They feel that the food and flowers are a crucial part of the wedding weekend, so they want the floral designs and the menus developed together. Side by side. We want you to bring everything together in a symphony for the senses. I want you to think about colors, textures and smells. It should all marry perfectly.”

With every word, Corryna felt her spine get a little stiffer. This was an exceptionally tall order. “We could exchange notes,” she offered to Colin.

“I’ve already worked out the passed hors d’oeuvres with the best man and maid of honor,” Colin said. “So, Corryna will have to work around me. I hope that’s clear. The food can’t follow the flowers. It will never work.”

“Well, we need to talk about that,” Rylee said, raising a finger before she returned her attention to Corryna. “Exchanging notes won’t be enough. I need you two working in concert with each other.” Her phone began to ring and she

consulted the screen. “I am so sorry. You’ll need to excuse me for one minute. I really have to take this.” She answered her call, then rose from the table and wandered over to the other side of the room.

“Teacher’s pet,” Corryna said.

“I don’t even know what that means.”

“They don’t have teachers’ pets in Ireland?”

“I predominantly grew up in the US, actually. Boarding school. And I was attempting to make a joke.”

“Your sense of humor could use some serious help.”

He reached out and cupped her hand, which was resting on the table. “Excuse me. Do you mind telling me why you’re being so rude? You’re the one who ran out after we had sex.”

Corryna’s vision flew to Rylee. Thankfully Rylee was immersed in her conversation and had not heard Colin’s string of unpleasant and highly personal comments. “It was *sex*, Colin. Nothing more. Surely you’re familiar with that concept. Or at least that’s what everyone in Royal says about you.”

“Just because something is casual doesn’t mean it can’t be cordial.”

She knew he was right, but it wasn’t as simple as that for her. She shouldn’t have fallen prey to Colin that night, but he’d had the gall to tell her she was beautiful and a million other nice things, and well, it had been a lifetime since a man had said anything like that to her. Then he went and kissed her neck, which was her absolute biggest weakness. She could not resist a guy who did that to her, especially one as steaming hot as Colin. Of course, as soon as her second orgasm had faded away that night, she realized her mistake. Her ex-husband had destroyed her faith in men, but she’d always told herself that if she ever did get involved again, it would be with a nice guy, certainly not a man with a massive ego who was known for having women falling at his feet. She’d been cheated on. More than once. She couldn’t retrace her steps. “I’m sorry. I will do my best to be nicer.”

“I know you’re capable of it. Everyone says that you’re the best part of going into your shop.”

“People say that?” She didn’t want to sound so eager to hear more, but she was. It was nice to get a compliment.

“They do. You’re known for excellent customer service. People always say you’re so warm and welcoming.” Under the table, he traced a line down her leg, filling her with ideas of what it might be like to have him take off her clothes again. The thought sent heat rushing over her.

“Thanks. That’s nice to hear. You can stop touching my leg now.”

He grimaced and pulled back his hand. “Your turn to say something nice about me.”

She looked at him with as quizzical a look as she could manage. “Do you really want to know what people in town say about you?”

“As a chef, yes. Nothing personal, please. Then things will really get messy.”

She laughed quietly and shook her head. Dammit, he was charming, as intent as she was of not being swayed by any of it. “Fine. People say that your food is exquisite. It’s innovative, but not pretentious. It’s perfectly balanced and always delicious.”

He jutted out his lower lip and nodded. “Not bad. You could write a food column, you know.”

“I actually haven’t eaten your food.”

His eyes grew comically large. He pressed his hand to the center of his chest and slumped back in his chair. “A dagger. Straight to my heart.”

She swatted his arm. “I’m sure you’re doing just fine. Every night at Sheen is sold out from what I hear.”

“That’s true. It is.”

“See? You’re fine.”

“I still want to cook for you.” Colin leaned in and pressed his nose right above Corryna’s ear. “Actually. Scratch that. I *need* to cook for you.”

She slugged him in the leg and grabbed a croissant. “Is this close enough? I hope so.” She took a tiny bite, but it was too delicious to not let out a small moan.

“You like that?”

She didn’t want to admit how much she did. Between the buttery flaky piece of heaven that was the croissant and his smooth voice, she was experiencing yet another true moment of weakness. She had to stop doing that around Colin, as soon as humanly possible. “It’s good. Could use more chocolate.”

* * *

Colin had never been so turned on, especially in a meeting. He didn’t get haunted by women, but his one night with Corryna had stuck with him. Maybe it was because things between them had gotten so hot, so fast, and then was over just as quickly. It left him wondering what would happen if he had a real stretch of time with her, to savor every inch of her body and for her to do the same to him.

“I’ll let my pastry chef know your comments,” he said.

“Sorry about that,” Rylee said, striding back to their table. “As I was saying earlier, your collaboration must be very hands-on.”

Colin snickered. He couldn’t help but laugh at the absurdity of their situation. Corryna crossed her legs in the opposite direction, away from him.

Rylee opened a large three-ring binder. “So, Colin, you’re going to need to scrap everything you decided with Dionna and Tripp,” Rylee said, referring to the wedding’s maid of honor and best man. “The bride and groom changed their minds about that particular slate of hors d’oeuvres. They want you to push yourself. Start over.”

Colin was not only no longer turned on, he found absolutely none of this to be amusing. “Excuse me?” He didn’t think of

himself as a man with a big ego, but he took immense pride in his food. “Push myself?”

“They want something different. They definitely do not want anything that has already been on the Sheen menu. Everything must be innovative. New. Exciting. Memorable,” Rylee countered.

Corryna shifted in her seat and took another bite of her croissant. When Colin glanced at her, she was smiling, so either the pastry was pleasing her greatly or it was Colin’s reversal of fortune that was making her so damn happy. Possibly both.

“My food is always all of those things,” Colin said.

“Then you’ll have no problem, right?” Rylee asked.

Colin cleared his throat. He wasn’t about to reply with more protests, even though he was more than a little annoyed. This job was immensely important to him. “Of course.”

“So back to your collaboration,” Rylee said. “We want a truly immersive experience for our guests.”

Colin couldn’t begin to imagine how this was supposed to work. He and Corryna had a compelling dynamic, but it wasn’t based on collaboration. It was more like a big argument swirling in the center of a tornado of sexual chemistry. They might be able to build a fire together, but what exactly would they burn down in the process?

“Colin? Will that timeline work for you?” Rylee asked.

He shook his head to clear his thoughts. He hadn’t been listening. “I’m sorry. Can you go over that again?”

“Yes. You have one month to present the full menu and let me, and possibly Dionna, taste each new dish. At the same time, Corryna will bring in the proposed arrangements.” Rylee pushed a piece of paper across the table to him. “This outlines everything I think we will need in terms of courses, as well as various dietary restrictions I’ll need you to work around.”

“That works.” His words suggested complete confidence, when he was feeling nothing of the sort. He glanced over at

Corryna, feeling more uncertain than he had in some time, but he was damned if he was going to let on to it. “We can do it. Together.”

Rylee rose from the table. “Perfect. So we’ll meet in four weeks, sample the food, look at the flowers, make any changes, and we should be good to go. Please keep me apprised of your progress as the month goes on. I’ll check in with you once or twice. We’ll see how my month goes. My schedule is pretty packed.”

“Don’t worry about us.” Corryna popped up and offered her hand to Rylee. “The schedule will work just fine. Thank you so much for the opportunity. I’m thrilled to be working on this wedding.”

“Xavier and Ariana are very happy to be working with local vendors.” Rylee reached out to shake Colin’s hand. “I’m really looking forward to tasting your creations.”

“Thanks,” Colin said. As soon as Rylee left, he pinched the bridge of his nose and stepped away from Corryna, doing his best to clear his head.

“Colin. Are you okay?” Corryna set her hand on his back.

He liked her touch. It did something to him. It sent a jolt of electricity through him. If everything else wasn’t so messed up, he might take the time to enjoy it. “I’m annoyed. It’s fine.” He started for the door, his mind already running one million miles an hour. He needed to get to work right away. Start from scratch. Somehow be brilliant, on demand.

Corryna was right behind him. “Colin. Hold up. Talk to me. If we’re supposed to be working together, then you need to tell me what’s going on.”

How did he explain this in a way that didn’t make him sound as though he was too proud about his work? “I didn’t enjoy hearing what Rylee had to say about my food. To be honest, it was a punch to the gut. But it’s fine. I’ll work harder. I’ll push myself more.”

“I don’t understand why you’re so upset. Do you really even need this job? Surely you’re making more than enough money

these days.”

“Excuse me? What do you know about my business?”

She reared back her head, seeming put off by his response. “All I meant is that I’m sure you’re doing fine. Every night at Sheen is sold out.”

“That’s true. It is.”

“So, see? Don’t stress about this wedding.”

“It’s a point of pride, Corryna. This isn’t about money.”

“You get plenty of high-profile jobs. Surely one more won’t make or break you or the restaurant.”

“No. It won’t. But it will look bad if I don’t have the job. If it goes to someone else, Sheen suddenly won’t be the best restaurant in town. Which means it isn’t one of the best in the state. Or in the country for that matter.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“What?”

“Nothing. You and I are just coming at this from very different perspectives.”

“How exactly?”

“I’m worried about paying my employees and covering my mortgage, and you’re worried about whether people will see you as being the best of the best.”

It was then that Colin appreciated just how vulnerable a situation Corryna must be in. And she was dependent on him to make this work out, whether or not that made any sense to either of them. “Both of our businesses will benefit from this collaboration. So, let’s do our best to make it work. When do you want to meet? I suppose we should start as soon as possible. My days are tight, but my kitchen staff runs the kitchen most evenings. How about tomorrow?”

She looked up at the ceiling, flaunting her graceful neck. He was suddenly bombarded by memories of burying his face in it, of his lips skimming her soft skin and his nose inhaling her sweet scent. How was he supposed to work closely with her

and resist her for an entire month? He didn't see that happening. "It's a Tuesday. That should work. Do you want to start with food or flowers?"

"Flowers. I don't know enough about them, aside from the edible ones like nasturtiums."

"I won't lie. I'm a little nervous about going first."

"You're going to have to get over that if we're going to work together."

She drew in a deep breath through her nose. "Okay. Tomorrow night at my shop? Six o'clock? That's right after we close."

How Colin relished the thought of being alone with her. "Would you like me to bring a bottle of wine?"

"Okay. But no more whiskey."

He hated hearing her say that. It created a knot in his belly. "Why not? I thought you liked it."

"I loved it. But it also got me into trouble. I couldn't think straight."

Colin dropped his head to one side and shook it, hoping to express his dismay. "Corryna, that's the best kind of trouble. I would love to get into that kind of trouble with you again."

She pressed a finger to the center of his chest. "Colin. We're working together. Absolutely not. You heard Rylee. She wants no tension between us."

"And that's the best way to get rid of it."

She cocked an eyebrow at him, admonishing him with a single look.

"I suppose you're right. But that doesn't mean I won't stop trying." He looked down at her hand, which was still touching him, sending a current right through his body. They were all alone in this big ballroom. The building was relatively quiet. The table they'd just been sitting at seemed sturdy enough. Or there was the wall. His mind was a torrent of sexy ideas—kissing her neck again, palming the silky skin of her bare

thigh, pushing that dress up past her waist... “Can I walk you to your car?”

“I suppose.” She turned back to the table where they’d just been sitting. “Hold on one second. We can’t leave those croissants sitting there.”

“Absolutely not. Go ahead. Take them.” He stifled his grin. He took great pride in knowing at least part of the way to her heart. “There’s more where that came from.”

“Don’t tell me that. It’ll only make me feel like I have to be nice to you.” She plucked the box from the table and held on to it tightly.

“Don’t you want to be nice to me?”

“I’m thinking I’d like to stay closer to the word you used earlier. Cordial.”

“Why only that?”

She pressed her lips together tightly, scanning his face. Was she thinking what he’d been thinking mere seconds ago? That their attraction was palpable and so worth giving in to? “I have a feeling it will help me stay out of trouble.”

Three

Corryna needed something to keep her mind off her meeting with Colin, so she was thankful that her Tuesday at Royal Blooms had been unusually busy. They'd had dozens of deliveries to make, plus a potential new bride and groom came in for a wedding consultation, and sadly, local banker Winston Alderidge of Alderidge Bank had passed away, which meant there were quite a few new orders of condolence. Corryna loved that her work got to be a part of special moments in people's lives—new babies, weddings, graduations, and yes, funerals and memorials. Even those sad occasions could be honored and marked with an expression of beauty, and Corryna couldn't think of anything more suitable than flowers.

“Well, that's it for me today.” Her delivery driver Mike hung up the keys for the Royal Blooms truck on the hook outside of Corryna's office, then stood in her doorway. He was tall and skinny as could be, with freckles and reddish-brown hair. “Can I do anything for you before I head home?”

Corryna looked up from her computer, where she'd been doing her least favorite activity—staring at spreadsheets. Staring was no exaggeration. When it came to numbers, she struggled for them to make sense. “You're more than good to leave for the day. Go home and kiss that sweet baby of yours.” Mike and his wife, Serena, had a six-month-old baby girl named Penelope. Everyone who met this little girl instantly fell in love, but Corryna was especially smitten.

Mike grinned like the proud dad he was. “That's definitely the first thing on my schedule when I walk through the front door at the end of the day. It's so amazing to see the way her face lights up. It makes every little challenge worth it.”

Corryna's heart squeezed tightly. There had been a time when she'd seen herself with a life like the one that Mike had, with a partner to love and a child of her own to care for and shower with affection. Unfortunately, her path had diverged

wildly from that. “Say hi to Serena for me. And thank you for everything today. We have Winston Alderidge’s funeral on Friday, so keep that in mind. It’s only going to get busier this week.”

“Got it.”

Corryna glanced at the time on her computer. The shop was set to close in a half hour, which meant Colin would be arriving soon. She still wasn’t sure how this was going to work. All she could think about were the words Rylee had used—things like “hands-on” and “working in concert with each other.” Those were not simple asks. If she and Colin were going to collaborate creatively, they would need to get on the same wavelength and stay there. They would need to understand each other and establish a healthy give-and-take. How was she supposed to do that with a brilliant but stubborn chef who she had a proven weakness for?

The only answer was that she was going to have to stay strong. That was all there was to it. She was going to have to establish hard boundaries and keep them. The trouble with that plan was that she needed to let down her guard when she was creating. She needed to stay loose, open to possibilities, and most importantly, stay trusting of everyone and everything around her. She’d struggled to reach that state in the aftermath of her divorce. She trusted no one other than her best friend, Jessica. Dan had hurt her deeply, and the trauma from his betrayal had carved deep grooves into her heart. It quickly became her impulse to put up walls, and that was still a well-honed reflex, but she had learned to overcome it at times. She might have overcompensated that night with Colin, but he’d gotten to her with his words and handsome face, and perhaps a bit of whiskey.

Luckily, Corryna had the health and future of Royal Blooms to keep her on the straight-and-narrow path. The Noble-Ramos wedding was key to her success, and that meant she and Colin had to keep things as professional as possible. No more kisses. No more taking off clothes. No more sex. That was a onetime thing. It was not going to happen again.

She jumped when her phone rang, and she fumbled to answer, seeing on the caller ID that it was Jessica. “Hey, honey. What’s up?”

“Can you do a quick hike tomorrow morning? It’s my only time off for the foreseeable future, and I miss you. I miss seeing your face.”

Corryna’s schedule had gotten considerably more busy as of today, but she could not pass up time with her best friend. Plus, early April in Texas was prime time for wildflowers. “That’s a great idea. I’d love to go. Can you come by the shop at nine tomorrow? I’ll duck out for a few hours. I can come in early to make up for my time away.”

“I don’t want to put you out, Corryna. You already work so hard.”

“You aren’t putting me out. At all. And... Well... I have something I’d like to talk to you about.”

“What kind of something?”

Really, her something was a *someone*. Corryna considered spilling the beans, but she was deathly afraid that Hannah, who was still working the front of the shop, might overhear her. “I’ll tell you tomorrow if that’s okay. It’s a long story.”

“Well, now I’m going to be wondering about it all night. I don’t get even a tiny hint?”

Corryna sighed. She couldn’t leave Jessica completely in the dark. Jess worked many catering jobs for Sheen and knew Colin. “Remember when I complained about Colin Reynolds after he canceled my contract with Sheen? Well, we’ve had a few more run-ins since then. It’s messy. And complicated.” Guilt weighed on Corryna for having kept her one-night stand a secret from Jessica, but she was embarrassed to admit that she’d lost control like that. “That’s all I can tell you right now.”

“Okay. I trust you. I’ll just have to be patient.”

There was that word again—trust. “See you tomorrow morning.” Corryna ended the call and checked the time once more. There was now only five minutes until Colin was set to

arrive. She bustled into the retail space, where Hannah was wiping down the long wood counters. Hannah had a bubbly personality, a quick smile, and had worked at the shop for four years, since she turned sixteen. Now she was a little less than two years out of high school. She was young and carefree—Corryna had been like that once, and she enjoyed seeing her old self in someone else. “Hey, Hannah. Where are we on closing up?”

Hannah tucked her rag into the pocket of her apron, then took the broom down from the hook on the wall. “I just need to sweep. If you can close out the register, we’ll be all set.”

“Will do.” Corryna tapped away at the touch screen of the point-of-sale system Dan had insisted they get when Royal Blooms first opened. Corryna knew it very well now, but there had been a steep learning curve at the beginning. Pen and paper had always made more sense to her, but this was pretty foolproof by now. She ran an end-of-day report every day, which told her the sales and remaining inventory. Once a week, the system told her what she was running low on, although Corryna knew her flower stock like the back of her hand.

The bell on the door chimed, and Corryna looked up. In walked Colin, holding a bottle of wine and looking like a male model with his tall stature and the devil-may-care glint in his eye. He was wearing dark jeans and a black T-shirt—a simple enough ensemble except for the fact that it showed off every hard contour of his arms. Memories of his hands on her body wound through her head like a cyclone. “Colin. Hi.”

“Hello there.” He strode in like the ultraconfident man he was, and set the bottle of wine down on the counter. “Ready to get to work?”

Corryna’s vision flew to Hannah, who was blinking so much it was like she thought he was a mirage. “Colin, this is Hannah. She’s not only one of my best employees, she’s studying at Royal Community College to get her floral design certification. Hannah, this is Colin Reynolds. He’s the owner and head chef of Sheen.”

Bright crimson rose in Hannah's cheeks as she shook Colin's hand. Apparently his appeal extended to women of all ages. "It's nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you, too. Tell me, Hannah, how do you like working for Corryna?"

"Ummm..." Hannah turned and looked at Corryna with wide eyes, like she wasn't sure what she was supposed to say.

"Go ahead," Corryna said. "Tell him."

Hannah returned her attention to Colin. "She's the best. It's super fun to work here. And she's paying for me to go to school. She always lets me go home early on Fridays, too. I've graduated, but I love going to my high school's football games. It's a big deal around here."

"Thanks for telling me about working at Royal Blooms, Hannah. Now I know where to come looking for a job if the restaurant doesn't work out," Colin joked as he studied Corryna with his mesmerizing green eyes.

Her pulse pounded in her ears as she couldn't bring herself to look away. His gaze made her feel so exposed, but in a way that made her want to give him everything. How did he do that? It was his superpower on full display. A warning shot across the bow. "You can head home, Hannah. I'll take it from here," Corryna said.

"Okay. I'll see you tomorrow. Bye, Mr. Reynolds." Hannah flitted into the hall that led to the office area. Moments later, the chime on the back door sounded, leaving Corryna and Colin all alone.

"This is quite a nice little shop you've got here, Corryna," he said.

"I know it's not fancy like Sheen, but I love it. I feel at home here."

"That's important." He picked the bottle of wine up. "Do you have any glasses? Then we can get to work."

Corryna was torn about whether wine was a good idea. She wanted to stay in control, but she appreciated the idea of

taking the edge off her nervousness. “I’ll have a small glass. That’s it.”

“Whatever you say.”

Corryna went back to the tiny kitchenette next to her office where employees often took their break, and grabbed two glass tumblers. “This is the best I can offer.”

“It works. And luckily, they now sell really good wine with a screw-top.” He poured them each a glass, and handed one to her. “Now show me how you work.”

Corryna led him to the back room, which wasn’t a glamorous setting. It had old concrete floors and beat-up wood workbenches for designing arrangements. “Well, normally the first thing I do is look at what the customer wants. Then I bring that to life.”

He pulled up a stool alongside her bench and sat on it. “Other than the old Hollywood glamor theme, we don’t know what the customer specifically wants, other than creativity and seamlessness and all of those other words Rylee threw out at us yesterday. Hmm.”

“And we’re supposed to be coordinating our two very different disciplines.” Corryna leaned against her bench, thinking about the best way to approach this, while trying to ignore how tempting Colin looked when he was also deep in thought.

“I think the most important part is that we have to sort out how to work together.”

“Yes. I agree.” It was such a relief to hear him say that. “Until we figure that out, we can’t get much done.”

“And this is a trial run. So how about if I tell you about one of my dishes at Sheen, and we can talk about it, then you can pull out some flowers and put together an arrangement?”

“That makes sense.”

“I mean, you haven’t actually been to the restaurant, so you’ll have to imagine what it tastes like.”

“Very funny. Just tell me about one of your dishes.

“One of my signature appetizers is a warm Spanish goat cheese with white wine, lemon and thyme, served with grilled house-baked sourdough bread.”

Funny how him uttering the names of a few ingredients in his buttery accent made her feel like she might faint. “Sounds delicious.”

“Does that spark anything?”

She didn’t want to tell him that what it really sparked was her attraction to him. “Yes. Several things. I’ll be right back.” She wandered into the cooler and grabbed lavender, white irises, branches of lemon leaf for filler, and one of her favorite flowers, a chartreuse green beauty with an unfortunate name given her audience. She dropped the stems into a bucket of water and walked out into her workroom. “I don’t want you to think I’m pandering, but the green ones are called Bells of Ireland.”

He grinned and admired the tall spiky stems with bell-shaped blooms. “Very pretty. What made you choose those?”

“The green made me think of thyme. I chose irises because they’re architectural, but still delicate, and they grow well in arid climates like Spain. The Spanish goat cheese inspired that choice. The lemon leaf is self-explanatory. I was thinking lavender for its herbaceous smell, but I’m not sure it will work. I worry it’s too fragrant. Might interfere with the guests’ enjoyment of the meal.”

“May I?” He stood and took one of the branches of lavender from the bucket and raised it to his nose. “It’s heavenly,” he said, closing his eyes and inhaling the scent.

Corryna’s knees went wobbly at the sight. “But?”

“But I think you’re right. Too strong a smell.”

“Good. This is good.” She nodded, her creative mind kicking into gear as what she wanted to create began to form before her eyes. She saw possibilities—shapes and compositions—and she wanted to explore them. For the first time, she felt as though a collaboration with Colin might actually be possible.

“Now I want to see your artistry in motion. Ignore me. Pretend like I’m not here. Do what you love to do.”

That part about ignoring his presence was easier said than done. It would be nearly impossible to disregard him completely. He was that magnetic. Her attraction to him was that potent. But she needed this partnership with him to work. Her business depended on it. “Okay, then.” She pushed the bucket to the side, pulled out a modern cylindrical vase and grabbed her floral scissors. They were cool and weighty in her hand. There was always something so comforting about holding them. Made of hand-forged steel, they were one of the first serious investments she’d made in her career as a floral designer. They were a reminder that despite everything, she still believed in her talents. As she stole a split-second glance at Colin, who was sipping wine and keeping his eyes glued to her expectantly, she realized how much she needed that sliver of confidence. One wrong word and he could shake her resolve to the ground.

* * *

Colin had not expected to be so mesmerized by the sight of Corryna arranging flowers, and yet here he was, sitting in her workroom, feeling a sensation that he hadn’t experienced in quite some time—inspiration. He saw the fire of creativity in her. He saw the miracle of a creator at work—shutting out the world and focusing only on the medium. In his best moments, when he could take his eyes off the bottom line, and stop chasing things like prestige and awards, he could be like that. He wanted to be more like Corryna as she placed the flowers with confidence, relying on instinct rather than analysis. When he’d first started in the culinary arts, he was like that—drawn to invention. Now it was all about outrunning his family’s legacy and making a name for himself. It was a mission he was dedicated to. He would not let his father win, even though it required a more exacting and ruthless approach than he preferred.

When she was done, she stood back and took a deep breath, scrutinizing her work. “Well?” she asked.

He stood and rested his thumb and forefinger on his chin, as if he was contemplating the meaning of the universe. Eventually, he gave up the ruse. “It’s stunning.” *You’re stunning.* He couldn’t get past his frustration at their tryst in his office. He felt cheated. He’d only had the tiniest taste of her, and he wanted more. “This is something I could never do. You use softness to create structure. You take nature’s beauty, which is already flawless, and somehow make it more profound.”

“Wow. Now who’s ready to launch a writing career?”

He chuckled, giving in to her quick wit. “What can I say? Watching you is like watching a painter at the canvas. I had no idea where you were going when you started. I certainly didn’t envision something this amazing.”

She shrugged. “Thank you. It’s decent. It needs some work. Still not sure about the asymmetrical design. Sometimes I have to toy with things.”

“That I can do. I tinker with food all the time. Taste it. Add a bit of this or that. Or sometimes I’ll be stumped about how to fix a dish and then it will come to me later.” He considered asking if she wanted to toy with *him*. He was completely open to the idea. But now wasn’t the time. He did want to work well with her. This job, even though he didn’t *need* the money, was important to him. He’d hustled to elevate Sheen’s already sterling reputation. It would be irreparably damaged if he was fired.

“Yes. Exactly. You get it.”

He poured them both another glass of wine, and she didn’t protest even though she’d said she only wanted one. Wanting to spend more time with her, he grabbed another stool and pulled it over to the bench for her. “So. Tell me. Why haven’t you been to the restaurant?”

“It’s not exactly in my price range.”

He took a sip of his wine. “Why not? You must do really well here. Don’t you?”

She shook her head. “No.”

“I don’t understand. Why not?”

“The business barely breaks even. Which is partly my fault. My costs have gone up, but I’ve been reluctant to raise my prices. I was constantly raising prices the first few years after I opened, just so that I could keep up. People complained.”

“Corryna, prices have to follow costs. Always. It’s part of how you make money.”

“I know. But it’s not that simple.” She blew out a long frustrated breath.

“You’re paying for Hannah to go to school. That’s taking money out of your pocket, too.”

“I guess I don’t look at it that way. It’s an investment in my future. She’s going to graduate soon and then she’ll be able to help me more, which could help me expand my business. So it’s worth it to me, even if things are more than a little tight right now.”

None of this made sense to Colin. He knew for a fact that flowers had very high margins, and the rent for her space had to be quite low. “Who does your books? Maybe you need someone new to take a look and give you some advice.” He was the perfect person to do it, but he didn’t want to stick his nose where it didn’t belong.

“I do them. Reluctantly. But I do them.” She swirled the wine in her glass and took another drink. “Numbers are not my strong suit. My husband was always responsible for that part.”

He’d heard people talking around town about Corryna’s ex-husband, but he wasn’t sure if the stories were true. “I understand he didn’t exactly treat you like a gentleman should.”

A low ironic laugh escaped her lips, reminding him of how wonderful it was to kiss her. “Uh, no. I think six different mistresses puts him solidly in the category of not a gentleman.”

Colin had known it was bad, but not that horrific. “I’m so sorry. That’s bloody awful.”

“And that’s just the women I know about. I have a feeling there were more, but I really don’t want to know.”

“How did you find out about it? The cheating?”

“The husband of a woman he was sleeping with showed up at the shop, looking for him. He was screaming and yelling. It scared the crap out of me. It terrified my employees. And of course, that meant I had to confront Dan, who tried to deny it. But the husband knew a lot about him, and once I started presenting him with those facts, Dan eventually admitted it.”

“I’m so sorry. What about the others?”

“That all came up during the divorce. My attorney hired a private investigator. He found out about the other women.”

Colin felt his anger rising up inside him. He didn’t even know her ex-husband and he already wanted to punch him square in the face. Resorting to violence was never the answer, but it would be a small measure of justice in the world. “I’m so sorry that happened.” He reached out for her hand, and her vision was drawn to the sight of his touch. It was just like before. A current of raw attraction flowed so instantaneously between them. It felt vital, like water and air. And dangerous, like fire.

Corryna pulled back her hand, leaving him no choice but to follow her lead. “To make things worse, I’m pretty sure Dan was stealing from the business while we were married.”

Colin was already infuriated by the misdeeds of her ex-husband, but hearing that he’d taken money from her struggling business? His blood went from a simmer to a hard boil. “Why do you say that?”

“It’s pretty simple, really. When we were married, he did the accounting. And he always told me how tight money was. When we went through the divorce, all of that proved to be true. We were just barely breaking even. But then after the divorce and the settlement, I noticed that there was more money at the end of the month. Orders hadn’t gone up dramatically. Nothing else had changed. That seems pretty suspicious, doesn’t it?”

“It seems more than suspicious. It’s sketchy as hell.”

She frowned. “I was worried about that. My lawyer wanted to hire some special accountant to look into it, but the divorce was already getting so expensive and I just wanted it to be over, so I said no.”

“A forensic accountant.”

“That’s it. I don’t really even understand what they do.”

Colin had lots of knowledge of forensic accountants, in part because his father was prone to hiring them when he had a dispute with a business partner. His father was always convinced others were stealing from him. “It’s someone who combs through bookkeeping records and financial accounts and finds the discrepancies. They find anything out of the ordinary or suspicious. Then they figure out the reason why the money went to a certain place.”

“Ah. Well, I guess that could’ve been handy at the time, but like I said, I just wanted the divorce to be final so I could move on. It’s been six years now, so it’s definitely too late.”

“I’m not sure of the legal side of this in the state of Texas, but this isn’t about your marriage. It’s about your business partnership.”

“What good will it do? So I can find out if he betrayed me one more time?” Her voice was thin and raw with pain like it hadn’t been before. “I don’t really want to go there again.”

“Don’t you want the truth? Plus, we could sue him for the money if we can prove it.”

“We?”

He cleared his throat. “I’m sorry. *You* could sue him. Or your business, more specifically. Or the district attorney might want to bring criminal charges. Embezzlement is a serious offense.”

“I don’t know, Colin. I wouldn’t know the first thing about doing that. It sounds like a stressful process. The thought of it, especially since it has to do with numbers, is overwhelming.”

“Let me help you.” He was surprised by the readiness with which he’d uttered the words. It wasn’t that he didn’t like to assist others when they were in need. It was more that he didn’t make a habit of pushing to make it happen.

“You’d do that for me?”

“Why do you sound so shocked?”

“Because I am. You’re a highly successful workaholic who knows how to maximize profits. I’m amazed that you would take the time to help someone else with their business.”

He wasn’t sure why he felt so inclined to help her, other than she was a smart, hardworking, fascinating woman who possessed rare talent and who’d also been through the wringer. He didn’t want her to fail, especially because of someone else. “It helps me if you’re successful. I want every business in Royal to do well. A strong community means a stronger business for me.”

“It helps you if I’m successful, but you canceled Sheen’s contract with my business?”

“Yeah. About that...” He stuffed his hands into his pockets as he recalled the words he’d uttered to her that day she’d marched into Sheen, full of fire and brimstone, ready to cut off his head and feed it to him for lunch. *My customers care about my food, not your flowers.* He’d been a real ass. “That was my mistake. And especially after watching you work tonight, I’d like to resume our partnership.”

“Colin, I don’t need your charity. Just because we’ve gotten to know each other a little bit. Or because we slept together.”

“It’s not that.” Although, to be fair, he would’ve been lying if he’d said he didn’t want to have sex with her again. Because he did. More than he could put into words, or even wrap his head around. “It’s just tonight. I got to see your work in action. And I realized that you’re not simply snipping a bunch of flowers and stuffing them into a vase. I didn’t realize how much artistry went into it. I didn’t give you a chance. And I want to make up for that.”

She studied his face. Like him, she had green eyes. Hers were lighter, but somehow more intense. “Okay. What do you want? And when?”

If only she knew the way he really wanted to answer that question. *You. Now.* “Can we resume our previous standing order? And can you bring something by tomorrow?”

She twisted her lips, seeming deep in thought. “I can make that work.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I don’t want to give you the chance to go back on your word.”

He laughed, which made her smile. “Not going to happen. I’m a man of honor.”

“I sensed that about you, Colin. Despite you firing me months ago.”

“Again. Sorry about that.”

She held out her hand to shake his. “Apology accepted.”

“Will you think about the forensic accountant?”

“I will.” She started cleaning up her bench. “We also need to decide on when we can get together again. When I get to see you create and be brilliant.”

“I thought about inviting you to the kitchen at Sheen, but if we are going to collaborate, we should work at my house. We won’t have all of the distractions.”

“Okay. When?”

“Saturday night?”

A look of surprise crossed her face. “Isn’t that the biggest night of the week in the restaurant?”

“It is. But it’s also the night when we have the most kitchen staff working. My sous-chef, Kristine, is excellent. Runs the kitchen with precision. I often just end up walking through the dining room and chatting up the customers. And believe me, I

could use a break from that.” *Especially if I get to spend it with you.*

“Saturday it is. I’ll be ready to relax. That’s wedding day, so it’s always incredibly busy.”

“Perfect. I’ll be ready with a big glass of wine. And you won’t have to do a thing other than sit back and tell me what you think of my food.”

She grinned, which was its own reward. “And I want to hear more about you and your path to Sheen. And your family. Lots of money and prestige in the Reynolds family. I’d love to know more about how they influenced your journey to becoming a chef.”

And to think, things had been going perfectly... “I’ll talk about Sheen, but don’t care to talk about my family. No good comes of that.”

“Oh. Okay. I’m sorry.”

He swallowed hard, struggling to regain his composure. His temper was rearing its ugly head again, threatening to ruin what had been a lovely evening. “It’s okay. You didn’t know.”

Four

Corryna was running on very little sleep, but between needing to design the arrangements for Sheen and the very cryptic thing Colin had said about his family, she simply hadn't been able to get any rest. She'd tossed and turned all night as she wondered how he could say that no good could come from discussing his family. From her bit of internet snooping, she'd learned that Colin's parents owned Reynolds Hospitality, a small but impressive group of four-and five-star restaurants across Ireland and the UK. His mother was a renowned pastry chef and cookbook author, and taught at a top-level culinary school. His father was also a chef, known for innovation, just like his son. The Reynolds family had a real empire. And since Colin had gone into the same line of work, she'd only assumed his mom and dad had played a key part in that. Perhaps they'd inspired and encouraged him.

It seemed like a logical conclusion to her, but there was clearly more to it, and she was curious to know why he had such disdain for them. Corryna adored her family, even though she didn't see them nearly enough, as her younger sister, Betsy, lived in Virginia and her parents were still back in Atlanta, where they'd grown up. College had brought Corryna to Texas—Austin, to be exact. Dan was the reason she'd remained in the state, but the charm and community of Royal was what was really telling her to stay put.

For now, she was finishing up the flowers for Sheen. She wanted them to be a “wow” moment, and not only because she wanted to impress Colin. Yes, she'd lost a chunk of income when Colin canceled his contract, but she'd also lost the exposure. Having her arrangements back in a top-notch restaurant like Sheen was a real feather in her cap, and a potential boost to her business. She'd take as many of those as she could get.

The chime on the back door rang. Corryna looked up at the clock on the wall. Ten minutes and the shop would be open, which also meant Jessica would soon be arriving for their hike.

“You haven’t been here all night, have you?” Mike ambled into the workroom.

Hannah was right behind him. “Those are gorgeous, Corryna,” she said, surveying Corryna’s work, which was blanketing one of the longer benches that ran along the far wall. There were thirty small tabletop arrangements, a larger one for the host station, and two oversized ones for the bar area. They all coordinated and proudly featured the state flower, the bluebonnet.

“Thank you. And no, I haven’t been here all night. I came in at five.” She could admit to herself that it had been more than excitement over flowers and questions about Colin’s family that had kept her up. Last night, he’d proven himself enticing in a different way from that night in his office or the day they’d met at the TCC. He was kind and thoughtful. That had been unexpected. She liked having people surprise her, especially when it contrasted with their public persona.

Hannah walked over to take a closer look at Corryna’s creations. “Which client are these for? I don’t remember this many arrangements in the orders for today.”

“Sheen. We’ve been rehired.”

Hannah turned to her. There was a knowing glint in her eye. For such a young woman, she was incredibly astute. “You must have really impressed him.”

“You know, I think I did.” It had felt so amazing to have Colin’s admiration for her talent.

“Should I go ahead and load up the truck and take these over to the restaurant?” Mike asked.

Corryna looked at the flowers and decided it was better to make this first delivery herself. “I’ll do it this time. If you can help me load up the back of my car, that would be great.”

“No problem. I’ll put them in plastic bins. Where are your keys?”

“On my desk.”

“I’m on it.” Mike went to work while Hannah and Corryna took care of opening up the shop.

Moments after Hannah flipped the sign to say Open, Jessica strolled in. “Good morning,” she said. Her dark brown shoulder-length wavy hair was back in a high ponytail, and she was wearing black leggings that showed off her curves, along with a turquoise exercise top that brought out the blue-green of her eyes.

“Morning,” Corryna said, giving her friend a quick hug. “Is it okay if we run an order over to Sheen before our hike?”

Deep creases formed between Jessica’s eyes. “I thought you said that Colin Reynolds was a problem. Now you’re bringing him flowers?”

“I don’t think I called him a problem. I think I said that I needed to talk to you about him.” Corryna glanced over at Hannah, who was clearly listening to their conversation. That one look was enough to make Hannah go back to bringing out the buckets of bulk flowers that went in the front displays.

“Got it. Subject matter for our hike. So let’s hit it.”

“We can take my car. It’s out back.” Corryna led the way through the shop. Mike was just closing the back tailgate of her car when they arrived. “Thank you, Mike. I appreciate it.”

He handed her the keys. “Of course. Anytime.”

Corryna and Jessica climbed into her car and were on their way to Sheen. “How’s school going?” Corryna asked. Jessica was finishing up graduate school and preparing to eventually be accredited as a music therapist. She was not only a gifted musician, but she also had a real affinity for kids, especially those with special needs. Her plan to build a career around her talent and passion was something Corryna identified with strongly.

“School is hard, but great. I love it so much. I’m just burning the candle from all ends if you know what I mean. Between working catering jobs and studying, I hardly have time to sleep. But it’ll all be worth it. I know it.” Jessica was a

very hard worker—something Corryna readily admired and identified with as well.

“Well, I think you’re kicking butt. And I’m very proud of you.” A few minutes later, Corryna pulled into the parking lot at Sheen and parked near the back loading dock. “I’ll run in and see if someone can help me with these.”

Jessica glanced in the back of the car. “I think we can handle it if we do it together.”

“Okay, then.” Corryna hopped out, and they each took one of the three bins of flowers. “We’re going to have to come back for the last one.”

They climbed a short set of stairs next to the loading dock, and entered through a side door, which had been propped open with a cinder block. Inside, boxes of produce were piled high while several people in white chef’s coats milled about. Corryna flashed back to the night she and Colin had loaded her flowers into the walk-in refrigerator. It was surreal to see this setting in the light of day, and the memory sent a current of electricity through her. Of course, she hadn’t had the nerve to retrieve those flowers. She’d been too worried about seeing Colin, so she’d asked Mike to do it.

A woman with flame red hair emerged from what was likely the main kitchen door. “You must be from Royal Blooms. Colin told me to expect the delivery.”

“Yes. Hi. I’m Corryna. Is there anywhere in particular you want these?”

“I’m Kristine Vargas. I’m the sous-chef. You can take the flowers into the dining room. Colin’s in there right now, fixing the sink behind the bar.”

“Okay.” Corryna glanced at Jessica, then led the way through the back to the dining room. “Hello?” Corryna called. Other than the tables covered in white tablecloths, the room was empty.

“Oy. Is that you, Corryna?” Funnily enough, Colin’s accent seemed even stronger than usual.

“It is. Where are you?” She set down her armful on one of the tables and, with a nod, suggested Jessica do the same.

“Under the bar,” he answered.

Corryna wandered to the far side of the room, then peeked behind the bar. All she could see was a very long and tempting pair of denim-clad legs sticking out from under the sink.

“Colin. What are you doing?”

“Restaurant ownership is very glamorous, in case you haven’t heard.” He shimmied out from under the sink with a wrench in one hand and a few beads of sweat on his forehead. His hair was a mess and he was wearing a Sheen T-shirt. He looked perfect.

“Can I help you up?” She offered her hand.

“This doesn’t make me look very manly, but sure.” He wrapped his fingers around hers as he got up from the floor. He didn’t let go when he was standing. He simply held on, peering down at Corryna. “Are you making the delivery yourself? That’s some exceptional service.”

She couldn’t disguise her smile, but she did pull her hand back. They were supposed to be keeping things businesslike and he was pushing the boundaries at every turn. “You’re a very important client. I want to make sure you’re happy.”

Someone behind Corryna cleared their throat. She turned to see Jessica standing there. Staring. “Jessica, you know Colin.” Turning back to him, she said, “Colin, Jess is my best friend.”

Colin reached out to shake Jessica’s hand. “Nice to see you again.”

“You too,” Jessica said with a *very* leading tone.

“Want to check out the flowers?” Corryna asked.

“Of course,” Colin replied.

“I’ll run out to the car and get the last few arrangements. We couldn’t carry everything in one trip,” Jessica said. Thank goodness she was thinking straight and had remembered that. Corryna certainly hadn’t.

Corryna led Colin over to the table and picked up one of the small vases. “I kept them simple. The focus should be on the food. Of course. The roses I used are very low fragrance. And the bluebonnets are the state flower. They’re one of my favorites. They bloom like crazy this time of year.”

“They’re perfect. And I recognize the bluebonnets. They’re blooming out at my house. I can show you when you come over.”

“That would be nice.”

He was quiet for a moment, then cleared his throat. “I feel like I owe you an apology after last night.” Colin folded his arms and a somber look crossed his face.

“Why?”

“Because I got defensive when you asked about my family. It was a knee-jerk reaction. I wasn’t trying to be difficult. It’s just a complicated situation.”

She reached for his arm, wanting to comfort him. His voice had a melancholy tone to it that was so out of character. “Don’t worry about it. I’m around to listen whenever you change your mind.”

“Thanks. I appreciate that. Did you think about the forensic accountant?”

“Not yet.” Something was making her hesitate, but she wasn’t sure what it was. “I’ll let you know.”

“This is the last of everything,” Jessica said, setting down the flowers.

“Thank you for helping,” Corryna said.

“Of course.”

“Are you going to invoice me for the flowers, Corryna?” Colin asked.

“I can bill you at the end of the month, if that works.”

“You shouldn’t extend your customers that much leeway. I’ll pay you weekly,” he replied.

Being around Colin made Corryna feel even more insecure about her business acumen. “Okay. If that works for you, it works for me. I’ll see you on Saturday.”

“Yes. See you then.”

Corryna and Jessica wound their way back to the loading dock, then climbed into the car to start the quick drive to the old Royal quarry.

“Alright, Corryna. Spill the beans,” Jessica said as they got underway.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Of course, Corryna knew exactly what her friend was asking. She just wanted to hear her say it.

“Oh, I don’t know. Just picking up on the fact that you and Colin have some serious chemistry.”

“You can’t tell that from a few minutes of being around us.”

“I’m shocked you two didn’t start a fire in the dining room.”

Corryna laughed quietly, then sighed. She was so attracted to Colin. That much was absolutely true. But getting involved was such a bad idea. “I need to tell you something.”

“Yes. Go.”

She sucked in a deep breath for courage. “Colin and I had sex. The night of the blackout.”

“Oh, my God. Tell me everything.”

She wasn’t prepared to tell her friend everything. But she could share most of it. “I brought my flowers to his restaurant so I could store them in his fridge and I don’t know. We were arguing, but then the next minute he was pouring me a glass of Irish whiskey and saying nice things to me. I completely lost my head.” This was the first time she’d uttered a word about this to anyone. She’d expected to feel some measure of relief at confessing to what had happened, but it was only tying her stomach up in knots.

“Was it amazing?”

“It was hot. For sure. But it happened so fast. I mean, ten minutes. Fifteen minutes, tops. Then it was over and I was frantically searching for my clothes on his office floor so I could get out of there.”

Jessica grasped Corryna’s forearm. “Hold up. You did it in his office? On the floor?”

“And on the chair, sort of. I don’t know. It was all a blur.” It had been hot enough to sear the memory into her brain for all eternity, but she didn’t like the fact that he’d made her behave in a manner that was so completely out of character. She thought of herself as a free spirit, but not *that* free, devoid of inhibition. What kind of mistakes would she make in a state like that?

“Do you like him? Could this be a relationship?”

Corryna nearly burst out laughing. “What? No.”

“Don’t say it like that. It’s a reasonable question.”

“Colin Reynolds? No way. I mean, he’s smart and sexy.” *And funny and clever and that accent makes me want to take off all of my clothes.* “But we’re working together on the Noble-Ramos wedding. It’s such an important job for both of us. So that’s really not a good idea.”

“I see your point about working on the wedding together, but there is going to be life after Xavier Noble and Ariana Ramos get married. I like Colin. He treats his catering staff with respect and pays us well. That’s why everyone wants to work his events. And you and Colin will still be living in the same town. Don’t shut that door completely.”

Corryna hadn’t thought about that, and it gave her a whole new perspective on her situation with Colin. Maybe she didn’t have to work overtime to keep him at arm’s length. She could keep him in the friend zone, then see where things went after the wedding. “It probably wouldn’t go anywhere. Colin doesn’t do serious. He’s more focused on his career. But it could be fun.” She pulled into the dirt parking area near the quarry. A thick rolling forested area surrounded it on three

sides, and there were quite a lot of nature trails snaking through the woods.

“You’ve never really struck me as the sort of woman who would get involved with a man just for fun,” Jessica said as they got out of the car.

“I’m not.”

“So maybe think twice about that.” Jessica reached out and cupped Corryna’s shoulder. “I want you to have fun, but I also don’t want you to get hurt.”

“I don’t exactly trust my judgment when it comes to men anyway. My track record isn’t great.” Corryna led the way up the main trail. It was dusty and arid along the upward incline, with outcroppings of rock, bits of vegetation and the occasional small lizard that would dart away when it saw them coming. The sun was already strong and fierce. It might be April, but summer was most definitely on the way. “So, Colin suggested one interesting thing to me last night when we were talking.”

“Oh yeah?” Jessica asked. “What’s that?”

“Remember when I told you that I had suspicions that Dan had stolen from the business? Well, I told Colin about it, and he said I should hire a forensic accountant.” Corryna’s words were coming out in choppy spurts now that they were walking up a steeper grade. But the woods were getting more dense, the greenery fuller and lush, and she knew that soon they would reach the real payoff. “They would audit the books and figure out if money disappeared and possibly where it went.”

“What would be the endgame with something like that?” Jessica asked.

“I guess I could sue Dan for the money.”

“After what he did to you, I absolutely think you should do it. Can Colin guide you through it?”

“Yes. He offered to help me find someone.” Corryna saw the trees opening up near the crest of the hill. There were wider swaths of light from the sun up ahead.

“That’s great. I say go for it.”

“I guess I just wonder why he would want to help me. That’s my only sticking point. He even asked me about it again at the restaurant when you were out getting the last bin of arrangements.” Corryna took a few more steps and reached the top of the hill. Jessica caught up a split second later. They stood and drank in the vision of the vast meadow on the other side of the slope. It was positively brimming with native Texas wildflowers—pink evening primrose, Texas bluebell, Indian paintbrush, white prickly poppy, brown-eyed Susan, and of course, bluebonnet.

“Wow,” was all Corryna could think to say as she surveyed the stunning landscape, knowing how inadequate words were.

“It’s gorgeous. And peaceful.”

“I love to come here. I love seeing the flowers in the wild. It just reminds me how lucky I am to get to work all day with these beautiful things that nature creates. It’s a little miracle.”

Jessica wrapped one arm around Corryna’s shoulder and tugged her closer. “You deserve a little miracle.”

“So you think I should let Colin help me?”

“Yes. I do. And I also don’t think you should rule out a romance. I’d just be careful. A guy like Colin Reynolds isn’t easy to hold on to.”

Five

Colin was the first to arrive at Sheen on Friday morning, before the sun was up, but that wasn't unusual. He worked more hours in the restaurant than anyone. As far as he was concerned, that was the only way it could be, because no one cared about the food and the experience of dining at his restaurant as much as he did. He went straight to work—not at his desk, where he would often spend hours analyzing the business's numbers. Today, he'd be starting in the kitchen.

He wanted to work out a few dishes before he had Corryna over tomorrow night. Although his kitchen at home was fully equipped, he had every ingredient he could ever want at Sheen. His plan was to cook and taste all morning, think on it for the rest of the day, then refine when he prepared a meal for Corryna tomorrow night. He wanted to impress her, but this wasn't about being flashy or even about pride. It was about trying to measure up. She'd truly bowled him over that night at Royal Blooms. It had taken his breath away to witness the moment when the world fell away for Corryna and she became immersed in her creativity, taking one thing and turning it into quite another. He knew that feeling. He'd been in that place before. But it had been a long time, and even then, he wasn't sure he'd ever been as uninhabited as she was. His approach had always been more cerebral and calculating. He formulated ideas in his head, tried them on his own, refined them over time, then presented the world with his creation when it was absolutely perfect.

He only had an hour or so to himself in the kitchen before his pastry chef, Elena Gutierrez, arrived at 7:00 a.m. "Wow. You're cooking this morning," she noted, looping her apron over her head and wrapping it around her waist to tie it. "Usually you're in your office." Elena was in her midthirties, with short deep brown hair and warm eyes. She was not only accomplished with pastries and desserts, she was a mom of three. Colin wasn't sure how she juggled it all, but he was

extremely thankful to have her on his team. One of the original Sheen employees, she'd stayed on when Colin had bought the restaurant from Charlotte Jarrett Edmond.

"I'll be out of your way in a bit. Just wanted to give some ideas a lash."

"A lash?" she asked.

The staff, and for that matter, most Texans, struggled when he let his Irish slang loose. "Give it a lash. It means to give it a go."

"Ah. Got it." She wandered over and peered down at one of the dishes he'd composed—beef carpaccio with green garlic aioli and black truffle. "Looks amazing. May I?"

He wasn't sure it was perfect yet, but he wasn't afraid of Elena's honest appraisal. "Please." Colin stood back as she grabbed a fork and dug in.

Her eyes closed the instant she put the bite in her mouth. "Oh, my God. Colin," she said, holding her hand to her lips. "That is incredible. The flavors are sublime and the texture is perfect. It's like velvet." She licked the fork. "Is this going on the menu? Please say it is."

He really hoped he'd get that kind of response from Corryna, and eventually Xavier Noble and Ariana Ramos. "Probably. Possibly. It would first be for the Noble-Ramos wedding. The wedding planner was very specific. She wants dishes that are exclusive to their event. But we could do this at Sheen afterward."

"Well, you're a genius."

Colin had heard that word before, but he didn't believe it. He knew he was a damn good chef, but was he the absolute best he could be? Not yet.

Sheen's sous-chef, Kristine Vargas, burst into the kitchen with such enthusiasm that it left the stainless steel door swinging back and forth on its hinges. "Have you guys heard?"

"Heard what?" Colin asked.

Kristine strutted over to them, her chin held high. “The Jane Broad award nominees were just announced. And you were *both* nominated.”

Elena shrieked so loudly that Colin recoiled. “Are you being serious right now?”

Kristine laughed and unleashed an enthusiastic smile. “I would not kid about this. You were nominated for pastry chef of the year, and Colin was nominated for chef of the year.”

Colin reached for Kristine’s arm. “Stall the ball. You mean best chef in Texas.”

Kristine shot Colin an inquisitive look. “Stall the ball?”

“It means hold on,” Colin said. Old reflexes, or colloquialisms, died hard.

“I do not mean best chef in Texas. I mean chef of the year. For the entire US,” Kristine replied.

Colin needed to sit. His mind was reeling. He’d always dreamed that his hard work would pay off, but after spending day after day working his ass off for years, he hadn’t had a chance to imagine that today might be the day. “I... I... can’t believe it.”

Kristine clapped him on the back. “Believe it. And congratulations.”

He turned to Elena. “Our brilliant pastry chef. Finally, you get the acclaim you deserve.”

Elena was frozen in shock, mouth agape and eyes glassy. “Am I dreaming?”

“No,” Kristine said. “You are not dreaming.”

“I never thought I would be nominated for something like this.” Elena directed her vision to Colin. “And I owe it all to you. Charlotte got Sheen off to such an amazing start, but you were the one who really launched us into the stratosphere. You’re the one who hired a publicist in New York and got important food writers to come eat at the restaurant. You’re the one who’s always inviting your famous chef friends. You got people outside of Texas to care about what we were doing.”

“You got Oliver Shaw to come and dine here last month,” Kristine said. “How amazing is that?”

Colin shrugged it off, even though Oliver Shaw’s visit to Sheen had been a real coup. He was a highly respected British food writer, a discerning devotee of everything Colin’s father had ever touched in the culinary world. Colin had only convinced him to make the trip to the US by promising to blow his mind. Colin and his entire team had worked their butts off for Oliver’s visit, and it went incredibly well. But Colin wouldn’t get his vindication until Oliver’s review ran in the publication *Global Cuisine*. It could drop any day now.

“Everything Elena said is true, Colin,” Kristine continued. “The food is only part of the puzzle. The publicity and playing the game is the other piece. So, thank you.”

He was taken aback by their kind words, and it was his immediate reflex to deflect the attention. He appreciated it, but he wouldn’t feel worthy unless he won the award. Up until that moment, he’d merely been following the plan he’d formulated as a young wannabe chef—prove to his family that he didn’t need them, their money or their influence. “Just trying to do right by you all.” In truth, these were skills he’d learned from watching his parents hustle in their own restaurants. He wondered when he would hear from them. Whenever Colin received an important piece of publicity or won a significant award, his father would reach out. It was never about offering congratulations. Instead, his dad weaponized his achievements against him. None of Colin’s previous accolades came close to matching the Jane Broad nomination. It was only a matter of time before he got a call. “I’m going to check my email and do a few things in the office, but congratulations, Elena. You deserve it.”

“You, too, Colin. You, too.”

Colin hoped that was true. He wandered through the kitchen and back to his office. It was far too early for a drink, but he sure as hell thought about it. He was proud and more than a little in awe of what had just happened, but he found himself unwilling to take any real joy from it. He believed with every fiber of his being that being a chef and restaurateur was what

he was meant to do, and it was magnificent to be acknowledged. But in his heart of hearts, he always felt as if he was falling short. He'd spent all forty-two years of his life fighting doubt. Pushing harder in order to measure up. But it was never enough in some people's eyes...

As if his father heard Colin's internal dialogue, Colin's phone rang. He sat in his desk chair, staring at the screen for a moment before finally taking a deep breath and resigning himself to his fate. "Da. How's the form?" he asked, slipping into the common phrases of his home country, as was his habit whenever he spoke to his parents.

"I saw the Jane Broad nominations. You finally did it. The nomination at least. It's a step. We'll see how things go when they give out the award. Later this month, right?"

Colin shook his head and leaned forward to rest his head in one hand, while holding on to the phone with the other. His father had conceded the tiniest possible sliver of positivity, but that was the way this always went. This was nothing new. He couldn't let it get to him. "That's usually how they do it. Announce the nominees a few weeks ahead of time. We'll have to wait and see."

"If you win, will you have proven your point? Will you come to work for me and your mam?"

"I'm not proving a point. I'm living my life on my own terms." He felt his fingers twitching, and he had to rub them together to make the sensation go away. They wanted to ball up into fists.

"I don't know how many times I have to say this. Can you not see that it's an embarrassment that I can't pull my own son in to work for me? If you win this award, it will only get worse. I look like I don't have my own house in order."

Colin would've laughed if it didn't make him so angry. Heat rose in his cheeks. How his father had managed to make the idea of Colin winning an award into a bad thing... Well, that was next-level martyrdom. "It's never my intention to make you look bad. Lest I remind you that I am still your son, and

that you can stake your claim on me by simply boasting about me.”

“You are my son in name only. You made that choice when you decided to stay in the US.”

Colin remembered the choice very well. It was impossible to forget. It was the first time Colin had ever had the nerve to stand up to his dad. He was still proud of the things he’d said. Yes, he’d been young, idealistic and more than a little naive, but he grew a spine that day. “I had my reasons.”

“You can’t punish your mother and I forever, Colin. We didn’t have a choice. You were impossible. And we had to focus on our business. So we sent you to boarding school in America. Some people would die to have an opportunity like that.”

His dad always glossed over the fact that the school he’d been sent to was for boys with discipline problems. It was a rough militaristic place with a hidden hierarchy among the students, where being cruel and good at fighting was the only way to be at the top. At first, Colin was terrified of his new reality. He lost all hope and begged his parents to allow him to come home. But his dad believed in toughness. He thought Colin needed to tame his inner demons. Colin knew he’d been a handful, always getting into trouble at his private school in Ireland, which greatly embarrassed his parents. He had a wild streak, something burning deep inside him that longed to get out. But being sent away didn’t cure him of it. It only made it stronger.

He could hardly believe he’d lived through those years at boarding school, but at least he’d learned one truth—love and family weren’t to be counted on. He’d thought his parents would always love him. He’d thought they’d see the error of their ways and bring him home, but they didn’t. And the damage was done. *Stop thinking about this. It doesn’t help.* He took a deep breath and willfully banished these thoughts from his mind. It wasn’t all bad—those hard times had made him the man he was today. It taught him the absolute heights of discipline. It brought him closer to the most coveted prize in

his industry—a Jane Broad nomination. “Da, I need to get back to work.”

“I see. Well, I need to do the same. Your mam sends her regards.”

There was nothing left to say. “Thanks.” Colin hung up the phone and dropped the device onto his desk. His head was reeling, but he knew one thing to be true—he’d made the right decision when he decided to simply not be a part of his own family. To his dad, love and relationships were simply another form of currency.

His phone rang again, making him wish that he’d chucked it across the room. Or perhaps set the thing on fire. Tension gripped his shoulders like a vise. Each ring of the phone made his jaw tighter. Whoever was calling was being persistent. He couldn’t ignore them forever. Reluctantly, he flipped it over and his heart jumped up into his throat. It was Corryna. “Corryna. Hello.”

“Hey, you. I heard that congratulations are in order.” Her voice was sweet and happy—a balm for his ragged nerves.

“You did?” He grinned and felt the strain on his body begin to wash away. He sat back in his chair. A split second ago, he’d been ready to explode. Now he felt like he was floating on air.

“I did. I ran over to The Royal Diner this morning for a cup of coffee and I heard people talking about your big award. Congratulations. I don’t know much about the food world, but it sounds like a very big deal.”

“It’s just a nomination. Haven’t won the thing yet.”

“Still. Isn’t it an honor to be nominated?”

“I won’t lie. It absolutely is.”

“I’m so proud of you. Your family must be thrilled.”

And just like that, his elation was deflated yet again. “I did get a call from my dad.” *He didn’t actually wish me congratulations. Not like you.*

“Your voice sounds exactly like it did the other night in my shop when I asked about this subject. You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.”

“Let me put it this way. I’d rather talk to you about something fun. Like your flowers. They’ve been a big hit in the restaurant.”

“They have not. You’re just saying that to butter me up.”

Good God, he wanted to butter her up. Quite literally. “I’m not. All of the servers said customers were commenting. They said it livened up the place. I believe the word they used was *cheery*.” It was an apt description for Corryna as well. She’d brought so much sunshine into his life.

“That’s so nice. I love hearing that. Thank you.”

“Of course. I’m happy to give credit where credit’s due.”

“It’s almost like you shouldn’t have canceled my contract in the first place.”

“You’re absolutely right. I should not have canceled it. I thought I was improving my bottom line, but if it creates a better guest experience, it’s worth it. Every penny.”

“Speaking of the bottom line, I wanted to tell you that I’ve thought about the forensic accountant and I’d like to go through with it. I’m not sure I actually want to go after my ex, but it would at least give me some peace of mind to know definitively one way or the other.”

Colin scrambled for a piece of paper and a pen, then scribbled down a note. “Absolutely. I will make a few calls and have someone reach out to you? They’ll need your financial records, of course, but they can go through all of that with you. And feel free to ask me for help if you need it.”

“I appreciate that. I don’t totally understand why you’re going so far out of your way to help, but I’m thankful.”

“I told you. I want to see you be successful.” He didn’t mention that he also despised the idea that this wonderful woman had been married to such a monster. And if he’d stolen from her? Colin needed her to get justice.

“Do you need to cancel our plans to get together tomorrow night? I’m sure the restaurant will be even busier because of your nomination.”

“We’re fully booked for weeks out, so we can’t really get more busy than we already are. And I made a plan with you, Corryna, and I intend to keep it.” He tapped his pen on the desk, thinking about everything he needed to get done before she came over to his place tomorrow. There was a lot to prepare. He wanted it all to be perfect.

“Probably smart. This wedding is an important job for us both.”

“The most important.” Of course, that wasn’t the full extent of Colin’s reason for prioritizing time with Corryna. He greatly enjoyed her company. Still, she wasn’t wrong about the importance of this wedding. Now that he’d been nominated for the Jane Broad award, the highest of expectations would be foisted upon him by everyone—the residents of Royal, Rylee Meadows, and most important, the bride and groom. He needed his role in the event to be a slam dunk—food that people raved about for weeks, months or years. “So I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“I’ll be there. Can’t wait.”

Six

Corryna's hair was done. So was her makeup. But try as she might, she could not decide what to wear to tonight's meeting at Colin's house. She'd put on at least ten different outfits, but none of them worked. Nothing seemed right. How was she supposed to strike a balance between looking nice and keeping things professional, while also not trying too hard? With only twenty minutes before she needed to leave for his house, she had to make a decision quickly. This required advice from the person she trusted most when it came to things like this. She sent Jessica a text.

What do I wear to this meeting at Colin's house?

Corryna's phone immediately started ringing. "You didn't have to call me," Corryna said when she answered.

"I'm in the car on my way to a catering job, so I couldn't text you back."

Corryna perched on the edge of her bed. "I'm sorry to bug you. I just can't figure out what I'm supposed to wear."

"You aren't bugging me. I want to help. Let's think about who, what, when, where and why."

"Okay." Corryna wasn't sure she was following this methodology, but she was prepared to try anything. "The 'who' is Colin."

"He's not just Colin. He's Colin Reynolds. One of the best chefs in the country, possibly in the world. And the 'what' is that he's cooking for you. Only you. On a Saturday night, which isn't like other nights."

Corryna was suddenly extremely nervous. "At his house, which I've heard is gorgeous."

"Honestly, the 'why' is unimportant at this point. I realize this is for a job you're working on together, but don't go over there looking like you're going to arrange flowers for the next

three hours because you aren't. You're going to taste his food and you're going to feel awkward if you don't look the part. If it were me, I'd dress like I'm going to Sheen, but maybe pick something you'd wear if it was just you and I going out."

"I have a black dress. Knee-length and sleeveless."

"Perfect. You can't go wrong with that. Ever."

"Heels?"

"If they're comfortable."

"I can do that."

"Does that help?"

"Immensely. Thank you so much."

"I'm pulling into the parking lot at this event, so I have to go. But try to have fun tonight. This might be work, but you also deserve to enjoy yourself."

Corryna got up from the bed, pinning the phone to her shoulder with her ear. "Thank you. I'll try. You're the absolute best."

"Love you," Jessica said.

"Love you, too." Corryna returned to her closet and plucked the aforementioned dress from the hanger. It had some silver embroidery on it, but was otherwise a fairly simple design with a flattering neckline and full skirt that accentuated her waist. After slipping into a pair of black wedge sandals, she hopped in her car for the drive to Colin's house. Her nerves were getting the best of her again. Despite the fact that she'd been divorced for six years now, Colin was the only man she'd slept with during that time. The thought of being all alone with him again made her wonder about what might happen, even though she knew that the professional aspect of their evening had to remain at center stage.

Her car's navigation directed her to one of the newly developed areas on the outskirts of Royal, where luxurious fully custom homes were nestled on acres of rolling lush green landscape. A place like this was so far out of Corryna's budget

it was nearly laughable. Her house was a modest one-bedroom bungalow about five minutes from downtown.

She pulled into the drive leading to Colin's house, which was situated quite far off the main road. She didn't care much about the trappings of wealth, but she couldn't help but be impressed as the home revealed itself to her as she drove closer. The sprawling ranch was creamy white, with a dark gray stone foundation for high contrast, dramatically lit from below. The multiple open gables of the roof were framed with exposed timbers, and the leaded black windows glowed from within with a warm light that made her feel welcome, rather than intimidated. It was stunning, just like Colin himself.

She parked her car to one side of the main entrance and made her way up wide stone steps to the double door, which was a rich dark-stained wood with inset multipaned windows. She rang the doorbell and drank in a deep breath of the sweet night air as she waited. It was peaceful out here. She already loved it.

Colin popped into sight, striding toward her down a wide central hall, wearing dark jeans that followed the temptingly long lines of his frame, and a black dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows. Before he even reached the door, her heart was pulsing in her throat. He was too hot for words.

"Right on time," he said, opening the door for her.

"Of course. I've been looking forward to this."

"Yeah?" His question had a leading tone. He was already flirting with her.

"I'm ready to turn the tables on you," she replied, stepping into the foyer. What she could see of the house was gorgeous, with light-stained wood floors, an open layout and furnishings similar to those in his office at Sheen, with a calming earth-toned color palette. Most wonderfully, the house was full of heavenly aromas. "You've been busy. It smells amazing in here."

"Thanks. Most of the cooking is done."

That struck Corryna as odd. That wasn't what she'd expected. But she didn't want to make assumptions about his approach to their collaboration. She also didn't want to be rude. "I brought champagne. And it's already chilled," she said, offering the bottle.

"How nice."

"I thought we should celebrate your award nomination."

He tilted his head to the side. "Now that's even nicer. Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"Come on." He waved his hand, beckoning her ahead into the heart of the house. "Enough faffing about in the hall."

She walked alongside him, unable to ignore the way attraction pinged back and forth between them. He was so confident, so comfortable in his own skin, that it was impossible to not be drawn to him. Even if she was unsure about the idea of sleeping with him again, it would be impossible to resist him if he made an overture. One kiss and she'd be putty in his hands. "Faffing about?"

"It means messing around."

Maybe she just had sex on the brain, but nearly everything that came out of his mouth made her think about exactly that. The things Jessica had said to her—about having fun and not ruling out romance—echoed in her head. Her thoughts zeroed in on that night in his office at Sheen. She'd responded to his flirtatious ways with unbridled enthusiasm, and she hadn't even liked him then. She definitely liked him now. A lot.

As they strolled into the kitchen, Corryna was in awe of what a beautiful room it was, although it shouldn't have surprised her at all that a brilliant chef like Colin would invest so much into his home space for cooking. The cabinetry in the room was a warm gray, with glass insets in some of the doors of the upper units. Inside, dishes and barware were lined up neatly. A double Sub-Zero fridge sat to one side, while an eight-burner Viking range with a matching stainless steel hood took center stage. Despite what he'd said earlier, there was no

sign that he'd actually been cooking. Everything was clean and straight as a pin. "Colin. This is absolutely gorgeous."

"Thanks. Have a seat." He pulled out one of the six barstools, which ran along one side of the long white marble island. "I'll pour the champagne."

As she sat, his hand remained at the back of the seat, then his fingertips grazed the small of her back as he stepped away, making goose bumps propagate along her arms. He pulled two stemmed flutes out of a cabinet, then turned back to her and removed the foil and wire cage beneath it. With the expertise of a master sommelier, he tilted the bottle with one hand, gripped the cork with the other and gently twisted. His forearm flexed, and the sight made her hold her breath as she was reminded of what it was like to be in his strong arms. The cork popped and Corryna jumped as a ribbon of excitement shot through her.

He poured the bubbly golden liquid into the glasses, then offered her one. "To our collaboration," he said.

"To your award," she countered.

He took a sip. "It's not mine yet. And the competition is stiff." His gaze connected with hers, and she felt as though she saw a glimpse of vulnerability in his expression. "Honestly, it might almost be better for me if I didn't win it. Even though it would be embarrassing."

"How in the world could that be better?"

He shrugged. "Keep my dad from bothering me."

Corryna could hardly believe he'd mentioned his family in front of her. He'd deflected the two times the subject had come up. "You mentioned that he called to congratulate you after your nomination. Doesn't he want you to win? I realize it's an American award, but from everything I've read, it's a very big deal in the culinary world. He must understand the importance of it."

"Have you been researching the Jane Broad awards, Corryna? You knew nothing about it when you called yesterday morning."

Heat flushed her cheeks. He'd caught her red-handed. "I was curious. I wanted to find out more."

He leaned against the kitchen counter, once again accentuating the long lean lines of his body. She had such a weakness for a tall man, and Colin was an exceptional example. How she longed to skim her hands over his firm shoulders, then trail them down his torso and abs. "Any time I get a major accolade, my dad expects me to go work for him. For his restaurant group." His face took on a decidedly more somber expression, which she hated seeing. She preferred happy Colin. "But it's not about wanting me. It's about his pride. Bragging rights. Whatever you want to call it. He's embarrassed that I had the gall to go out and build my own business."

"You've never worked for him, have you?" She'd done her research and seen no sign of it, which still didn't make sense to her.

"Not a day in my life."

"How does that happen? You're a chef. So are both of your parents. Why not work together?"

"They made that choice when they sent me off to boarding school. It forced me to make a life for myself, so that's what I did. Started culinary school when I was seventeen, then immediately went to work. As soon as I had enough experience, I bought my first restaurant."

"Sheen is your third restaurant, right?"

A wicked grin spread across his face, making his eyes light up. "You really did want to know more, didn't you?"

She dismissed it with a shrug of her shoulders. "Hey. Knowledge is power." Feeling flirtatious, she took a sip of her champagne while holding his gaze. His eyes were so mesmerizing she could've looked into them for hours, all in an attempt to unlock everything he kept tucked away inside his handsome head.

"I never planned to do what my father did, trying to build an empire. Always needing more." Colin straightened and

downed the last of his drink. “I’d rather do one thing, make it all it can be, then move on to the next challenge.”

“I could never do that. I like to feel settled.”

“I’ve never felt settled a day in my life.” He delivered a pointed glance, as if he needed to drive home his point.

“There’s too much desire pent up inside of me.”

Corryna bit down on her lower lip. He was an absolute mystery with so many layers, and she deeply wanted to know more about him, but at the moment, what she wanted most was to be on the receiving end of his desire one more time. She’d never get to hold on to Colin for long. He’d essentially just told her that he wasn’t that sort of man. But still, his raw appeal made her want to banish caution from her life entirely.

“Are you hungry?” he asked.

She nodded, recognizing that for her, the answer she was about to give had nothing to do with food. “Starving.”

* * *

Colin felt as though his entire body was buzzing from one glass of champagne and fifteen minutes around Corryna. If he didn’t pace himself, he was going to have a difficult time getting through their night together. *Focus*. “Let me get you fed, then.” He already had absolutely everything in order. He didn’t want to leave anything to chance. “I reworked all of the passed hors d’oeuvres for the wedding this week.”

Corryna got up from her seat and rounded to his side of the island. “You did? I can’t wait to see what you did.”

“We’ll start with the chilled dishes. That’s four of the first seven menu items I’d like to present to Rylee at the end of the month.” He opened up the fridge and removed the small plates and serving vessels he’d carefully chosen. “These just need a few final touches.” He went to work, drizzling olive oil on some items, squeezing lemon on others and sprinkling sea salt on the rest.

Corryna placed her hand on his back while he finished the dishes. He could have sworn that the warmth of her hand nearly burned a hole through his shirt. He loved her presence,

but he especially relished her touch. It made him feel alive. "It's fun to watch you work. Tell me what we're having."

"To start, we have a tuna crudo with charred Meyer lemon, capers and spring herbs." He continued down the line of dishes he'd prepared. "Then chilled blue crab with Thai basil, cucumber, lime and chile-miso aioli. After that, cold sweet onion and artichoke bisque served in a shot glass. Lastly, we have beef carpaccio with green garlic aioli and black truffle."

"Wow. I can't wait to try everything."

"The dining room table is set. Why don't you go in and pour us a glass of wine? There's a bottle on ice, but it's already open." With a nod, he directed her to the dining area, which was through a wide archway opposite the kitchen.

"I can't help?" she asked.

He wanted everything to be perfect for her. "Sorry. No."

As Corryna ambled into the other room, he loaded up a silver lacquer serving tray and walked the dishes in behind her. Corryna was getting settled before one of the two place settings. He'd worked hard at creating ambience in the room, with soft lighting, music and candles. As he set each dish before her, he couldn't ignore the fierce pounding of his heart. He cared what she thought. He wanted her to love every last bite.

"It's all so pretty. I'm almost afraid to eat anything. I might ruin it," Corryna said.

He took the seat next to her. "Please don't say that. Eating is the point."

She picked up her fork and glanced over at him, her eyes flickering with excitement as she took her first bite of the tuna. She moaned in ecstasy and licked her lips, prompting Colin to stare. "This is so good. It's amazing. It's so light and fresh and bright. Full of flavor."

He wasn't out of the woods, but her approval gave his shoulders the chance to relax slightly, which was a very good thing. The rest of his body felt as though it was on fire. "I'm glad you're enjoying it."

“So, I wanted to tell you that I talked to the forensic accountant today and gave her access to all of my records. She was really nice. That made me feel a lot better about everything.” She finished the final bite of her tuna.

“Good. I’m glad.”

“She said it won’t take more than a week or two, which surprised me.”

“All of your records are electronic. And your business is small and straightforward. It shouldn’t take long.”

“I guess you’re right.” Corryna took a bite of the crab dish, then reached out and grasped Colin’s forearm. How he loved it when she touched him. “Colin. How is the crab even better than the tuna? This is the best thing I have ever put in my mouth.”

Dammit. He fidgeted in his seat. Every flattering comment and appreciative sound she made was pointing his brain and body in only one direction—kissing her, leading her to his bedroom and taking off her clothes... “That’s quite a review.”

“I have a way with words, remember?”

“Oh. I do.”

They finished the last of the dishes he’d served for the first round, each also receiving raves from Corryna. He was pleased that his hard work on refining his ideas was paying off. Frankly, the night was going perfectly. “Now we’ll move on to the hot dishes if you’re ready.” He stood and began clearing plates.

“Do you need my help?”

He shook his head. “No. I’ve got it.”

Corryna reached for the wine bottle and poured herself a bit more to drink. “For the record, I could get used to this.”

“Good.” Colin strode back into the kitchen, struggling to remember the last time he’d had a chance to cook for someone in his home like this. He hosted plenty of dinner parties, but that was usually more about staying in the good graces of the power players in Royal rather than any desire for social

interaction. Or he was entertaining some VIP from the food world—giving them the royal treatment in the hopes that they would see him as his own force in the culinary arts and not merely the son of Killian Reynolds.

It only took him a few minutes to bring his remaining creations to Corryna. “Here we have a coffee-rubbed skirt steak with mint chimichurri and Asian pears. Then a vegetarian option of homemade potato gnocchi with roasted garlic, parsley, sherry and parmesan. Lastly, Rylee asked for vegan as well, so we have cornmeal crusted fried mushrooms with herbs and a sweet chili sauce.

“You really outdid yourself,” Corryna said when she was finished eating. She’d made countless glowing comments along the way. “I seriously want to lick this plate.”

He cleared his throat, unsure of how to respond. If she did that, he might enjoy it a little too much. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“You should.” She got up from the table. “You have to let me help you with cleanup. I won’t take no for an answer this time.”

He smiled and grabbed their bottle of wine. “I won’t turn you down.”

They filed into the kitchen with the last of the plates and silverware. “What can I do?” she asked.

“I can rinse if you want to load the dishwasher.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

He turned on the water, letting it glide over the plates before handing them to her. Their fingers brushed with every pass, and he tried to wrap his head around the fact that he and Corryna had managed to find such a comfortable rapport so quickly. Normally, when he was working with someone, he tended to hand down orders, but he couldn’t do that with her. It was a nice change. And when he was interested in a woman romantically, he made a point of not getting close, but he couldn’t do that, either. He and Corryna had to mesh. Those were the orders from Rylee and they both took them seriously.

“The meal was amazing, Colin. Truly,” Corryna said as they finished up.

Finally, he felt as though he could take some respite. He’d done what he’d set out to do—he’d impressed the hell out of her. He poured them each a final glass of wine and leaned against the kitchen counter. “Not a single negative comment?”

“Actually. Yes. I do have one.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t have asked.” He was surprised. She’d given no indication that she was unhappy with anything he’d served.

“You didn’t play fair.” She drifted closer to him until she was standing mere inches away. It wouldn’t have taken much effort to reach out and tug her closer.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You made me stand in my workroom and design while you watched.”

“I wanted to understand your process.” Just thinking about it, he was still blown away by what it was like to see her shut out the rest of the world and give in to pure creativity. It was inspiring. “I’ve never arranged flowers, but surely you know how to cook. It’s not the same thing.”

She wagged a finger at him. “You can’t call what you did tonight cooking. It was so much more than that. It was…” She looked deeply into his eyes, seeming to search for words. “It was a fully immersive art experience. All of these amazing sights and smells and tastes. I’ve never had anything like it.”

“Really?”

“Yes. So, I don’t think you can say that I know how to do what you did. I don’t. And I’d be lying if I said that I didn’t feel a little cheated by the fact that you didn’t let me watch you create.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Of course I am. I felt naked when I was standing there working on that arrangement in front of you. And we did not

know each other very well at that point. Don't you think that was hard for me?"

The mental image of Corryna naked popped into his consciousness and wasn't about to go anywhere. "I suppose."

"And I wanted to see you be vulnerable like I was. Instead, you went out of your way to show me the perfect side of your talent. But I want to understand how your brain and heart work together."

He took a deep breath while his body and brain waged a war against each other. She was right. He'd gone to great lengths to only present things that he'd known were perfect. But that was a reflex, one that was coded into his DNA, and he wasn't sure he could let go of it. It protected him. It made his life easier. "I'm sorry if you're disappointed."

"Colin. You couldn't disappoint me if you tried." Her eyes were misting with emotion. "I know this much about you. You have a lot of fire and desire inside of you. And I want to see it for myself. I want to experience it. Don't hide it from me."

"And what happens if I show it to you?"

"Well, I'll have no choice but to let down my guard and show you mine as well."

Seven

Colin didn't often succumb to flattery. Most of the time, he felt undeserving. But hearing it from Corryna's tempting mouth made him feel entirely different about it. Perhaps it was that her admiration was worth more than anyone else's because she knew what it meant to be creative. She understood how much it took to lay your heart and soul bare for all to see. "You see right through me, don't you? Because you're right. Absolutely right. I did try to hide from you tonight. It's the way I work. I try to make everything perfect. I work hard and I hone a dish until I see no faults in it. Then, and only then, I let the world see it. And taste it."

"You don't have to do that with me. Seriously. You don't. I want to see and know everything that's locked up in that incredibly handsome head of yours."

He pushed forward from the spot where he'd been leaning against the counter. "I'm starting to feel like I can trust you." If only she knew what a consequential admission that was for him. He trusted very few people, and they all worked at Sheen.

"You can. You absolutely can."

He stepped closer to Corryna, drawn to her in a way that he felt on a molecular level. Every atom in his body wanted her and needed her. "I hope you know that you can trust me, too."

"I do think I know that."

"I want you, Corryna. One hundred times more than I wanted you that night at the restaurant, and I really, really wanted you that night."

Pink colored her cheeks, making her even more impossibly beautiful. "I'd be lying if I said I didn't want you too, but this wouldn't be like that night at Sheen. Neither of us had anything to lose then. Now we're working together, on a wedding that we've agreed is immensely important to our businesses. And you heard what Rylee said that day at the

TCC. She wanted no drama. Sex will make everything more complicated.”

He reached for a lock of her hair and twisted it in his fingers. “The last time I checked, Rylee Meadows isn’t here. It’s just you and me. And us, together in my bed, isn’t complicated. It sounds bloody perfect to me.”

“Why do I feel like you might be able to talk me into anything?”

“This has to be about free will, Corryna. I’m not trying to make a case. I’m simply poking holes in your argument.”

Her tongue ran slowly across her lower lip. “No one can know.”

“I’m excellent at keeping secrets.” He pulled her into his arms and kissed her, amazed by how quickly and effortlessly they fell into sync. It felt like the logical next step after that night at Sheen, and just like then, he sensed that she was feeling as impatient and filled with urgency as he was. She arched into him, her belly hard against his. He threaded his hands into her hair as her supple lips made him lose all logical thought, which was absolutely for the best. He was always overthinking. It was his downfall. Kissing Corryna didn’t require analysis or examination. They were acting on their attraction. It was nothing more than that.

“I really want to get you out of this dress,” he said, breathless.

She peered up at him, her eyes half-closed and her mouth slack and beckoning. “You haven’t even shown me your bedroom yet.”

“How rude of me.” He grabbed her hand and he wound his way through the kitchen, then down the hall and to his owner’s suite, which took up nearly a quarter of the house. Just like his office at Sheen, this was a place he retreated to. He could let down his guard here, so it was only right that this was where he and Corryna would cast aside everything that was getting in the way, like their clothes and the preconceived ideas of professional behavior from people like Rylee Meadows.

“It’s beautiful. Just like your whole house,” Corryna said, stepping in a lazy circle as she looked around the room.

The space was lit only by a nearly full moon, still low in the night sky. He knew she couldn’t see everything, but this wasn’t the time for a full tour. That could wait until morning. “You’re beautiful. Inside and out.” He combed his fingers into her hair and brought her face to his, getting lost in the most magnificent kiss, her lips soft and supple, and for right now, all his. “The dress. It has to go.”

“It is a little itchy.”

“We can’t have that.”

Corryna turned her back to him, gathered her hair in her hand and pulled it to the side. Gazing over her shoulder at him, she extended an invitation with a single look that was born of pure passion and a bit of mischief. It was enough to make him give up everything that had ever been important to him. It was the look that had first made him want her.

He turned his attention to her zipper, drawing it down. Inch by inch, he got to see a little more of her creamy skin in the softly lit room, past a black bra, followed by more touchable skin, then down to black satin panties. Standing right behind her, he pressed his torso against her back, drinking in the reality that this was going to happen again. After last time, he’d truly thought that was it. That was the only taste of Corryna he would get. He was thankful to have been wrong.

He wanted his clothes off. He wanted hers gone, too. But he also wanted to savor this moment. He dipped his head lower and kissed her neck while he nudged the dress from her shoulders. The garment slid down her body to the floor, and he planted his hands on her naked waist, then slid them around to her belly and up to her full breasts. The lacy cups caressed his palms and he felt it as her nipples grew tight. He continued to skim his mouth along her neck, then brought his hands back to unhook her bra clasp. Corryna ruffled the straps from her shoulders, then cast it aside.

He turned her around, cupping her breasts again with his hands. Her skin was so warm and soft beneath his touch, but it

was even better to taste as he lowered his head and drew one of her nipples between his lips. He swirled his tongue around the tight skin, loving the way it felt when her body reacted to his.

She frantically worked on his shirt while he focused on her incredible breasts, but she was quick with the buttons and he had to let go of her when she yanked his sleeves down his arms. He was just as eager to get rid of his shirt as she was. She grasped his shoulders and kissed him—fast and hot, then dropped to her knees and rubbed the front of his jeans, pressing forcefully against his erection. He'd thought he couldn't get any harder, and he'd been wrong. A rush of heat made him dizzy, or maybe he was simply drunk on Corryna.

She unbuttoned and unzipped his jeans, and then he shucked them before standing still and letting her decide where this went next. She slipped her fingers below the waistband of his boxer briefs and slowly pulled them down past his hips. She was taking her time, looking up at him with sheer desire on her face. She didn't have to work at all to seduce him, but he appreciated the way she was working her way into his psyche. Knowing how much she wanted him was as good as having her touch him. She wrapped her hand around his erection and it felt so good that he had to steady himself with a hand on her shoulder. She took long and firm strokes while their gazes connected. Her eyes were dark and surprisingly intense. Normally sweet and soft Corryna was showing him the side of her he'd seen that night in his office.

When she leaned closer and took him into her mouth, his mind went blank, then he experienced a flash of white. Nothing had ever felt so incredible. So luscious and hot. Again, she took things slow and careful, focused on him, and once his brain settled down, he opened his eyes to watch her lips on his body, the scene lit only by the soft blue light of the moon. He reached down and raked his fingers through her hair, curling them into her scalp and caressing. Having her mouth on him had him teetering on the brink, but he didn't want this to be all about him. He wanted to please her. He wanted her calling his name and quivering in his arms. He wanted to make her his own.

* * *

Corryna was surprised when Colin reached down and tugged on her arms. She hadn't been with many men in her life, but none had ever taken the initiative to shift gears like this. They'd always left it up to her. As she rose to stand, he was quick to kiss her, and with raw abandon—cupping the sides of her face while their tongues swirled in an endless circle. Corryna felt as though her entire body was about to go up in flames. She had to have him. Now. He steered them toward the bed, and they wound their way there by walking in circles and not dropping their kiss for even a split second. When he ran into the edge of the mattress, he made one more half-turn and used the gentle force of his strong hands to suggest she stretch out on the puffy duvet.

Corryna arched her back, skimming her skin against the silky bedding of Colin's bed. The only thing better than the sensory delight of touching the cool fabric was the view of Colin as he towered over her—all six feet and five inches of him—completely naked and all hers. Everything about his physical presence was perfect—he had a sculpted chest and muscular shoulders and a stomach that made her want to scrub her laundry on it, if only to test out the theory of washboard abs. Even so, he was about so much more than his appearance. Colin's inner confidence and self-assurance, the way he lived in his body, made him unlike any man she'd ever had the pleasure to look at. She craved him like the most decadent dessert she could imagine. He might not be hers, but for right now, she needed him like air and water.

He cocked an eyebrow at her and a corner of his mouth quirked up. He was satisfied with himself. And he deserved to feel that way. Despite the fact that she'd given him a hard time about his overpreparation for the meal he'd served tonight, he was still utterly brilliant. He was a rare talent and had an exceptional mind. She felt so damn lucky to spend any time at all with him.

“Get over here, Colin,” she murmured, curling her finger in invitation.

“I could stand here forever and look at you.”

“Something tells me you want a little more than the view.”

“True.” He reached down and shimmied her panties past her hips, then planted a knee on the bed and stretched out next to her.

She sucked in a deep breath, relishing this feeling of vulnerability with a man she trusted implicitly. She rolled to her side and he kissed her softly while he cupped her bottom with his strong hands and pulled her closer. “I need you, Colin.” As soon as the words left her lips, she knew that this was about so much more than lust. That night at Sheen had been solely about satisfying an urge, but this was something more than that. He’d turned out to be so much more than she’d ever imagined. It was one more reason to believe she could never have more than a fling with him, but she was okay with that. She’d known what he was and who he was from the very beginning. “Please tell me you have a condom,” she said. She hadn’t had the presence of mind to ask for it the first time they’d had sex, which had been stupid of her. Luckily, there were no signs that there had been any serious repercussions of that misstep.

“Oh. Uh. Sure.” He rolled to his side, opened the drawer of the bedside table and pulled out a box. A few moments later, he urged her to her back and positioned himself between her legs. She lifted her knees, inviting him inside. Inch by inch, he filled her so perfectly that it was difficult to know where one of them started and the other ended. He buried his face in her neck, blanketing the sensitive skin with wet and hot kisses, amping up the intensity of every sensation in her body.

They rocked together, Corryna tugging him closer with her legs, needing him to go as deep as possible. She closed her eyes and let her mind wander as the pleasure toyed with her, and the tension climbed, ever closer to a peak. His breaths grew shorter and he bore down a little harder with his body weight, applying the perfect amount of pressure with every thrust. Her peak was fast approaching now, like a runaway train. Colin simply had her too turned on. As soon as she felt the first rumbling, it went quickly, like a bolt of lightning that leaves the earth trembling beneath your feet. Colin followed,

calling out with several forceful thrusts, then he collapsed next to her, gasping for breath.

“That was amazing,” she said, feeling like she was floating several feet above the bed, but still wanting more of him.

“It was, Corryna. You’re incredible.” He held on to her tightly and tenderly kissed her forehead.

She pressed her face against his warm chest, wanting to soak up as much of Colin as humanly possible. She hadn’t felt this content in a very long time. And she couldn’t help but feel as though she deserved it.



There was no telling when she fell asleep, but Corryna woke to the sound of a rooster. For a moment, she didn’t remember where she was, but then she drew in a deep breath through her nose and recognized Colin’s incredible smell. She was in his room. And last night had been absolutely glorious. She opened her eyes, but the side of his bed where he’d slept was empty. “Huh,” she muttered, finding it strange that he’d left, but guessing that if anyone was likely to be an early riser, it was Colin. She flipped to her other side and peered through the French doors she hadn’t noticed last night. Outside was a rolling vista of bright green and what appeared to be a sizable garden. She was drawn to it in the same way that she was drawn to him—something deep inside her wanted to explore.

“Colin?” she called out into the room, wondering where he’d gone. There was no answer. She tossed back the covers to search for him, and that was when she saw his head poke up from the garden. She had to go. Right away. She scrambled out of bed, noticing that he’d neatly hung up her dress on a hook next to his closet. As much as logic said she should be wearing her own clothes, she hadn’t been lying when she’d said her dress was itchy. Plus, she selfishly wanted to be wrapped up in anything that smelled like him. She grabbed his shirt from last night, threaded her arms into the sleeves, rolled up the cuffs and opened the door. The sweet morning air hit her nostrils. The rooster crowed again and the rising sun lit

Colin from behind. It was as idyllic a setting as she ever could've imagined.

"Who knew you were a farmer?" she asked, padding across the dewy grass in her bare feet.

He looked up and smiled wide, his entire face lighting up. Damn, he was handsome. Especially so this morning. "I'm getting a few things for breakfast." He marched down one of the rows toward her with a basket in his hand, wearing jeans and a T-shirt.

"What a beautiful garden. Do you do all of this by yourself?"

He turned and surveyed the plot of vegetables and herbs. "I do. I picked up gardening when I lived in Santa Monica, California. That's where my first restaurant was. It's also where I met Charlotte, the original owner of Sheen." He returned his vision to Corryna and stepped closer. "That restaurant was tiny. Only twenty-four seats. And my concept was fully farm-to-table, but I didn't know the area well, so establishing relationships with farms took some time. The house I bought there had a large vegetable patch that hadn't been tended in years. I wanted the restaurant to be as much of me as it could be, and I also wanted to have the best of the best, so I taught myself how to garden."

"Does any of what you're growing now end up at Sheen?"

"I'd have to be a full-time farmer to keep up with that much demand. But I bring in herbs on an almost daily basis in the spring and I'll do a second planting in the fall. If I have a good crop of a vegetable like tomatoes or peppers, I'll compose an appetizer or an entrée around it."

How she admired his commitment to his craft. She'd given him a hard time last night about not being open with her about his creative process, but there was no question that he put a lot of heart and thought into it. "What did you harvest this morning?"

"Chives, flat-leaf parsley, spring onions, spinach and eggs. I was thinking I'd make you an omelet. I have a heavenly Irish

cheddar in the fridge.”

“Does this mean you’re going to cook for me with no advance preparation?”

“It means exactly that.” His eyes raked over her body. “You look great in my shirt.”

“Thanks.” *It smells good. It smells like you.* She grasped his shoulder, then popped up onto her tiptoes to kiss him. “Can we eat now? I’m starving.”

“Of course.” They filed back inside, this time through another set of French doors that led into a mudroom and the back entry into his kitchen. “Help yourself to coffee. I left out a mug for you and there’s some cream in the pitcher on the counter.”

“Perfect.” He was the consummate host. Corryna poured herself a cup and added a splash of cream. She breathed in the intoxicating smell, then took a sip of the dark roast coffee. “I’m excited to actually watch you cook.”

“I’m excited to prove to you that I don’t hide.”

Just thinking about their conversation last night prompted a question she wasn’t sure she should ask. He’d said he trusted her, but to what extent? “How much of a perfectionist would you say you are?”

He unloaded the contents of his basket, avoiding eye contact, making her wonder if he was already feeling defensive. “I hate it when people answer a question like this with a number larger than one hundred, but I have to say I’m one thousand percent a perfectionist.”

Just like that, she felt better about digging for the information. He seemed to be okay with opening up to her. “Does any of that have to do with your parents? Your upbringing?”

“Some of it’s the restaurant business. If you want to be successful, you have to be consistent. And in consistency, lies perfectionism.”

“But? I sense a ‘but’ coming here.”

“I think the rest of it lies with my family.”

She leaned against the counter and watched as he washed the vegetables and dried them with a white cotton tea towel. “Were they controlling?”

“My dad, especially.” He pulled out a cutting board, then sharpened a chef’s knife.

“You know, I understand that you aren’t excited to talk about your parents, but just like you can’t keep your creative process bottled up for no one to see, it’s not healthy to keep your history with your family locked up inside, either.”

He glanced at her, only in passing, as he pulled two sauté pans out of a pot drawer next to the stove. “It’s pretty simple. I got in trouble a lot as a kid, and it drove my dad up a wall. He was embarrassed of me, and so was my mother, so they sent me away to a military school in Utah. It wasn’t called that, but that’s what it was. I was only twelve. No clue what was going on. And I felt like my parents didn’t want me anymore.”

The vision of a young Colin, banished to a country that wasn’t home, materialized in her mind. Her heart squeezed tightly in her chest. He must have felt so vulnerable. So scared. “Oh, my God. I’m so sorry. How long did you have to stay there?”

“That’s the thing. They sent me back every year for five years. I got to go home during the summers and I tried my best to earn my dad’s approval, especially as I got more interested in food and cooking, but if I didn’t do things exactly right, or if I made any sort of mistake, he wasn’t impressed.” Colin began chopping his bounty from the garden. “And of course, he sent me away again, hoping I’d learn some more discipline. He thought I lacked it and until I had some, he didn’t want anything to do with me.”

“What happened after the five years?”

“I didn’t get on the plane to go back to Ireland at the end of the school year.” He cracked eggs into a bowl and began whisking them furiously.

Meanwhile, Corryna was frozen. She hadn't expected him to say that he'd had such an extreme reaction. No wonder this was such a sore subject. "What did your parents say?"

"At the time? I'm not sure. I didn't call them for a month. I was too mad. I enrolled in culinary school and got a job as a dishwasher. I decided that I'd had enough."

"Colin. Your mom must have been worried sick."

"I guess she probably was. She was angry with me when she tracked me down at my new school. I think one of my teachers tipped her off."

"Did you have your parents' money to help you live?"

He shook his head, seasoned the eggs with salt and pepper, then lit the flame under the first pan. "I did not."

Corryna took a long sip of her coffee. She'd always assumed that Colin had gotten his start in part because his parents had at least bankrolled it. "Wow. They could've helped you so much."

He stepped over to the fridge and pulled out a stick of butter, then dropped a knob of it into the pan. It quickly sizzled, and he rolled it around the edges with great confidence. This was what she'd wanted to see—the way he commanded the kitchen. Next to go into the pan was the spring onions, which he sautéed and tossed with a flick of his wrist. Last in the pan was the spinach. "To be fair, I had family money to open my first restaurant after I turned eighteen. But those were funds that had been placed in a trust by my grandparents. My dad didn't have a say over that."

"Still. You really had to go out of your way to prove your point."

Colin shrugged and lit the flame under the second pan. He poured the eggs into it, again tilting it with great dexterity, perfectly swirling the mixture to the edges. "It made me the chef I am today. I know that I've done it all on my own. There's something to be said for that."

But at what price? Corryna wanted to ask the question, but feared Colin's response. She'd already extracted far more

information from him than she'd thought possible. "What's your relationship like now? You said your dad called you after you got your nomination, so it must be better."

"I haven't seen them in over twenty years."

Corryna's jaw dropped out of pure shock. "What? Not once?"

"Not once." He scooped the sautéed veggies from the first pan over the top of the cooking eggs, then sprinkled in the herbs. As it continued to cook, he walked over to the refrigerator and pulled out a block of cheese, which he quickly grated. "They've never come to see me. And I haven't gone back to see them. I've been to Ireland once, but visiting my family wasn't on my itinerary."

"And you're an only child, right?"

"I am."

All of this was hard for Corryna to wrap her head around, but she reminded herself that not every family was like hers. Colin might have grown up with all the money in the world, but that didn't make up for a lack of love, acceptance and encouragement. Still, she knew that he had to have suffered from not having that support system. "Maybe you can go see them some day."

He sprinkled the cheese over the omelet, then turned off the heat and put a lid on the pan. "Maybe. But I'm not planning on it anytime soon, and I can't imagine what would make me want to go." He dropped four slices of rustic bread into the toaster and pushed down the plunger.

Corryna kept quiet, needing more time to think. No wonder Colin was known as a bit of a lone wolf. And perhaps his playboy ways were merely because he'd never felt attached to someone. Or loved. She didn't want to psychoanalyze him, but it made sense to her.

Colin pulled out some plates. "Breakfast is just about ready. We can eat here at the island if that's okay with you."

"Sure thing. It smells amazing, so I can't wait to try it."

“Go ahead. Take a seat. I’ll bring it over.”

Corryna perched in one of the barstools and patiently waited as he flipped the jumbo omelet, divided it into two portions and buttered the toast. He delivered it all with a smile, then sat next to her. However much he’d been defensive about his family before, he seemed to be in an okay mood after sharing the details.

Corryna took her first bite and nearly fell off her seat in ecstasy. The omelet was buttery, but light. Fluffy, but rich. And that Irish cheddar was creamy and sharp and so delicious she wanted to take a bath in it. “This is the best omelet I’ve ever had. The ingredients are so fresh. It’s heavenly.”

“Straight from the garden. It’s not such a bad life I’ve carved out for myself here.”

He was right, despite the fact that she felt he did have a few gaps in his fabulous life—namely, love and emotional support. “I’d say it’s wonderful. I loved watching you cook. So much. I could do it every day.”

He wiped his mouth with a napkin, then turned to her. “You know, Corryna, you make me excited to create. Seriously. You inspire me.”

She was more than a little taken aback. Colin was brilliant. How could it be that she inspired him? “I do?”

“Yes. You’re like a muse.”

“I’ve never been anyone’s muse before.”

“Well, good. I don’t want you to be anyone else’s muse. Be mine. It’ll make our collaboration for this wedding a magical thing.”

Corryna loved hearing him express those things, but she couldn’t ignore that he’d put a bookend on whatever it was that was going on between them. Again, she struggled with finding the real Colin. Was he what everyone, including Jessica, had said he was? A guy who wasn’t easy to hold on to? She was starting to doubt the validity of that assertion. She felt as though there was a whole side of him that very few people got to see. He was more than endlessly hardworking

and brilliant. He had a beautiful soul. He was a solid, dependable guy.

“Speaking of our collaboration, we need to talk about when we’re going to get together next to work on it,” Corryna said.

He leaned closer and whispered in her ear, “I was hoping we could go collaborate in my room.”

Tingles raced over the surface of her skin and she laughed. “That doesn’t sound like work.”

“It won’t be. But it will definitely take both of us.”

Eight

Time with Colin quickly became a given in Corryna's life. They did their best to keep the intimate aspect of their relationship very hush-hush, but there were no complete secrets in Royal. A few people had quickly figured it out. Hannah, Jessica and Mike all knew. As did Elena and Kristine at Sheen. They'd all promised to keep it to themselves, and Corryna and Colin trusted them all implicitly. Neither Corryna nor Colin could risk losing the Noble-Ramos wedding job. Corryna's reasons boiled down to finances and her future. For Colin, it was all to preserve his stature in the community and the food world at large. Especially with his recent award nomination, it would be absolutely humiliating if he and Sheen were dropped from the biggest, most lavish wedding to ever be held in Royal.

Despite the possibility of the news getting back to Rylee, Corryna and Colin could not stay away from each other. In fact, after that first night together at his house, and the fabulous breakfast he'd made for her the following morning, things had heated up very quickly. They'd been inseparable for more than two weeks now. Every night, they were together, mostly at his house, but sometimes at hers. To their credit, they always discussed their collaboration for the wedding. It was not only the thing that had brought them together, it was the thing they cared about most. But even though it started with work, it always led to sex. Always. Corryna couldn't get enough of Colin. He was so clued in to her needs. He was always unselfish, and his touch simply made her feel alive.

She knew that she was making up for lost time. She'd made love with no one since her divorce. Six years. At first, she'd been too crushed. Then she'd felt defeated, a feeling that took forever to go away, and only improved to a state of uncertainty. It was then that she'd gone on a few dates, but no one sparked any real interest. Many men didn't take her seriously. They saw that she was a florist, and assumed that

was a wholly unchallenging career choice. Or they had no personality, wanting to talk about only themselves. Mostly, there was no chemistry. Corryna ultimately decided that it made the most sense to devote her energy to Royal Blooms and let love find her if it was meant to. After all, Royal Blooms was the one thing she could count on, and her track record with men was dismal. But then Colin waltzed into her life when she least expected it and turned everything upside down. Of course, she wasn't thinking super long-term. Colin simply wasn't that sort of guy. But what was between them already felt like more than a fling. He'd lit a fire inside her, and all she wanted was for him to continue stoking the flame, for as long as he felt like sticking around.

For now, Corryna was working her way through Monday morning, which was quiet enough that Hannah had no trouble handling the front of the shop on her own while Corryna devoted time to refining her designs for the Noble-Ramos wedding. Last week, she'd managed to place an order for the most prized bluebonnets in all of Texas—the patented Blue Darling, a hybrid developed by a botanist with ties to Royal. They were hard to come by, but she'd sweet-talked her way into a large order for the wedding, and a smaller sample order for her to work with now. She was so excited that she'd texted Rylee to tell her all about it. As luck would have it, Rylee replied right away that she wanted to stop by Royal Blooms to see them for herself. She was due to come by that afternoon with Ariana's maid of honor, Dionna.

Corryna was working with the Blue Darling flowers when the chime on the door into the workroom sounded. She expected it to be Mike, but when she glanced over her shoulder, she saw that it was Colin.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, setting down her scissors and wiping her hands on a towel. Funny how simply setting eyes on him made her entire body run about five degrees hotter.

He held up a pastry box and smiled as he strolled over to her. “Elena made croissants for you this morning.” Leaning down, he planted a soft and sexy kiss on her lips.

“Aww. That’s so nice. Although, I’m starting to think I should be romantically involved with Elena.” She took the package from him and popped open the lid. The heavenly aroma of butter and chocolate wafted up to her nose. As she lifted one of the pastries from the box and took a bite, she caught him staring. There was something so electrifying about having his eyes on her. “Delicious. Perfect. As always.”

“Good. I’m glad.” He pulled up a stool, parking it next to her bench before he sat down. “What are you working on today?”

“These are the centerpieces for the reception.”

He studied the arrangement, which had bold yellow roses named after Julia Child, striking white anemones with a dark purple eye, graceful lilies of the valley, and the bluebonnets, all accented with a delicate greenery similar to a willow. “I love it. It’s very refined, but something about it is a bit wild. Unexpected.”

“I need to make sure the colors are right. The theme is old Hollywood glamor, so I need black, cream, and gold. Not the easiest ask in the world of flowers. The roses might not be the right shade of gold, so I might have to pull them and find a closer match. But I’d really like to see them use the bluebonnets. I mean, they’re the state flower and the Noble family are Texas through and through. Plus, this variety is absolutely stunning and sturdy, which as a florist, is everything you could ever want in a flower.”

He grinned at her again and reached out for her hip, tugging her closer by gripping the tie on her apron. “I love seeing you get excited about what you’re designing. It’s sexy.”

It wasn’t good for her to be this worked up in the morning, but this was what Colin did to her. A few kind words, a soft kiss and a possessive tug, and she was putty in his hands. “I love seeing you the same way. I feel like we understand each other when it comes to that. The creative part.” It was her turn to drift into him as their gazes connected and they gave in to another kiss.

“We do understand each other. We absolutely do.”

“Hey, uh, Corryna,” Hannah’s voice came from behind her.

Corryna jumped back from Colin’s grasp and composed herself, then whipped around to face Hannah. “Hey, Hannah. What’s up?”

“Rylee Meadows and Dionna Reed are here to see you. And Keely Tucker came with them, too.”

“What? Now?” Corryna hated hearing the sheer panic in her voice, but she couldn’t help it. Rylee held her future in her hands and she’d been clear that she didn’t want any problems between Corryna and Colin. There weren’t any, thank goodness, but surely Rylee would not approve of them being personally involved. “They were supposed to come this afternoon.” *And no one told me the dress designer was coming, too.*

Corryna turned back to Colin and straightened her apron. “You and I have been working on the wedding this morning, okay? You’re here because you knew that I was busy with these centerpieces.”

He popped up from the stool and stood at attention. “Yeah. Of course. Got it.”

Corryna took a deep breath for strength and smoothed her hair, hoping it wasn’t evident that she’d just been kissing Colin. “You can send them back, Hannah. Thank you.”

Rylee, Dionna, and Keely marched into the back room, and Corryna witnessed the instant when Rylee spotted Colin and a look of surprise washed over her face. “Colin. You’re here, too.”

He stepped out from behind Corryna’s workbench and shook Rylee’s hand. “I am. Corryna and I are always working together on the wedding. She texted me and said she was working on arrangements this morning, and I had a few spare minutes, so I said I’d drop by to discuss where we’re at with everything.” He turned to Dionna and Keely and shook their hands as well. “Ladies. Morning.”

“Good morning, Chef,” Dionna said with a smile. Her long black twisted braids were pulled back, accentuating her

enviable cheekbones.

“Yes. Good morning,” Keely looked as impeccable and polished as any dress designer ever could, with a slim-fitting skirt and blouse and makeup on-point.

Rylee turned to Corryna, seeming impressed. “It’s great that you and Colin are working so closely together.”

“You told us to collaborate, so that’s what we’re doing. Collaborating,” Corryna said.

Colin cleared his throat. “I brought croissants if anyone wants one.”

“I’m good, but thank you. That’s really quite considerate of you,” Rylee said.

“No, thank you,” Dionna and Keely said in near unison.

“Well, Corryna can’t say no to them. I couldn’t help but notice how much she loved them when we had our first meeting at the TCC. She just kept eating them and eating them. So now I bring them to her whenever I can,” Colin said.

Corryna elbowed him in the ribs. A little less emphasis on how much he’d noticed that she loved the croissants would’ve been helpful. “I’ve been working on the centerpieces. I’d love for you all to see the bluebonnets I was able to bring in. These are a very special variety. They are quite difficult to get and not widely available.” Corryna pulled one of the stems from the bucket to show to Rylee, Keely and Dionna. “They’re called the Blue Darling. Prized for their brilliant color. I thought the bride and groom would appreciate that they’re not only an exclusive choice, but are also grown here in Texas.”

Rylee stepped closer and held the brilliant blue spire of the bluebonnet with her fingertips. “Fabulous. These are quite gorgeous.”

“I think Xavier and Ariana will really like these,” Dionna added.

“The color is perfect,” Keely said. “Exactly what we talked about.”

“The bluebonnets were a stroke of genius on your part, Keely,” Corryna said. “Rylee, do you have thoughts about the rest of it?”

“I like that it’s old Hollywood glamor and romantic at the same time.” Rylee turned to Corryna. “I’d love to say that this is perfect, but maybe make it a little more bold? I mean, keep refining.”

Dionna pulled out her phone. “If it’s okay with you, I’ll take a few photos and send them to Ariana. Then Rylee will get back to you with some feedback.”

“Yes. Absolutely. Go right ahead.” Corryna stood back and let Dionna take the pictures. She glanced over at Colin, who was grinning like a fool. He seemed to take great pleasure in seeing other people admire Corryna’s work.

“Perfect.” Dionna tucked her phone back inside her purse.

“And everything else is going well? With the food, too?” Rylee asked.

“Everything I’ve tasted so far is unbelievable,” Corryna said.

“Yes.” Colin nodded eagerly. “Corryna and I have followed each other’s cues at every step. I think you’ll find it’s all seamless when we make our presentation to you at the end of the month.”

“Great. If you could email me the menu as it stands right now, I’d like to look it over. But otherwise, I’m hoping we can get together a week from Wednesday to taste everything and take a look at the final flowers. That gives you about ten days.”

“Have you thought about where you’d like us to do the presentation?” Colin asked. “We could do it at the TCC, but it will be a big undertaking to bring supplies into their kitchen. I’d like to do it at Sheen if possible.”

“Maybe at lunchtime?” Rylee asked.

Colin regarded Corryna with a sideways glance. “Does that work for you, Corryna?”

“Of course.”

“Perfect. I’ll set aside the private dining room. Will Ariana and Xavier be joining us?” Colin asked.

“I’d love to say that they will, but it’s hard to know,” Rylee said.

“Their schedules are so unpredictable,” Dionna added.

“I’ll let you know,” Rylee said.

“No problem. Just keep me updated so I can be sure that I have everything on hand,” Colin replied.

“I will. Of course.” Rylee’s vision narrowed on Colin, then she turned to Corryna with the same skeptical expression. “I have to ask. What exactly happened between you two?”

Corryna’s stomach lurched. Her hands became clammy. Could Rylee tell that there was something romantic going on between them? Was it that obvious? “Happened?” she asked, her voice faltering.

Colin fidgeted, folding his arms across his chest in one direction, then in the other—a dance of discomfort that wasn’t like him at all. “Yes. Uh. Not sure what you mean by that.”

“There was so much tension between you two when we met at the TCC. I was really worried about it, to be honest. That all seems to have evaporated. It’s remarkable how that has all gone away.”

Corryna couldn’t help but remember that day, and Colin pointing out that sex was the best way to get rid of tension. They’d certainly put that theory to the test in the weeks since then. “I guess it’s just been the process of working together. Even though our mediums are very different, we understand each other’s creative mindset. That alone was enough to make a harmonious working relationship.”

“Yes. Yes. That’s right. We understand each other,” Colin said.

Corryna glanced at Colin, and as their gazes connected, it felt as though they had their own silent conversation. What was going on between them *was* more than just sex. They’d

built something. A bridge. A real connection. Was she falling for him? She'd told herself that she wouldn't, but he had become a constant in her life and she only wanted their romance to keep going. "It's as simple as that."

"Well, it's amazing to see. Really. Just keep it up." Rylee peered up at the clock on the wall. "We need to go. I have a million places I need to be today, and Dionna has a conference call this afternoon. I believe Keely has a fitting with another bride."

"That I do," Keely said. "Word is getting around in Royal."

"It was nice to see you both again," Dionna added.

"Thanks for dropping by," Corryna said. "We'll talk to you soon."

Rylee, Keely, and Dionna strode back out the way they came, disappearing into the front of the shop.

Corryna finally felt as though she could exhale. "Whoa. That was close."

"What are you talking about?" Colin asked.

"I mean, that was close. What if Rylee figured out that we're...you know..."

He arched one of his expressive eyebrows. "That we're what? Working well together? Getting along? Friends?"

She couldn't help but smile. He was right about all of that. They did get along. And they were friends. "I meant that we're sleeping together."

He dismissed it with a tut and a wave of his hand. "I don't think she cares about that. She doesn't want tension between us. There's no tension. End of story."

Corryna hoped it really was as simple as that. One thing hadn't changed from that first meeting at the TCC—she and Colin both desperately needed and wanted this job. "I suppose that's true."

"Seriously, Corryna. Don't worry about it. You do what you're doing. I'll do what I'm doing." He gripped her elbow

and pulled her closer, then wrapped her up in his embrace. “And we’ll keep doing what we do together. Which I think is spectacular.”

That familiar ribbon of excitement worked its way through her. If Hannah wasn’t in the front room and Royal Blooms wasn’t open for business, she would’ve started tearing off Colin’s shirt right then and there.

“Corryna?” Hannah asked from behind Corryna. “I’m so sorry to interrupt again.”

Corryna and Colin stepped back from each other again. Corryna was a bit mortified that she and Colin had been caught so wrapped up in each other twice that morning. “No problem. What’s up?”

Hannah held up a large white envelope. “The mail was just delivered and I had to sign for this. I thought it might be important.”

Corryna had an inkling about what that was and she’d been dreading its arrival. She walked up to Hannah and took the package from her. “Thank you.”

“Of course,” Hannah said, then returned to the front of the shop.

Corryna looked at the return address and her worst suspicions were confirmed. “It’s the report from the forensic accountant,” she said to Colin.

“Go ahead. Open it.”

“Now?” She was terrified of what was inside that envelope. She’d been so betrayed by Dan. She didn’t think she could endure learning that there was more.

“Yes, Corryna. It’s best to face these things head-on.”

* * *

Colin hated seeing that look on Corryna’s face—the one that said she was overwhelmed and simply wanted everything to go away. He’d pushed her to do this investigation and he was devoted to the idea of helping her through it.

“Come on now. No time like the present.”

“It’s just going to be a bunch of numbers, and you know how I feel about that. None of it makes sense to me. I’ve tried.”

He sensed that this was about far more than numbers, but he made a mental note to convince her to hire a real accountant once she could afford it. A woman as kind and talented as Corryna needed to be spending more time arranging flowers and interacting with customers, and less time bogged down by the financial side of her business. It wasn’t that she was incapable. It was merely that Colin was a strong believer in playing to one’s strengths. If a person was good at something, he believed they should lean into it and rely less on the things that frustrated or confused them. “I understand. Which is why I think you should open it now. I’ll help you read it. If you want. I don’t want to stick my nose into your business. But I do know my way around numbers.”

“You’ve already done so much for me. And don’t you need to get to the restaurant?”

He couldn’t tell if she was reacting like this because she wanted him to stay out of it, or if she didn’t want to talk about her ex, but they’d come this far and he wasn’t about to back down yet. “This is simply about seeing this through. You deserve the truth. As for Sheen, I can show up whenever I want.”

She sighed. “Okay. Fine. Let’s go into my office.”

“Sounds good.” He followed her through the short corridor that led to her tiny workspace. He could hardly believe she was able to get anything done at all in here.

Corryna sat behind her desk while Colin took a seat in the only other chair available. She tore open the envelope, pulled out a thick stack of documents and began scanning the top page. Her face slowly drained of all color. Eventually, she thrust the stack of paper in his direction. “You do it. This is making me sick.”

This was probably for the best. He could be objective. She couldn't. "Sure. Let's take a look." Colin took one glance at the cover page and knew that he'd never be able to read the report without a little help. He reached into the pocket of his shirt, pulled out his reading glasses and put them on. "Going to need these."

"Now, that is a sexy sight."

He laughed quietly. At least he'd been able to bring some comic relief to a tense situation. "I'm glad you're amused by the fact that I'm forty-two years old and my eyes are slowly failing me."

"They're still stunning."

He felt the heat rise in his cheeks. His immediate reaction to all flattery was to deflect. "Not as beautiful as yours." It was the truth. Her eyes always reflected so much heart. They often stole his breath away.

"That's sweet. Now, please read that thing so I can stop worrying about it."

Colin sat back in the chair and crossed his legs. As he began to flip through the pages and digest the content, a picture was forming and he didn't like it. Not one bit.

"Well?"

He removed his glasses and set them down on her desk. "I'm afraid that you're going to need to hire a lawyer. I can help you with that, too."

"No, Colin. No. Absolutely not. I didn't want this to turn into some big mess. I told you that."

"Your husband didn't merely skim money, Corryna. He fleeced your business. There's more than one hundred thousand dollars gone over the course of the two years that he was here in Royal and doing your books."

"That much? How is that possible?"

"He was methodical. He had one thousand dollars a week going into a money market account that was in the business's

name. But he was the sole account holder. Did you know about that account?"

She shook her head. "No. He set up everything at the bank when we opened up. He did it all."

"This account was opened one month after the main business accounts. My guess is that the bank didn't question it since he'd been the one to open the initial accounts." He referred back to the report, flipping through the documents. "The money never stayed in there for long. He basically parked the money in what looked like a legitimate account, then he took it as he wanted it. I have to hand it to him. He was very disciplined. The amount always stayed the same, so it truly wouldn't raise any red flags with the bank. Usually, when someone does something like this, they get greedy when they realize no one is looking. He never did that."

"I'd say it was more like he was very good at being consistently sneaky over a long period of time."

"The question is what he was spending the money on that whole time." Colin scratched his chin, wondering what the answer might be. A man like Corryna's ex might have any number of vices requiring a bankroll.

"It all went to the other women. That's actually how I first confirmed that he was cheating. One day, I was getting some clothes together for the dry cleaner, and I found a receipt in his pocket for a fancy lingerie shop in Dallas. It was for a lace nightgown that cost almost five hundred dollars."

"I take it you never received an expensive nightgown as a gift?"

"Not only that, there was a business card from the store manager with a note that said..." Corryna's voice started to crack and she dropped her head, looking down and avoiding eye contact with him.

He reached across the desk for her arm, his heart breaking for what she'd gone through. She'd endured a betrayal he couldn't imagine. "You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

“No. No. I need to prove to myself that I’ve moved beyond this.” She composed herself with a deep breath and a straightening of her spine. She raised her head. “The note said that they had enjoyed meeting him and his wife. Whoever received that nightgown was pretending to be married to him. While I was here in Royal, actually married to the jerk and completely clueless.”

“Don’t say that. You can’t blame yourself for not knowing.” For a moment, Colin sat impossibly still. So many unpleasant thoughts rifled through his mind, none of them charitable toward Corryna’s ex-husband. The man had never been worthy of Corryna. That was all there was to it. Unfortunately, he didn’t think that sharing that thought with Corryna would help her. Frankly, there were no good words. So he simply got up from his seat and stepped behind her desk. “Come on. Stand up. Come here.”

She shook her head. “I’m fine.”

“You’re upset. Come here.” He tugged on her arm and she immediately gave in, rising to a standing position.

“I don’t want you to feel sorry for me,” she murmured against his arm.

He stroked her hair, pulling her even tighter against his body. “I can’t help it, Corryna. What happened to you is unforgivable. Seriously. No one should have to endure what you have.”

“It all feels like a bizarre dream.”

“It’s only bizarre that someone would treat you that way. You are the most generous person I have ever met.” *I’m falling in love with you.* As quickly as the words filtered into his consciousness, they were followed by one more thought—it was true. How had this happened? This had never been part of his plan. “I realize you’re just now absorbing this information, but you need to think about your next steps.”

“Honestly, I want to forget about the whole thing and move on.”

He loosened his grip on her so he could look her in the eye. “You can’t sweep it under the rug.”

“Why not? It’s in the past. I don’t want to dig it up. I don’t want to spend time thinking about him and the things that he did to me. It’s just money. I’m doing fine without it.”

“But you’re not. You’re barely scraping by.” He looked around. “I mean, your office is a broom closet.”

“Hey. It’s utilitarian. There’s nothing wrong with my office. Just because it’s not big enough for comfy leather chairs and a corner bar like yours doesn’t mean that it doesn’t do the job.”

She was getting defensive. This conversation might be better left for another time. “Okay. Okay. I’m sorry. We can talk about it later.”

She peered up at him, her eyes welling with emotion. “I don’t want to waste my time living in the past. I want to look forward. I have a lot of good things going for me. I have an amazing staff. I love my job. I get to work on the Noble-Ramos wedding, which is an absolute coup for me.”

Even though he was dumbfounded that she wanted to sweep aside the one-hundred-thousand-dollar loss, he couldn’t help but admire that she preferred to focus on the positives. “You’re absolutely right. Those are all very good things.”

“And I have you on my side, which feels pretty amazing.” Her eyes flickered with the optimism that was there almost every day. It was a big part of why he was falling for her.

“You do have me, Corryna.” He ran his thumb across her cheek, where her tears had been mere moments ago. “Don’t question that, okay?”

A smile bloomed on her face. “You have me, too.”

Heat flooded his body. His pulse thumped in his ears. “Do you want to come over tonight?”

“Of course.”

He loved that it was almost a foregone conclusion. He appreciated that he didn’t have to try hard to make this work. He and Corryna were simply drawn to each other on a

molecular level, and they'd fallen into a fun and simple routine as a result. This was the most emotionally involved he'd ever been with a woman, but it was also the least complicated relationship he'd experienced. Was this what it was like to fall in love? Could it really be that easy? "And tomorrow night? And the night after that?" He reached down and playfully squeezed her bottom.

Corryna laughed quietly. "I'd like it if we could stay at my house, too, if that's okay. I was actually going to ask if I could convince you to take a few hours off one morning this week and go on a hike with me. We're nearing the end of spring wildflowers and I really want to see them one more time."

He felt honored. This was an activity Corryna usually reserved for her best friend, Jessica. "I'd love to go. And your house is closest to the quarry, so it would work to stay there the night before."

"How about tonight and tomorrow at your place, then we'll stay at my house on Wednesday and hike on Thursday?"

That was a whole lot of planning ahead for a guy who didn't do serious, but making plans with Corryna didn't bother Colin. It felt right. "That works."

"Thank you for saying you'll go." She glanced at her desk. "And thanks for everything with the forensic accountant. I'm just not sure I want to act on any of it. I'd like to put it away for now if that's okay."

He sensed her discomfort with the topic and decided to leave it alone. "You need to make the choice yourself. But at least you know the truth now."

"It took me a long time to feel like I could look ahead. I don't want to stop doing that now." She smiled and pulled herself snug against him. "You make me feel like I can look ahead."

He kissed the top of her head. No one had ever said anything so sweet to him. With every word out of her mouth, he was falling a little harder. The only trouble was that he was worried this happy, euphoric feeling couldn't possibly last.

Where and when would he have to come back down to earth?
Just because he was willing to venture into more serious
territory didn't mean that he was convinced he was equipped
to make it work.

Nine

On the morning Corryna and Colin were set to go on their hike, she insisted they leave before dawn. “I know it’s super early, but I’ve gone around this time with Jessica once or twice and it was totally worth it to see the sunrise. I promise it’ll be amazing.”

“More worth it than sleep?” Colin tied his sneakers, sitting on the bench in the entry of Corryna’s house. Of course, the answer to his question didn’t matter. He was prepared to do almost anything for her.

She stretched and yawned, looking so sexy in a sleeveless workout top and black leggings that followed her every curve. “I know. I’m tired, too.”

He stood. “Who’s driving?”

“Do you mind? My car is making a funny noise.”

“Funny noise?”

“Yeah. It’s like a whirring, but then there’s a rattle when I accelerate.”

“Hmm. Not sure what that is, but I’m happy to drive. Let’s go. We wouldn’t want the sun to come up while we’re standing here talking.” He grabbed his keys, Corryna took two flashlights she had stashed in a drawer, then they loaded into his car, and he began the drive to the quarry. Despite his complaints about the hour, he was thrilled that Corryna had invited him to hike with her. There was no question that Colin and Corryna had more than filled the friend role in each other’s lives. They spent nearly every waking minute together. They texted off and on, all day long. They worked on their collaboration for the wedding, and of course, they made love. A lot. They were hot for each other all the time.

“When are you going to get your car fixed?” He glanced over to see her purse her lips.

“I don’t know. Sometime soon.”

“You need a working vehicle in Royal.”

“I know. But I hate taking it in. I have no clue what they’re talking about when they tell me what’s wrong. I always worry that they’re just lying to me and ripping me off.”

Colin had heard both Kristine and Elena express a similar sentiment, and he felt for anyone who found themselves in that situation. He didn’t know much about car repair, but he was just tall enough to be slightly intimidating. Very few people ever messed with him. “I tell you what. Let’s drive into town this morning together. I’ll follow you and we can drop your car off at Royal Auto. The guy who runs the service department comes into Sheen all the time. I’ll make sure he takes care of you, and then I’ll drop you off at work. I can pick you up whenever you want.”

“Don’t you need to get in to the restaurant?”

He caught the disbelief in her voice, and he understood what she was saying. His entire life revolved around Sheen. Well, now his life revolved at least partly around Corryna. “What if your car broke down in one of the rural parts of town? I can’t let that happen. I’d never forgive myself.”

“That’s very thoughtful of you, Colin. Thank you.”

He pulled into the dirt lot at the quarry, and parked his SUV. There wasn’t another car to be seen. “I guess this is a best kept secret, huh?”

“I know you think this is silly, but you’re just going to have to trust me.” Corryna hopped out and turned on her flashlight while he locked up, then she started to lead the way. She started them along a winding and narrow trail. At first, the incline was gentle, but quickly became more and more steep. With every hundred yards or so, the foliage around them became more dense and the trees more frequent. “You doing okay back there?” she asked.

“Yep. Just enjoying the view.”

“The trees and plants are beautiful out here, aren’t they?”

“I was talking about the view of you. But the plants are nice, too.”

She came to a stop and turned around to playfully smack his arm. “You’re bad.”

“What? It’s true.” He greatly enjoyed the chance to ogle her ass in those leggings, especially when the flashlight made it easier.

“Just keep walking. We’re almost there.”

They started up an even steeper and more winding incline, with a narrower, rockier path. It seemed like they were headed nowhere, but just when they reached the crest of the slope, the entire landscape opened up before them. As the trees fell away, nature revealed a vast meadow ahead, dotted with a rainbow of wildflowers. They both came to a stop, taking in the breathtaking view. The sun was just beginning to breach the horizon, casting soft golden light that turned the clouds overhead a brilliant mix of purple and pink. Colin had traveled all over the world, but this was one of the most stunning things he’d ever seen.

“Wow,” he said, unable to think of anything to say that could fully capture the beauty.

Corryna flipped off her flashlight, then took his hand and leaned into him, resting her head against his shoulder. “I told you.”

They soaked up the stunning vista, listening to the birds and enjoying the peaceful solitude. “What do you love most about coming here?” he asked.

“It’s hard to pick one thing, but I guess I’d have to say the flowers. I’ve just always loved them. Since I was little. They’re happy and optimistic. I can be having the worst day in the world and they always make me feel better. It’s impossible for me to be sad when I’m around them. And seeing them like this, in their natural habitat, just feels special.”

He squeezed her hand and leaned down to kiss the top of her head. How he loved the way she looked at the world. She showed him the beauty all around him. Much of the time, he

never stopped to smell the proverbial roses. He was too busy working his butt off, making money and worrying about proving his parents wrong. Corryna had not only inspired him to tap back into his creativity, she reminded him that he had quite a lot to be thankful for. “You know, this reminds me a little bit of Ireland. We have all sorts of lush green hills and flowers.” For the first time in quite some time, he found himself almost feeling homesick.

“I’d love to go there someday.”

“I’m sure you’d love it.”

She turned to him and shielded her eyes with her hand to her forehead. “Have you thought about going back? I hate the thought of you being away from your family for so long.”

He scanned her face, thinking how remarkable it was that she had become the only person he could talk about this with. Perhaps it was because she leveled very little judgment in his direction. She merely wanted to help. “I think about it every now and then. But you know, just like you told me that you don’t want to live in the past, I don’t want to, either. I like looking forward just like you do.”

“I really don’t think it’s the same.”

“What? Of course it is.”

She shook her head. “But is it? My needing to move on from my divorce isn’t the same as you trying to forget that you have a broken relationship with your parents. My divorce was closing a door. Forever. I had to leave it behind because it was over. I know that you think you shut yourself off from your parents when you decided to stay in the US, but you still talk to them, so there’s still a line of communication there. The door is still open.”

“I can’t not talk to them. But I’m keeping them at bay. I’m establishing boundaries. I thought that was the healthy thing to do.”

“It is. But I don’t think you really came to terms with the pain in your past. I think that when you shut the door, it was just about trying to ignore the way you hurt each other. That’s

not good. And it's also not entirely fair to them. They made mistakes, but I think all parents do. I think you should at least give them the chance to explain themselves. And I think they should give you the chance to do the same."

Colin blew out a deep breath and looked off at the meadow again. In some ways, he'd come to peace with his relationship with his family. It wasn't what he ever would've wanted, but at least he knew exactly what it was. "I just don't know if I can do that."

"I know it won't be easy, but you're so much stronger than you give yourself credit for."

He shrugged. He *was* strong and he wanted to keep it that way.

She caressed his arm softly. "Just think about it. That's all I want you to do. Think about it."

"Why do you care about this?" He turned back to her. "You don't know my family at all."

She unleashed the soft smile that melted his heart every time she delivered it. "Because I know that you are the most incredible man I have ever met. Every time I think I've got you figured out, you surprise me."

"I feel the same way about you." *I love you*. The thought popped into his head and wouldn't let go.

"Aww. Thanks, Colin. That's sweet."

They stayed for a few more minutes, admiring the view before they started the trek back to the car. Meanwhile, Colin's head was a buzzing beehive between the things Corryna had said about his relationship with his parents, and the surprising conclusion he'd reached at the tail end of that conversation. Was what he was feeling really love? He wasn't sure, but oddly enough, it made sense.

When they got back to her house and inside, Colin was overcome by an overwhelming need to be closer to Corryna. Sex wasn't the answer to everything, but it was the answer to *some* things. "Shower?" he asked. "I'm sweaty after that."

“Of course. Go ahead and I’ll hop in after you.”

“I was hoping we could get each other clean.” He placed one hand on her hip while the other slipped inside the back of her workout top.

“I don’t have the biggest bathroom.”

“And I don’t care. I just want to get you wet.” He nestled his face in the crook of her neck and kissed the soft skin.

Corryna moaned, then curled her fingers around the hem of his T-shirt, pulling the garment over his head. “Whatever you want.”

Colin felt a rush of blood that went straight to the center of his body. The thought of Corryna wet and soapy was more than a little sexy. “I love it when you say that.”

She leaned closer and flattened her palms against his abs, then pressed her lips against his shoulder. He needed her now and none of what he wanted to happen was going to take place in the front hall. Needing to take charge, he scooped her up into his arms.

Corryna let out a squeak, then wrapped her arms around his neck. Colin walked into the bedroom and then the attached bath. He set her on the floor, then took the liberty of reaching into the shower enclosure and turning on the water. He dropped his shorts and boxers while Corryna lifted her top over her head and wriggled out of her leggings. Colin wrapped his arms around her waist. He was already hard and ready for her. As he kissed her softly, his body flooded with warmth. He felt light-headed, grappling with the emotion that kept trying to bubble up inside of him. This was a very sexy scenario, but he found himself only thinking about things like love.

The air in the bathroom was getting warm and thick. “I think the shower is more than hot enough,” she said. Corryna stepped in and Colin followed. Corryna immediately sought another kiss, lifting her arms to rest them on his shoulders and combing her fingers into his hair, which was slowly getting damp. The hot water pattered against her back and trickled over her shoulders, then down her chest and stomach. Colin’s

hands glided down Corryna's back and over the silky skin of her butt, gently squeezing and drawing her hips closer to his. Their tongues swirled in a kiss that he never wanted to end. In truth, he never wanted any of this to end.

* * *

Corryna moaned softly as Colin lowered his head and kissed her jaw, then down her neck and across her collarbone. The warm billowy air swirled around her. Being with him like this was sheer heaven. He dipped his head to one of her breasts and she watched his tongue circle her nipple as warm water cascaded across the side of his face and rolled over his jaw. He gripped Corryna's rib cage and dragged his tongue to her other breast, leaving a trail of heat as he went. She dropped her head to one side, eyes half-closed, as the sensations amped up her need for him.

Colin reached for the bar of soap and built lather with his hands. The look on his face was one of pure hunger. It made Corryna want him even more. His sudsy hands sank against her breasts, his palms against her nipples, spreading the silky bubbles in circles. His eyes grew darker as he studied her reaction to every touch, their gazes connecting while the temperature in the room continued to climb.

"Colin. We need to get clean or neither of us is going to make it to work this morning," she said.

"You're so sensible."

Corryna reached for the shampoo, pouring some into her hands, then handing him the bottle. They stood there together, each washing their hair, grinning at each other. She rinsed her hair out, then stepped aside to let Colin do his. That gave her the chance to spread soapy suds across his chest, then down his stomach and legs. Every inch of his chiseled physique was pure magic. And she couldn't wait to have all of him.

After a final rinse, Colin turned off the water and they both got out and toweled off. He leaned down and kissed her again. "I know you want to get going, but I need to make love to you."

She smiled. “Exactly what I was thinking.”

He clutched his hands beneath her butt and hoisted her up. Corryna wrapped her legs around his waist and her arms around his shoulders as he maneuvered them into the bedroom. He laid her down gently on the bed, then reached for the box of condoms that was still sitting on Corryna’s nightstand. He rolled it on while his eyes raked her body, his hair damp and a few stray beads of water still settled in his collarbone. Seeing the intensity on his face, she sensed that something had shifted between them. Had she gotten to him when she’d talked about his family? Was she finding a way into his heart?

He slid his hands beneath her hips, lifting them off the mattress and shifting her body until she was in the center of the bed. Then he climbed onto the mattress, in total control. He claimed her with one long thrust, and Corryna was quick to pull him in closer, locking her ankles around his waist. She needed his perfect being as close to her as possible. He pumped slow but hard, and Corryna felt as though her entire body was about to boil over. His breaths were heavy and short, and he muttered her name into her neck. She loved hearing that. She loved that right now, she seemed to be his only thought, just as he was hers. She tried to hang on for as long as possible, but the moment was too much, and she called out as the peak rocketed through her, just at the moment when he gave way as well.

He rolled to his side and reigned her in with his strong arms, kissing her forehead again and again. For the first time in a long time, she had zero desire to go to work, however much she loved it. Royal Blooms had long been her life, but it felt now like her life was right here in this bed. It felt like he had become her reason for being. The realization hit her hard, and she had to suck in a deep breath to get past it and keep it to herself. She’d already put him through the wringer with their conversation at the quarry. She didn’t want to burden him with more. At least not now.

“I suppose we need to get dressed and get going, huh?” she asked.

He groaned. “Yeah. I think so.”

They slowly got up off the bed, and Corryna wandered to the closet while Colin ducked into the bathroom. She wanted to look cute, so she put on a black-and-white sundress and sandals. Colin got dressed in the clean clothes he’d brought with him—his typical wardrobe on a workday of dark jeans, a white dress shirt, and today, a beautiful linen suit coat. Colin made coffee and toast for them while she put on her makeup and did her hair, then they each climbed into their cars for the drive to Royal Auto.

To Corryna’s great relief, Colin handled everything when they arrived at the repair shop. She didn’t enjoy the thought of giving in to too many gender stereotypes, but she’d forgotten how nice it was to have someone else around to take care of things like this.

Colin drove toward Royal Blooms. Town was busy that morning, with the only parking spot on the street nearly a block away from the shop. “Let me walk you to the door,” he said.

“You don’t need to do that.”

“I want to. It doesn’t feel right to do anything else.”

Before she could argue the point any further, he was already out of the car and standing on the sidewalk. Corryna climbed out and joined him. Even though there were people everywhere, he took her hand. She thought twice about it, but decided that what was between her and Colin was more important than what anyone thought.

When they reached the front door at Royal Blooms, Colin came to a stop and took her other hand. “I just want to thank you for this morning,” he said. “It felt really special. Thank you.”

She peered up into his magical green eyes. Something had definitely shifted between them over the last few days, which both delighted her and scared her. She didn’t have the best track record with men. But something told her that she was on

the right path. It felt too good to be with him for it to not be going somewhere. “You’re more than welcome.”

Colin combed his fingers into her hair and brought his lips to hers. The world around her faded into the background and as he took the kiss deeper, he became the sole thing tethering her to the here and now.

“Corryna?” A woman’s voice pierced the air.

For a split second, Corryna didn’t react to hearing her own name. She was too caught up in the kiss. But then her mind managed to place the voice—Rylee. Corryna pushed away from Colin, and sure enough, Rylee was standing a few yards away, glaring at them. Even worse, dress designer Keely Tucker was with her. “Oh. Hi,” Corryna sputtered.

Rylee’s sights flew back and forth between Corryna and Colin, her voice and face colored with disbelief. “Is this... Are you two...romantically involved?”

Corryna looked to Colin for answers, as she wasn’t sure what to say. What exactly *were* she and Colin doing? She had lots of thoughts tucked away in her head about the subject, but no one had asked them to put a label on anything. Dating? It was more than that. Sleeping together? Yes. But Corryna hated the thought of minimizing it like that. There was more between them. So much more. They had shared details of their pasts. Colin had helped her with the forensic accountant. They had spent so many nights up late, talking and making love.

Finally, Colin chose to answer. “Yes. Corryna and I are involved.” He stepped closer to Rylee, holding his hands up as if he’d been found guilty of something and was making his confession. “But I want to tell you that it’s not a problem. If anything, it’s helped us get in sync. It’s part of the reason our collaboration has gone so well.” He turned back to Corryna and his eyes softened.

A wave of relief washed over Corryna. He felt the same way she did, or at least it seemed that way. She desperately wanted to reach out and take his hand, but this might not be the best time for public displays of affection. Rylee and Keely

had already witnessed one hell of a kiss. “Yes. That’s exactly right.”

Rylee crossed her arms and grimaced. “So that’s why you two were suddenly being so nice to each other the other day at Royal Blooms.”

“That’s part of it,” Corryna said. “But to be fair, we’ve found that we simply work well together.”

“But I asked you two what had made the difference and you gave me no indication that this—” Rylee fluttered her hands in the air “—was going on.”

Corryna felt incredibly guilty. She never wanted to be dishonest with anyone. “I’m sorry. It’s a very new thing. We’ve been trying hard to keep it quiet and private. You must know how much people gossip in Royal.”

“Except that you were making out in the middle of the sidewalk in downtown Royal.”

Neither Colin nor Corryna had an answer for that. Corryna’s only defense was that she was on a high from their morning together. It had been so perfect.

“And what happens to the food and flowers for this wedding if you two have a falling out?” Rylee’s voice was brimming with panic. Her eyebrows drew together tightly, forming a deep furrow in the center of her forehead. Meanwhile, Keely, who’d kept herself removed from the conversation, stepped closer.

Corryna and Colin made eye contact again. He seemed to be searching for an answer as hard as she was. “It won’t be a problem,” Colin said.

“Uh-huh. So says the guy who’s dated half of the women in Royal.” Rylee focused her attention on Corryna. “I’m sorry, but it’s true. You *had* to know that.”

Corryna swallowed hard. “I did.”

“That’s not fair,” Colin interjected. “It’s not half. It’s not even one quarter. Or one tenth.”

Corryna wanted to leap to Colin's defense, especially while he was only digging them a bigger hole. But Rylee wasn't wrong. Everyone knew that women all over Royal wanted Colin and that he was known for using that to his best advantage. Corryna didn't enjoy feeling insecure, but it did make her wonder whether she was deluding herself by getting wrapped up in Colin. Even Jessica, her ultimate supporter, had pointed out that Colin was not an easy guy to hold on to.

Rylee stepped even closer to them both. "I don't think you two have any concept of the pressure I'm under with this wedding. Every decision is in a state of flux. The bride and groom are all over the place. They're too busy to give me answers most of the time, but they want to approve every detail."

"She's not wrong," Keely interjected.

"In the meantime, I'm juggling one million bits of information—the guest list and accommodations for VIPs. Seating charts and music and flower girls, and meanwhile, the entire town of Royal is expecting the wedding of the century." She gripped Colin's arm, her eyes wide and frantic. "Of the century. If it's not absolutely perfect, who's everyone going to blame? Me. It's my butt on the line. My reputation. My business. I can't let whatever is going on between you two ruin that."

"I see your dilemma." Colin swallowed hard, but nodded eagerly as if he agreed with every word she'd just said.

Rylee sighed. "I'm sorry if I'm a little intense right now. I'm just under a lot of pressure."

"I think we all understand what you're saying. We all get it because we're living it, too," Keely said.

"Right. Corryna and I are also under pressure. This wedding is an important opportunity for Corryna. It will open so many doors for her in Royal. And for me, I can't afford to not be doing the food. It would damage my reputation, and frankly, it would be an embarrassment. So, I hope you know that we didn't get involved without thinking about it. We knew the ramifications, went into it with clear minds and hearts, and

decided that it was worth it. That's how much we like each other."

Speaking of hearts, Corryna's was now beating like a hummingbird. Whatever doubts had crept into her thinking earlier were now gone. He felt like she did. It was such a relief.

Rylee managed a thin smile. "I really hope that's true."

"You have to trust that Corryna and I have the best intentions." Colin glanced at Corryna and smiled softly. "And the wedding is only a few months away. Whatever happens, we will hold it together."

Ten

Corryna was trying very hard not to obsess over what had happened with Rylee, but two days later, she was still on edge. She needed Royal Blooms to be successful, and Rylee Meadows was the last person who should have to question whether or not Corryna could pull off her part in the wedding of the century. And of course, it wasn't merely Rylee who was counting on Corryna. Hannah and Mike needed her, too. Hannah couldn't afford to pay for school on her own. And Mike had six-month-old Penelope to care for. In short, Corryna could not fail.

But that meant she and Colin needed to keep things on a perfectly even keel if they were going to be involved and continue to collaborate as Rylee wanted them to. On the surface, it was no problem. She woke up every morning, seeking his warmth and quick wit. She ended every day wrapped tightly in his arms. For the first time in a long time, she felt safe. She felt content and she believed that he did, too. But she still worried that he wasn't in as deep as she was. Maybe it was the remnants of her divorce and the way it had rattled her confidence in a way that went to the very core of her being. Or maybe it was simply because her time with Colin had not been long, and she knew from experience that oftentimes, love took time to take hold.

For today, she decided to spend less time thinking about Colin and more time focused on the nuts and bolts of running Royal Blooms. She placed her orders for next week, making sure she had everything she needed for her final presentation to Rylee next week. She worked on her website and caught up on the accounting. She'd even taken one more look at the report from the forensic accountant, but ultimately stuffed it in the filing cabinet. It wasn't really going to help her to pursue anything with Dan. It would only dredge up old pain. And despite her trepidation about her future with Colin, she was generally optimistic about what might be ahead for her. Things

were mostly bright, and she'd ride that wave for as long as she could.

Hannah poked her head into Corryna's office. "Am I interrupting?"

Corryna looked up from her computer and shook her head. "Nope. What's up?"

"We need a few things for the break room and the bathroom. Do you want me to pick those up tomorrow morning before I come in?"

Corryna pulled out a piece of paper to write herself a note. "I can run out in a little bit. What's on the list?"

"Sugar and creamer for coffee. And we're out of hand soap and tampons in the bathroom."

Corryna scribbled down the list, then something struck her. She should have gotten her period more than a week ago. She glanced up at the calendar. Actually, scratch that—it was more like twelve days ago. But that didn't make any sense. She and Colin had been more than careful.

"You okay, Corryna?"

Corryna snapped out of it. "Yeah. Yeah. I'm good."

The chime on the shop's door sounded. "We have a customer. I gotta go." In a flash, Hannah was gone.

Corryna immediately pulled the calendar down from the wall and started counting. But numbers had never been her forte, so it quickly wound up frustrating her. "This doesn't make any sense," she muttered to herself. She officially needed advice. A second opinion. So she picked up her phone and called Jessica. "Do you have a minute? I need some help," she said when Jessica answered. For privacy, she got up and closed the door to her office.

"Of course. I'm working on a paper right now, but it's frying my brain. I could use the break."

Corryna swallowed hard. She wasn't exactly sure how to broach this subject. "How long after you miss a period until it's probably a good idea to take a pregnancy test?" A few

moments of uncomfortable silence came from the other end of the line. “Jessica? Are you there?”

“Did you and Colin have unprotected sex?”

Corryna’s stomach sank. She hated that she’d been so irresponsible, but she’d done several out of character things that night. “Unfortunately, yes. But it was only once. That was nearly two months ago now.”

“So, the night at Sheen? Did you get your period after?”

“Sort of? I basically spotted for a few days. That was it.”

“And how late are you now?”

“Twelve days. At least.”

“I would take a test ASAP. A woman I work with had this exact same thing happen to her. She spotted even though she was pregnant.”

Corryna could hardly believe she was having to confront this reality right now. Hopefully this was just her body acting up, possibly because of stress. “Okay. I’ll go get one now. I need to get some things from the store anyway.”

“Are you at Royal Blooms?”

“Yes.”

“Get the test and go home. There’s no sense in doing it at work. I’ll meet you at your house.”

Corryna was so relieved she wasn’t going to have to do this on her own. “Thank you. It’s probably nothing, but I appreciate you being there. I’ll see you in a few.” In a daze, Corryna grabbed her phone and let Hannah know she’d be gone for a few hours. Then she drove to the grocery store, where she bought the things the shop needed, as well as a two-pack of pregnancy tests. It felt so surreal to know that they were in the shopping bag as she loaded up her car. She’d dreamed of this moment when she was married, but Dan kept putting off the question of children. He’d say things like how he didn’t want to bring kids into “this messed up world.” Of course, he hadn’t thought twice about messing up Corryna’s world. Ultimately, it had been a good thing that they never

conceived, but she still very much wanted to become a mom, and at thirty-six, the clock was ticking. She simply hadn't bargained on today being the day she'd find out if her dream was actually going to come true.

When she got to her house, Jessica pulled into the driveway right after Corryna. "This is silly," Corryna said as she opened the front door and they walked inside. "You have schoolwork to do. And a million other things. This is probably just a false alarm." She set the shopping bags on her small butcher-block kitchen island.

"It doesn't matter. I didn't want you to be alone when you took the test." Jessica reached for Corryna's hand. "I know how much the question of kids weighed on you while you were married, and after your divorce. This is a big deal. And as your best friend, I felt like I needed to be here for it."

Corryna sighed and took the box from the counter. "Thank you for being so awesome. I'll be back in a few minutes."

"I'll be here waiting."

Corryna walked into the bathroom, read the instructions on the package, then followed them exactly. She didn't want to leave anything to chance. "Okay. Ten minutes," she called out to Jessica.

Her friend appeared in the bathroom doorway mere seconds later. She had the kitchen timer in her hand. "It's set. The countdown is on."

Corryna paced up and down the hall while Jessica stood sentry at the bathroom door. When the timer dinged, Corryna jumped. "Ten minutes is a lot shorter than I thought it would be."

Jessica waved her over. "Come on. Let's look."

Corryna stepped into the bathroom. She peered down at the plastic stick, which was sitting right there on the edge of the sink. The two blue lines were so dark and clear that Corryna's legs nearly went out from under her. She clamped her hand over her mouth. "Oh, my God. It's positive."

Jessica stepped behind her, placing her hands on Corryna's upper arms and peeking around her shoulder to view the test. "Whoa. So it is. Are you okay?"

Corryna turned and simply stared at Jessica. "I don't know. I'm in shock."

Jessica took her hand. "Come on. Let's go make some tea and talk." She led the way down the hall and into the kitchen. "Sit. I've got this."

Corryna plopped down in one of the chairs at her kitchen table. Her mind was such a torrent of thoughts that it was hard to make sense of any of it. She was pregnant. With Colin's baby. And as to how he was going to react, she had no clue. He had such a complicated relationship with his family. He'd had a traumatic childhood. And they'd hardly been together long enough to talk about things like children.

Jessica brought over two steaming mugs a few moments later, along with honey, spoons, and a small plate for the tea bags. "How are you doing?"

"I'm... I'm..." The first thing that popped into her head was Mike's baby girl, Penelope. The thought of having a little bundle like that to love and care for made her heart swell to twice its size. "Despite the uncertainty and the somewhat bad timing, I'm happy. Really happy."

"Understandable. You've wanted a baby for a long time."

"True. I have."

"And Colin is definitely the dad?"

Corryna shot her friend an incredulous look. "Yes. There's been no one else."

"I know we talk about everything, but I didn't want to assume." Jessica raised her mug to her lips and blew on the tea to cool it down, then took a sip. "Do you think it happened that first time in his office?"

"I don't see any other possibility. We've been very careful."

"The blackout was the beginning of March. It's almost the end of April. That would mean you're almost eight weeks

along. Have you been feeling okay?”

Corryna shrugged. “Yeah. I mean, maybe a little tired, but I’ve been so busy.” *And Colin’s been wearing me out.*

“What do you think Colin is going to say?”

“I don’t know. If I had found this out a month ago, I would have at least had a guess. But that was only because I had an idea of Colin in my head. Since then, he’s surprised me so many times. I want to think that he’d be excited and happy. I mean, things are really good between us.”

“Do you love him?”

Corryna had been wrestling with this question, but she’d always been posing it in the confines of her own head. Hearing it out loud and from someone else, there was only one answer. “Yes. I do.”

Jessica’s eyes widened and she smiled. “Well, good. Do you think he loves you?”

Corryna thought back on the last several weeks with him. He had been so exceptionally kind and wonderful. She didn’t want to assume that he felt the same way she did, but he *had* to have feelings for her. There was no way there wasn’t something of substance there. “I’m not sure. But I’d like to think there’s a chance that he does.”

“That’s great.” Jessica tilted her head to one side. “You know, I say that thinking positive is the best way to go. Talk to Colin and tell him how you feel.”

As much as she wanted to be optimistic, the idea of the conversation that was ahead of her made her slightly queasy. If he took it badly, the whole notion of keeping things with Colin on an even keel would go right out the window. And then where would they be? They would have jeopardized their jobs with the wedding, and their fairy-tale relationship would crumble to nothing. But Corryna couldn’t bring herself to look at the downside. Not now. Not when her dream of motherhood seemed to actually be coming true. “You’re right. I need to stay upbeat and hope for the best.”

“That’s the spirit. When are you going to tell him?”

“Right after I finish this tea.”

* * *

Colin was having a hell of a day, which was not good given that he was supposed to be working on finalizing the menu for the presentation to Rylee next week for the Noble-Ramos wedding. But unfortunately, the Oliver Shaw review in *Global Cuisine* magazine had finally come out, and although it was a rave on the surface, Colin saw a few too many details that made him deeply uncomfortable.

He sat in his office at Sheen, rereading the piece. Certain passages, surely meant to flatter, cut Colin to the core. *His brilliance is exactly like his father's, but it's been elevated for the modern palate. And Colin Reynolds and his dad seem to share the same brain and heart, but Colin stands alone on the forefront of something truly unique.* In some ways, these were things he'd longed to hear. They were going to get under his father's skin like nothing else could. But Colin wasn't sure he wanted to get back at his dad anymore. Or at least not in a vicious way. Corryna had gotten through to him on this very central issue in his life.

Even so, the comparisons did bother him. He'd always worried that he and his dad were exactly alike. It was part of the reason the distance between them brought some comfort. If he and his father weren't close, Colin didn't have to be confronted by their similarities. Colin could tell himself that he was different. But Oliver's review seemed to confirm what Colin had always feared—he and his dad were too much alike.

When he heard Corryna's voice outside of his office, it felt like someone had just thrown him a life preserver. He got up from his desk and rushed to the door. Outside the kitchen, she was chatting with Elena.

“I'm glad you like the croissants,” Elena said.

“They are so good. Every time Colin brings them to me, I just want to keep them all for myself,” Corryna replied. She glanced over at Colin and smiled. “Hey. Sorry I'm dropping by unannounced. I need to talk to you.”

“Sure. Yeah. Of course. Come on in.” He ushered her into his office, then closed the door. “It feels like a miracle that you’re here. I’m having a terrible day and now it all feels better.”

She looked at him with the most indecipherable look on her face. It was like she was both happy and confused. It made him wonder what in the hell was going on. “Oh. Well, maybe this isn’t a good time to talk about important things.”

“No. No. This is the perfect time. Important things will help keep my mind off everything else.” He took her hand and led her to one of the chairs, then he sat on the edge of his desk.

“If it’s okay with you, I’ll stand.”

That worried him. People with bad news always stood to deliver it. “Sure. Whatever works.”

She sucked in a deep breath, as if she needed to give herself a dose of courage. “I’m pregnant.”

For several moments, Colin was frozen. Neither words nor actions seemed appropriate. But that didn’t mean his mind wasn’t running. It was. Not smoothly, but it was whirring in stops and starts as he thought through what she’d said. “Pregnant. You’re going to have a baby.” He didn’t want to be that guy, but he had to ask. “And it’s definitely mine?”

“Yes, Colin. It is.”

The shades of happiness that had been there on her face earlier were slowly evaporating, but he didn’t know what to say. He didn’t want a child. He didn’t want to be a parent. He never had. In fact, he’d sworn to himself that he would never do it. “Wow. This is big. Huge.” He wandered over to the window and looked outside, hoping it might help to clear his mind.

“Is that all you’re going to say? It would be nice if you told me how you’re feeling.”

He turned back to her. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to say, Corryna. We’re weeks into our relationship. And I never wanted to be a father. Plus, let me point out that I’m forty-two.

Having a child was never part of my plan, but it really isn't now."

She nodded as if she agreed, but the hurt on her face was plain. "I get it. We never made any promises to each other." She looked around the room, seeming lost. "I'll just leave now."

Colin felt as though his heart was being ripped out of his chest. "Corryna. Please don't go. Will you give me a minute to wrap my head around this?" He couldn't imagine changing his opinion about this matter, but he cared deeply about Corryna. He didn't want to hurt her.

She blew out a breath. "Believe me. I understand. I haven't had much time to think about it, either."

He sensed her frustration and was eager to make it go away. Explaining his feelings and motivation seemed like the only path forward. "You know how I feel about my family. I never wanted to become a dad because to me, a father is someone who lets you down. It's not only someone who isn't there for you, it's someone who brings you heartache."

"You could take it as a lesson and decide to be nothing like your dad."

"But what if that's not possible? People are who they are. My dad and I are so much alike. People have always told me that. Hell, this food writer claimed we're practically the same person." He pointed to the open magazine on his desk. He didn't want to sound so stubborn about it, but he'd spent decades dealing with the aftermath of what had happened between himself and his parents. He couldn't magically unspool it in the span of fifteen minutes.

"I understand what you're saying, Colin. To you, family represents betrayal. But you don't have to follow that script."

"What if I'm not capable? I'm not naturally loving and nurturing like you are. This cold and calculated focus on perfection is imprinted on my DNA. That's not going anywhere. Trust me."

She shook her head and blew out a breath. “I wish that you could see the things in you that I see. You are so much more than you think you are.”

He wasn’t convinced. “Well, I wish I could hear what you’re saying and instantly change my mind, but I can’t. Like I said before, this was not part of my plan.”

“Okay. Fine.” She stiffened her spine. “But I need you to understand that it has always been one of my dreams to become a mom. My ex-husband took that dream away from me. And I thought that dream was gone. But it turns out that it isn’t, and no matter what you say, I’m happy about this.”

“It’s not my job to make amends for another man’s mistakes.”

“Of course it isn’t.” She scanned his face, her eyes sweeping back and forth in deliberate fashion. “But you took the time to care about the other thing he took from me. My money.”

Damn. That one stopped him right in his tracks. “I did that because I care about you.” Those words were zipping around in his head again. He’d never uttered them to a woman before, but maybe they could save him. “I did that because I love you.”

Corryna blinked so many times that her eyelashes were fluttering. She let out a low and quiet laugh. “I hate to break this to you, but that only makes this worse.”

He was so epically bad at relationships. He should have just kept his mouth shut. “You know I’ll take responsibility for the baby. No matter what. Whatever you need.”

“I don’t want our baby to be seen as a responsibility, Colin. I can manage on my own. I’ll find a way.”

“How, exactly? Your shop barely breaks even. And you aren’t willing to take the steps to go after the money you’re rightfully owed.”

Anger flared in her eyes and she stepped closer and planted a finger in the center of his chest. “That was *my* choice to make. You said it yourself.”

“Well, you can’t keep me from helping you. I’ll order flowers from you every day.”

“Am I supposed to be impressed that you’d go to such extraordinary measures to give me money—the thing that you have more than enough of? The thing that you can afford to give away? Because I’m not.” She took a step back, away from him. “I will find a way to make it work. I always do. I don’t need you.”

In some ways, he’d always expected to hear her say that to him. It was the truth. She didn’t need him. She was a fully formed human being and he was a shell of a man. “I’m not trying to walk away from you, Corryna. I just need time.”

She shook her head. “I can’t stay here and listen to this anymore. I need to get on with my life. I need to look forward.” She walked to the door, then turned back to him. “Apparently, I’m going to be doing that alone.”

Eleven

It had been two days since Colin's conversation with Corryna, and every morning, he woke up feeling like he'd downed an entire bottle of his beloved Redbreast whiskey. He dreaded getting out of bed. He didn't want to go to the kitchen. It only reminded him of Corryna, although to be fair, his bed reminded him of her as well. As did the garden. And his restaurant. And his entire life. How in the hell did this happen?

But being a parent had never been part of his plan. From a very young age, as soon as he was able to recognize that the relationship he had with his parents was dysfunctional as hell, he'd vowed to never ever have kids. Because the truth was that he was otherwise exactly like his dad. He had laser-focus on the bottom line. He was a perfectionist at every turn. He expected the best out of everyone around him. He allowed for few mistakes, and when it came to himself, that number was zero.

For exactly that reason, he forced himself to get up and get going. It was Monday, the start of the workweek, which was always a busy day. He also only had two days until he and Corryna were due to make their final presentation to Rylee. There was much to do before then, including figuring out if Corryna would even speak to him. He wasn't sure she'd ever utter another word to him, which would make the next several months of working together an absolute nightmare.

He arrived at Sheen early and saw that Elena was already there. As soon as he walked in through the back door near the loading area, he smelled Elena's incredible chocolate croissants. *Dammit*. Everything was another reminder of Corryna. He wasn't sure he'd ever be able to eat Elena's incredible pastries. Every bite would be like scratching at an open wound.

"Good morning," Elena said when he dared to walk into the kitchen. "I don't know if you're working with Corryna

Lawson today, but I baked her favorites.”

“I know. I could smell them the minute I came inside. I’m sure they’re delicious.”

“Are you seeing her today?”

He shrugged. “I’m not sure.” *She probably hates me.* “Maybe. We have a few final things to talk about before the wedding presentation on Wednesday.”

“Gotcha. Well, I’ll box some up for her. Just in case.”

“Thanks.” Colin trailed back to his office, one of the most potent reminders of his past with Corryna. He’d thought about the night of the blackout countless times. He’d fantasized about what would have happened if he’d been able to convince her to stay longer that night or, even better, persuaded her to come to his place. They’d conceived a child that night. It was pretty miraculous considering how quickly the whole thing had happened.

He sat down at his desk and got to work, looking over last week’s numbers, placing orders and making sure that the well-oiled machine that was Sheen continued to run. That much he could do. That much he wouldn’t mess up. About an hour or so later, Kristine poked her head into his office. Elena was right behind her. They were both grinning like fools.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“You both won!” Kristine shrieked and started jumping up and down.

For an instant, Colin almost asked, “*Won what?*” But then he realized what had just happened. The Jane Broad awards. “*We both won?*” He rose from his desk, in utter disbelief. His first reaction was to give Elena the hug she so richly deserved. “Congratulations,” he said. He felt genuine happiness for her. For himself? Nothing but disdain and disappointment.

“Congratulations to *you*,” she said. “You made all of this possible.”

“I didn’t make your award possible. You did that.”

“Well, I still think you’re the best boss ever,” Elena said.

“Huge congrats to both of you,” Kristine said. “We should probably do a press release, don’t you think?”

Funnily enough, that would normally be Colin’s first thought—to find a way to capitalize on the award by drawing more attention to the restaurant. “Can you tackle that with our publicist? I don’t think I have the bandwidth for it right now.”

“Oh, sure. The Noble-Ramos wedding. I know that’s front and center for you,” Kristine said.

“It is.” That was a lie. Corryna was first and last on his mind. Nothing else was getting through.

“I’m happy to do it.” She smiled wide at both Colin and Elena. “I guess I’ll get on that. I’ll see you two winners later.” Kristine patted Elena on the shoulder then exited the office in a flash.

“I should probably get back to work,” Elena said. “Those mini pecan pies I need to prepare for dinner service tonight won’t make themselves.”

“Elena, hold on one second.” Colin had something he wanted to ask her, although he realized this might not be appropriate for work. “Can I ask you a personal question? I mean, it’s really more of a life question. I could use some advice.”

“Of course. Anything at all.” She perched on the arm of one of the upholstered chairs opposite his desk.

“Do you like being a mom?”

She delivered the most incredulous look—in a single glance she told him that he’d asked the most ridiculous question imaginable. “Like it? I love it. It is the hardest thing I’ve ever done. And the easiest thing I’ve ever done. It has transformed my life in ways I never could have imagined. There are days when it feels like my heart is going to explode from the rush of love that wants to come out of it.”

“Wow. That’s quite an answer.” All Colin could think about was his childhood and the mistakes he had blamed his parents for. He wasn’t sure he’d ever made any of it easy for them.

Not that it was his job to do that, but he could appreciate that they weren't entirely to blame for everything that went wrong.

"I mean, there are also days when my head is the part of me that's going to explode. But that's life, isn't it? There are good days and bad. But there are also amazing days."

Colin nodded solemnly, taking in everything she was saying. He understood it on some level. The days since Corryna had come into his life had been remarkably full—of laughter and optimism and joy. "Did you ever doubt whether you could be a good parent?"

"Are you feeling okay? This seems like a weird conversation given the fact that you and I just won the highest accolade our industry awards."

"I know. I know. It's just that winning it has very suddenly put a lot of things into perspective." And of course, Corryna had been the force that brought so much clarity to his life. If only he'd been smart enough to notice it when she was doing it. If only she might be willing to forgive him for being such a stubborn ass.

"Well, I doubt my parenting every day, but I think that's normal. You do your best and you love them. In the end, that's what it takes. Nothing more and nothing less. Also, money. Kids cost a lot of money." She laughed, then narrowed her vision on Colin. "Are you thinking about kids?"

"Thinking about them? Yes. Why? Is that surprising to you?" *I have to start living my life. I have to get out there and grab it or the whole thing is going to pass me by.*

"That's amazing, Colin. I think you'd make an incredible dad. You're so generous. And kind."

He appreciated the vote of confidence, but he wasn't sure he deserved the praise. "Thank you, Elena. For everything."

She rose from her perch on the arm of the chair. "Anytime." She clapped him on the shoulder. "And way to go, Colin. You're a rock star."

If only I felt like one. Colin sat in his chair and turned to look out the window—the same view he'd had to the parking

lot the night of the blackout, when Corryna had shown up in the Royal Blooms truck and turned his life upside down. He loved her, dammit. He did. And his life simply wasn't going to be right without her. But rebuilding the bridge he'd burned would take some doing. And then there was the elephant in the room—he'd told Corryna that he loved her and she'd said that only made things worse. For all he knew, she didn't love him back.

It didn't matter. He had to try to salvage some of this. He turned his chair back and stood. His phone rang, and he was sure it had to be his dad. Talk about needing to build a bridge... The one to his parents would need to be rebuilt, too. Corryna was right. She'd been right about everything.

But when he looked at the caller ID, he was taken by surprise. This call was from his mother. "Hello?" Colin answered.

"You won. I'm so proud of you."

The emotion of everything leading up to that moment hit him like a ton of bricks. Two tons. His history with his parents. The accolade he'd worked his ass off to get. And front and center in his mind, Corryna and the baby. It felt like everything was converging. It was scary and wonderful at the same time. He was teetering on the brink. One misstep and all could be lost. "Mam. Thank you." His voice trembled, but he refused to see it as weakness. This was what happened when you'd spent half of a lifetime or more squashing down your feelings.

"It's okay, darling. It's understandable that you'd be emotional."

"It's just a lot."

"Of course. You know, I always struggled when you were sad. It was always so painful to know you were hurting. It kept me up at night."

"It was?"

"Of course, son. I'm your mother."

His heart felt like it was about to explode as he realized what had always hurt the most during those years when he'd

been away at school—he'd been left wondering if they cared. He couldn't allow anyone else to ever endure that pain. Certainly not a baby, a sweet and vulnerable, innocent child. More than anything, *his* baby. With *Corryna*, the woman he loved. He *did* care. He had an ocean of love churning inside of him and he'd spent too many years damming it up and holding it back, all because it was messy to let it out. Because it might reveal that he was imperfect. "It's happy tears. I promise."

"Oh, good. I'm glad. What are you going to do to celebrate your big win?"

Big win. Despite the award, in his mind, there was no big win yet. "I'm going to go see a friend. We have a lot to talk about."

"That sounds nice. I'm sure your father would love to talk to you soon if you can. He'll probably give you that guilt trip about coming to work for him. You know, you can tell him to bugger off if you like. He only does it because he still wants you back in the fold."

He swallowed hard. What he was about to say was years late, but it was only weeks in the making. "I'd like to find a way back into the fold, Mam. But not like Da wants. Not business. I'm talking about family. Our family."

She gasped. And then she started to cry.

"Mam. Don't..." Colin said.

She sniffled. "You don't even have to ask. You can come back anytime and I'll squeeze you so hard that you won't be able to breathe."

She painted a lovely picture, but it still felt like a fantasy. Something so far off in the distance that it wasn't yet his. And that was because the real problem in his life, the one that meant even more, still needed fixing. "That sounds great. I want to talk some more, but I really need to go see that friend of mine. I mean, she's not simply a friend. Her name is Corryna. And I love her."

"You're in love?"

"I am. Is it okay if we speak about it later?"

“Well...well... Yes. Of course. Go.”

My future is waiting. He wanted to say as much, but it would have to wait. “Thank you.”

“I’m proud of you.”

“Thank you. That means the world to me.”

“I love you, son.”

“I love you, too. Goodbye.” Colin hung up the phone and collected himself for a heartbeat or two. His mind had been like a tornado for the last several days, but now he felt as though he could see things clearly. The path ahead might not be easy, but he still had to take it. He grabbed his car keys. One quick stop in the kitchen and he’d be on his way to Royal Blooms. No, he didn’t have a plan. He only had an aim. Everything else, he was just going to have to improvise.

* * *

It was an unusually busy morning at Royal Blooms, which meant Corryna was working the front of the shop alongside Hannah. She was just finishing ringing up a customer when Mike’s wife, Serena, walked in, pushing her stroller.

“Serena. Hi.” Corryna’s heart leaped at the prospect of seeing Mike and Serena’s baby girl, Penelope. She stepped out from behind the counter. “Mike’s not here right now. He’s out making deliveries.”

“No problem.” She leaned down, reached under the stroller and pulled out a small insulated bag. “He forgot his lunch. I thought I’d drive it over and take Penelope for a walk downtown. It’s such a beautiful day.”

“I’ll take it.” Hannah appeared from behind Corryna. “I can put it in the fridge for him.”

Serena handed over the bag. “Thanks so much.”

Corryna crouched down. Penelope was asleep, her head listing to one side, making her fine reddish hair, a brighter and lighter version of Mike’s, fall across her cheek. “She’s so beautiful, Serena.”

Serena peered down at them. “She is. This is such a great age. She laughs and smiles. She sleeps a lot better. It’s an awesome time to be a mom, I’ll tell you that much.”

Corryna started to do the math. It was never her strong suit, but this calculation was somehow easier to make. She’d conceived in early March. She hadn’t been to the doctor yet—her appointment was next week—but she estimated her due date would be sometime in November. That meant that her baby would be a little younger than Penelope’s age by this time next year. Thinking about the future was such a mixed bag right now. She was endlessly excited about the baby. But it was going to be hard to do it on her own. There was no doubt about that. Then again, she’d done so much on her own over the last six years. She’d kept her business alive despite her ex-husband’s best attempts. She’d made it through. And she would make it through this as well.

“I’m pregnant,” Corryna blurted, surprised at herself.

“You’re what?” Hannah nearly shrieked from the back of the shop.

“Oh, my gosh,” Serena said. “Congratulations.”

Corryna straightened. “Sorry about that. It just sort of came out. I’ve been dying to tell someone. Jessica’s the only one who knows.” Along with Colin. But that was a different story. “I’m only about eight weeks along. It’s still early. I haven’t even told my family yet.”

Hannah bopped over to Corryna and wrapped her up in a hug. “You are going to make the best mom.”

Corryna wasn’t sure about that, but she sure as hell was going to try her hardest. “Thank you.”

“I should probably head out, but congratulations again,” Serena said. “Mike will be so excited to hear the news.”

“Thank you. And thanks for coming by.” Corryna held the door so Serena could push out the stroller, but as soon as they were gone, Jessica was walking in. “Wow. It’s like a parade in here today.”

Jessica thrust a gift bag into Corryna's hand. It had the word Baby printed on it in pastel colors. "Sorry. I saw this cute little picture book about flowers. I couldn't resist."

"This is happening fast." Hannah turned to Jessica. "I just found out."

Jessica clasped her hand over her mouth. "Oh, my God. I'm sorry. I assumed that you would've told everyone right away."

"I just started. About five minutes before you got here." Corryna would've been lying if she'd said she wasn't a bit overwhelmed at the moment. "Hannah, can you watch the shop for a minute while Jessica and I go talk?"

"Of course."

"Do you have a minute?" Corryna asked Jessica.

"Always."

The pair walked into Corryna's office and sat. "Thank you for the gift. That's very kind of you."

"I figured you might need your spirits lifted. I'm sorry that your conversation with Colin went badly. I'm sure he'll come around."

Corryna wasn't so certain. He had a lot of hurdles to get past and she couldn't push him to do any of it. It wasn't her job to convince him that they could be great together. He had to reach that conclusion on his own. Of course she'd made one tragic mistake the other day when they'd had their big talk—he'd told her that he loved her and she hadn't returned the sentiment. She'd been angry. She wasn't proud of it. "It's okay. I figure that what's meant to happen will happen." She pressed her hand against her lower belly. "I have one thing I've always wanted. And I have you. I'll be fine."

Jessica scooted to the edge of her seat. "Remember when we went on our hike? And I said that you deserved a little miracle? Maybe the baby is that."

"We were talking about flowers, weren't we?"

"So I was a little bit off. I'm not psychic." Jessica spotted the folder on Corryna's desk. "Is this the report from the

forensic accountant? What did you decide to do about it?"

Corryna had briefed Jessica on the results of the audit soon after she shared the information with Colin. "The lawyer called this morning so I got the report out again. He said there's no statute of limitations on embezzlement in the state of Texas. I can go after Dan any time if I decide to." She sighed. "But you know, for now, I think I'm going to let it go."

"Really? It's so much money. Won't you need that for the baby?"

Corryna nodded. She knew exactly how illogical her decision seemed. "It would certainly make life easier. But money doesn't make life *better*. It certainly doesn't help you raise children any better. Colin's parents had all the money in the world and they sure messed him up."

"Whatever you decide, I support you."

"I figure the evidence will always be sitting there. But ultimately, I don't have a vindictive bone in my body. Dan stole from me in more ways than one, but I've reclaimed my life for myself. He can't take that away from me."

Hannah appeared in the doorway to Corryna's office. Her face was flushed with pink. "I realize you're already having a bonkers day, but Colin Reynolds is here to see you."

"Plot twist!" Jessica exclaimed, then popped up out of her seat. "I'll clear out so you two can talk." Jessica leaned down until her face was near Corryna's belly. "Alright, baby. Be good to your mama."

Corryna peered down at her best friend. "Thank you so much. You're the absolute best. I love you."

"I love you, too." Jessica straightened, then planted a kiss on Corryna's forehead. "I hope your talk goes well."

"Thanks."

Jessica walked out and Corryna stood, preparing herself for another uncomfortable talk with Colin. When he stepped into the doorway, taking up all of the space, he sucked the breath right out of her, which was so like him. He always managed to

make her world tilt on its axis with his very presence. That was saying a lot because he looked like hell. She seriously doubted he'd been sleeping. And he held his arms awkwardly behind his body, seeming immensely uncomfortable.

"I've been an ass," he said. Except it sounded more like *arse* because of his accent.

"I won't argue the point."

"Can we talk?"

Corryna realized that she didn't want to have this conversation in her office. It was too cramped and it was full of things she hated, like spreadsheets and numbers. She needed to be close to things she loved right now. "Let's go in the back." She squeezed past him, trying to ignore his enticing scent, and led him down the short hall and into the back room. She grabbed a stool and dragged it to her main workbench. It was impossible to ignore her memories of being back here with him—the first time she'd arranged flowers for him and the times he'd stopped by to say hello—but she wasn't going to allow thoughts of those happy times be tarnished by the present state of affairs.

"You sit," Colin said. "I'll stand."

You're not staying, then. Got it. "Okay."

He stepped closer as she took the seat. "Here. I brought you this as part of my apology." He finally pulled his arm out from behind his back, revealing the reason he'd been standing like that—he had a bakery box in his hand. "Elena made them this morning."

Corryna couldn't help but smile, even though it didn't make up for everything that had happened between them. "Thank you. That was nice."

"I couldn't bring you flowers. I wouldn't want to give another florist the business. And well, no matter what someone else did, they would never match one of your designs."

"Thank you." She lifted the lid and saw the enticing pastries, but she wasn't going to take one yet. "So you were saying you've been an ass. I'd love to hear more about that."

He laughed quietly and inched even closer. “I figured I should start with the most obvious statement. It’s absolutely true. And I would understand it if you wanted to tell me to get out of your life forever, but I really, really want a second chance.” He took her hand. “I love you, Corryna. I meant that. You are the only thing I care about in my life.”

A tear leaked out of the corner of her eye. Then another. How could *I love you* hold so much weight, and still hurt? “I love you, too, Colin. I know I didn’t say it the other day. And I’m sorry for that, but I can’t sit around and wait for the moment when you decide you’re okay with becoming a dad.”

He nodded solemnly. “I know. Which is the reason I came to talk to you. In person. I had a real moment of clarity an hour ago. I talked to my mom. And it went well. Really well.”

“You did? That’s so great.” She couldn’t help but be happy for him. This was a step that he’d needed to take for a long time. “Did she say something particularly profound?”

“No. She said the simplest thing in the world. She said that it had always made her sad when I was sad. And I realized that all those years when I was away at school, the one question I was stuck with was whether my parents cared. Now I know that she did. And as soon as that light bulb went off, the logical conclusion hit me. I can’t leave a child with that question. Not even for a second.” A tear rolled down his cheek. “Especially not a child that’s one half the person my entire world revolves around. The one person I cannot live without.”

Corryna found it nearly impossible to get past the lump in her throat. “Me?”

“Yes, you.” He threaded his fingers into her hair and cupped the sides of her face, then lowered his head and kissed her cheek, allowing his lips to linger for a moment. The warmth from his skin washed over her, and he pressed his forehead against hers. “I love you, Corryna. And I love that you’re having my baby. You were right. I can rewrite the script. I’ve been doing it for years. I’m not my dad. I’m my own person. But I didn’t see that until you held a mirror up to my face and

showed me what I really was. And what I really want to be. I want to be a dad. I want to be your partner. I love you, Corryna. More than I ever thought possible. I want us to be a family. The three of us. I want us to be together. Forever.”

Corryna had cried an ocean of tears in her life, especially over the last six years, but they hadn't fallen as freely as they were right now. Her face was soaked, but it felt as though she was washing away the final remnants of her pain. She was wiping the slate clean so she could start a new life with the man she loved, and their child. “I love you, too, Colin. I want us to be together, too.”

She stood and wrapped her arms around him. He did the same, holding on to her so tightly that she felt as though nothing could ever hurt her again. She raised her head and they tumbled into a kiss that was long and giving and more than a little hot. It spoke of nothing less than true love, and it was everything Corryna had ever wanted.

When she pulled back from it, she asked, “What prompted you to talk to your mom?”

“She called because I won the Jane Broad award.”

“Colin. You did? Congratulations. I can't believe you didn't tell me that.”

“It's just an award, Corryna. It's not what I really care about. What I care about is you and me standing in the back room of Royal Blooms confessing our love.”

She smiled wide as she peered up into his handsome face. “I'm so proud of you. For everything.”

“And that means the world.”

Twelve

Colin was busy in the Sheen kitchen preparing for the final presentation to Rylee when his phone, which was sitting on the stainless steel prep table, lit up with a text. It was from his dad. For a moment, he hesitated to read the message. Call it a well-worn reflex, but he didn't want to be disappointed once more, just like he had been for most of his life. Fortunately, Corryna had taught him that no situation was one-sided. No one was purely good or purely bad. Most important, she'd shown him that the painful times in life only made the good times that much sweeter. It had only been two days since they made up in the back room at Royal Blooms, but life with Corryna was already exceptionally sweet.

Your mother and I looked at our schedules.
August works, his dad's message said.

He smiled at his phone and was quick to tap out a response. Great. Looking forward to it. More soon. He sent that, but it didn't seem like enough. Now that he'd learned to let out his emotions, it was like a runaway train. Love you. He hit send.

The three dots that said his dad was typing appeared. We love you, too.

"Colin? Corryna is out back. Do you want to go help her with the flowers or should I?" Kristine asked.

Colin was already on his way out the door. "No. I've got it. Can you work on the garnish for the crab?"

"Yep. I'm on it."

He darted past the walk-in fridge and through the loading area to the side door. He thundered down the steps. He could see that she already had the back of the truck open. "Corryna Lawson, don't you dare carry those flowers. Let me do it."

She peeked out from behind one of the doors and smiled. “You’re so bossy.”

He was quick to pull her into an embrace and kiss her. These moments were too precious to waste. “And you’re pregnant.”

“The baby is the size of a peanut. I assure you that I’m fine.”

The baby. He was still getting accustomed to the idea of what was ahead for Corryna and him, but he was more comfortable with it with every passing day. And after his conversation with Elena, he suspected that parenthood was likely something that he’d never be fully prepared for. As little as two months ago, the perfectionist in him would have been sick over the idea of a major life change that required on-the-spot improvisation. Especially one where a tiny human’s well-being was hanging in the balance. But he and Corryna made an amazing team, and she’d taught him to embrace a little uncertainty and trust that he had so much more in him than he’d ever thought possible. “Indulge me.”

She rolled her eyes at him, but it was adorable, just like everything she did. “I’ll take a little at a time. How about that?”

“Deal.”

They ferried several loads of flowers into the restaurant and into the private dining room where they would be making their presentation to Rylee and Dionna. Kristine and several members of the waitstaff had already set up the entire space to mimic a reception, arranging each of the tables to seat ten people. Even though it would only be Rylee, Dionna, Colin and Corryna eating today, there was a place setting at every seat, complete with the dishes, linens and glassware the bride and groom had already chosen. It was a little over-the-top, but Corryna and Colin wanted Rylee and Dionna to be able to experience it all so they could report back to Xavier and Ariana. This wedding was the most important job of Corryna’s life and right up there for Colin, but it was also the thing that

had brought them together as a couple, so they both felt the need to knock this presentation out of the park.

Corryna orchestrated the placement of the centerpieces, smaller table arrangements and the other elements, like tiny bundles of blooms tucked into the napkins at each guest's seat and elaborate floral garlands adorning the backs of the bride's and groom's chairs. How he loved being around Corryna when she was in her creative zone, laser-focused on bringing her artistic vision to life. It reminded him of that first meeting at Royal Blooms. They were falling in love that night, even though there hadn't been a single kiss or embrace. They were finding their way to each other, even though they didn't know it. And she was sparking his creativity, while warming up his once frozen heart.

Eventually, everything seemed to be to Corryna's liking, and they stood back to survey the final product.

"I'm still not sure about those roses. I mean, I love them, but maybe they're too safe. Do you think they might not be bold enough?"

He put his arm around her shoulder and leaned over to kiss the top of her head. "It's all perfect. The bluebonnets in particular are stunning. And I really like the anemones. They're quite striking."

"I can't believe you know the names of flowers now. The first time I met you, you basically told me that you hated flowers."

He still regretted what had happened that first time she'd come into Sheen, after he'd canceled his contract with Royal Blooms. He'd really been an ass. "Actually, that wasn't the first time we met. Remember the night at The Silver Saddle? When I tried to buy you a drink?"

She stepped away from him and over to the main table, where she plucked a bit of greenery out of one of the arrangements. "I was in a pretty bad way that night. It's still for the best that I sent you packing."

He laughed quietly, although he didn't want to think about what his life would be like right now if he and Corryna hadn't found each other a second time. "It'll make a good story to tell our little one."

Corryna looked over her shoulder at him and smiled. Her gorgeous eyes glinted with life and happiness, which warmed his heart, as well as a few other parts of his body. "Yes it will." She stood back from the table again. "I really hope Rylee and Dionna are happy with this. There won't be much time to get things done if we have to start over. It's the last day of April and the wedding is in early June."

"I have every confidence in us, even if we have to make last-minute changes. Plus, how could they not be pleased with what we've put together?"

"So says the guy who had the first seven dishes he created for this wedding rejected."

Colin turned to her. "You know, I've pretty much resigned myself to the fact that things with this wedding are probably going to be in flux until Xavier Noble and Ariana Ramos actually say 'I do.' So, I don't see the point in questioning what we've done so far. You and I know that we have left no stone unturned. We have pushed ourselves to the point of exceptionalism. I think we'll bowl over Rylee and Dionna today. Then we see what happens."

Corryna gripped his arm. "Who are you and what have you done with Colin Reynolds? It sounds like you're planning to go with the flow."

He laughed and leaned down to kiss her on the cheek. "What can I say? You've changed me for the better." His phone buzzed with a text and he pulled it out of his pocket. The message was from Rylee. "Alright, darling. It's time for me to get back in the kitchen. Rylee is on her way."

* * *

"Can I come into the kitchen and watch you work until Rylee arrives?" Corryna asked.

“Of course you can. Come on.” Colin led her into Sheen’s kitchen, where Kristine, Elena and a few line cooks were already busy working. “Here. This is a good spot for you.” He carried a metal barstool to one of the far walls, which provided an excellent view of the line.

“Perfect. Thank you.” She sat and watched as Colin went to work, taking over from Kristine and directing every member of the kitchen staff. It was like watching a conductor in charge of a symphony. The amount of multitasking involved was incredible—he knew the stage of preparation for every dish. He knew exactly what was right and what was missing. He tasted. He tweaked. And he guided his crew with a firm, but kind hand. Corryna marveled that they had found each other. He was such an exceptional person. She felt nothing short of lucky. And a little exhausted. Everything that had happened over the last month was difficult to wrap her head around—an assignment for a wedding, a red-hot collaboration, passion with a man she never imagined could be hers, and ultimately...love. It had taken *years* for her life to turn into something she hardly recognized, but it had only taken a month for it to turn around.

One of the Sheen servers poked her head into the kitchen. “Chef, Ms. Meadows has just pulled up.”

“Thank you.” Colin turned to Kristine. “Are we good with everything?”

“Absolutely,” she answered. “We’ve got this. It’s time for you to go turn on the charm.”

Corryna couldn’t have contained her smile. Colin managed to be charming always, even when he was being less than pleasant. It was his inexplicable superpower.

“Right.” Colin turned to Corryna. “Ready? It’s showtime.”

She hopped down from her perch. “As ready as I’ll ever be.”

“We’ve got this,” he muttered to her as they walked out of the kitchen.

After the talk they'd had in the private dining room, Corryna felt like it didn't even matter if they didn't have this. They would sort it out. Just like they'd figured out everything else.

"Rylee," Colin said as they rounded into the main dining room. "How are you today?"

She tapped away at her phone, then kept it clutched in her hand. "Good. Busy. I'm sorry, Dionna can't come today. A last-minute meeting popped up and she had to fly to LA this morning. But I'm looking forward to this."

"We've been working really hard," Corryna said. "Hopefully it'll be everything Xavier and Ariana are looking for."

"I'm going to take a bunch of photos today if that's okay," Rylee said. "Including some video as I walk into the room for the first time. I not only promised the bride and groom, I promised Dionna. She's so sorry she couldn't be here."

"Of course. Go for it." Colin turned to Corryna. "Let's get a few steps ahead just to be sure the lighting is correct."

"Sounds good," Rylee said. "I'll wait a minute before I come in."

Colin and Corryna hustled into the private dining room. Indeed, everything was perfect. The overhead lights had been dimmed, and candles all over the room had been lit. Music from a playlist Rylee had provided was playing softly in the background. It was a sumptuous and romantic setting. If Rylee wasn't bowled over by this, nothing was going to impress her.

On cue, Rylee walked into the room, holding her phone and panning the room, shooting video. Colin and Corryna stood impossibly still and quiet as Rylee walked past them, but he did take Corryna's hand and squeeze it. She squeezed his back. This was their moment. And there was no turning back.

Rylee continued to film her full panoramic view of the room with her camera, turning in a circle, then she tapped at her phone and tucked it inside her bag. "Okay. Let's get started," she said.

Corryna glanced over to see that one of the servers had entered the room. "I'll notify the kitchen, Chef."

"Perfect. Thank you," Colin said. "Rylee, please make yourself comfortable." He directed Rylee to sit at one of the chairs at the center of the table, then he pulled out a chair for Corryna. He sat next to her. "You have the printed menu right in front of you for reference." On the table was a beautifully typeset card describing all of the dishes they were about to taste.

"Great." Rylee perused the card. "I'm ready to eat."

In a carefully coordinated procession, Colin's staff of servers brought in each dish, being careful to space them and give Rylee the chance to try each individually. Corryna was absolutely loving every bite, especially as it brought back memories of that first night she'd been over to Colin's house. But after the second course had been served and she'd been raving about how delicious everything was, she noticed that Rylee was being quiet. She did nod a few times, take pictures and write down some notes, but she was otherwise providing very little feedback. Nervousness started to take hold for Corryna. How would Colin handle it if she rejected his creations again? She wanted to think he could take it all in stride, but this was his pride on the line.

After the final bites of the final dish had been consumed, Rylee made a few more notes, then set aside her pen and tented her fingers in front of her with her elbows on the table. "So."

Corryna thought she might pass out from the tension.

"This was absolutely spectacular. Top to bottom." Rylee grinned from ear to ear. "I tried to find some criticisms, but I really don't have a single one. The food was exceptional. And the flowers are flawless."

Corryna finally felt like she could exhale.

"I look forward to telling Ariana and Xavier all about it," Rylee continued. "They'll want to taste everything for

themselves, of course. Hopefully it won't be too much trouble for you to do all of this again."

Corryna and Colin glanced at each other, silently having one of their conversations. It was going to be a great deal of work to replicate this once more, then do it all over again for the wedding, but it was of little concern. They'd nailed the task for today. "Of course," Colin said. "It'll be absolutely no problem."

Rylee looked back and forth between Colin and Corryna. "And everything is still good between you two? Not anticipating any problems as we get closer to the wedding?"

"None," Corryna was quick to answer. "Things are great between us."

"Well, that's not exactly right," Colin said.

Corryna slugged his leg under the table.

He turned to her and grinned, then focused his attention on Rylee. "Honestly, Corryna and I need to thank you. You put us together. You asked us to collaborate. And that led to a change in my life that is so huge, I can't even fathom it. Corryna and I are deeply in love, Ms. Meadows." He reached for Corryna's hand under the table, and she held on to it like she might never let go as she listened to the raw honesty of his words and the sheer emotion with which he delivered them. "She is the most incredible person I have ever met. And we're excited to say that we're having a baby together. We're starting off on a life together."

Corryna had to fight back the tears. Even Rylee looked like she was getting choked up.

"Wow. That's not what I expected to hear today, but I'm happy if I got to play any role in this at all. It sounds to me like you've got the ultimate collaboration. In everything."

Corryna and Colin looked at each other. It was precisely that. Corryna's heart was thundering in her chest. She loved this man more than she'd ever thought was possible. "That's exactly what it is."

“Well, I won’t keep you two from your day any longer. Plus, I have a full schedule.” Rylee pushed back from her chair and stood. Colin and Corryna followed suit. “But thank you for today. For everything.”

Colin and Corryna walked her to the dining room entrance. “Thank you,” Colin said.

Rylee turned back one more time. “What are you going to do with all of these flowers?”

“I’ve already made arrangements to donate them,” Corryna said. “My delivery driver will be here soon to take them to Royal Memorial Hospital.”

“The maternity ward, perhaps?” Rylee asked.

“You know, I didn’t designate exactly where they would go, but that’s an excellent idea,” Corryna replied.

“I hope you both have a great day,” Rylee said as Colin’s staff began filing into the room to start the cleanup.

“You too,” Colin and Corryna said in near unison.

As Rylee walked away, Colin blew out a long breath and slung his arm over Corryna’s shoulder. “I don’t know about you, but I’m knackered. Let’s go unwind for a bit.”

“Knackered?” Corryna asked as they ambled their way into his office.

“Tired.” Colin closed the door behind them.

“I have a feeling that’s a word I’m going to become intimately acquainted with during this pregnancy.” Corryna took a seat in one of the leather chairs as Colin took his usual spot, sitting on the front edge of his desk.

“Have you thought about hiring more staff? You’re not going to be able to spend as much time on your feet as the pregnancy progresses.”

“Hannah will graduate from her program soon, so I can promote her to full-time designer, and then I guess I’ll just have to hire one or two more people to work the front of the shop. I’ll need to work out the financial side, of course.”

“What you really need to do is raise your prices.”

She'd dug her heels in on this, but he was right. “Maybe you can help me with the final calculations.”

“Of course.” He cleared his throat. “But first, there are a few more things we need to discuss.” He rose from his perch, then scooted the other chair closer to hers and sat. “I have a question to ask you.”

“Of course. Anything.”

“I've been thinking a lot about what you said about my family.” His voice shook, but considering the subject matter, Corryna understood why. This was a pain point for him that was a mile wide. “Especially in light of us starting our own, I think you were absolutely right. I need to let go of the past and embrace the future. Our future.”

A wide grin bloomed on her face. It had been a miraculous thing to witness this transformation in Colin's thinking. “That's so wonderful. Are you going to call them?”

“We've already talked. I'd like to go to Ireland and see them. They've said yes. But I don't want to go unless you'll come with me.”

Corryna was absolutely thrilled. When she'd suggested that Colin reconnect with his family, she hadn't imagined herself as part of the scenario at that time, but so much had changed. “I would love to go to Ireland with you. Love to.”

“Good. We'll have to go in August. After the wedding. But the weather is lovely there that time of year.”

“I can't wait to see it. To have you show me around. And to spend time with your family.”

“I'm looking forward to introducing them to the mother of their first grandchild.” He slid forward to the edge of the desk, then stood and reached for her hand. “And more than anything, I'm looking forward to this next happy for our little family.”

“Me too, Colin. We deserve it.” A tear rolled down her cheek. Things were moving fast for them, but that was how

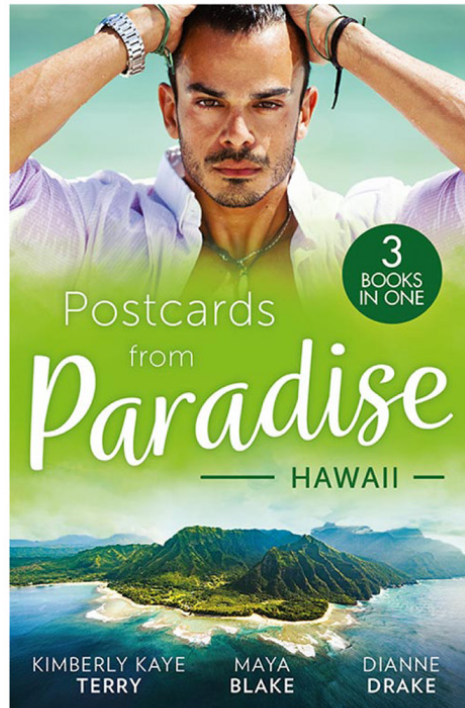
elemental things were between her and Colin. Their love was as natural as the partnership that started it.

“You’ve made me so happy.” He smiled wide, then leaned in for a soft and sexy kiss.

She felt light-headed, but needed to say one more thing to the man she loved more than anything. “And you’ve done the same for me.”

* * * * *

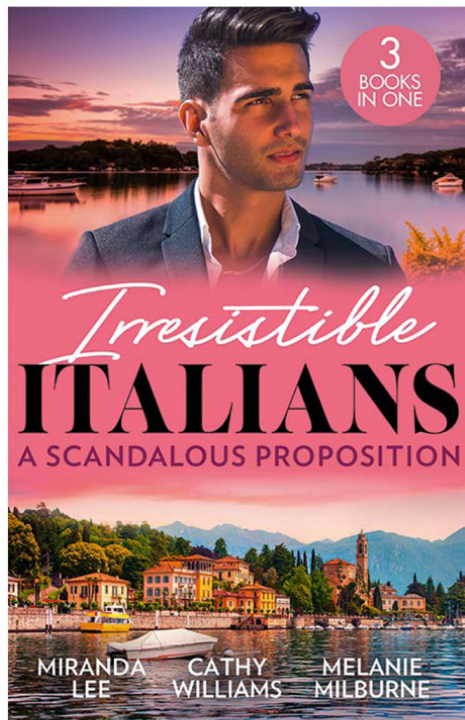
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